

Like many of you, during pandemic life I learned to adapt to Zoom as one of the few safe ways to stay in touch at a time when gathering together could be hazardous. This allowed us to share experiences during the lockdown, and to discover that along with many losses came some unexpected gains.

In a Zoom conversation with a group of friends about coping-during-Covid, one mentioned he'd begun teaching himself how to make sourdough bread. This friend doesn't possess particular talent for cooking as far as I know, but with an inquisitive spirit he wanted to put the time to good use. I recall saying "that's great – good luck with that" while thinking "why would he want to do this?" I love bread but I don't think I have the patience to learn what goes into creating it. There's an art and a science to making bread, and I've heard sourdough is the hardest to make.

The next time we talked, my friend had to interrupt our Zoom visit to go to the oven to tend to some bread that was about to emerge. He'd learned how to combine the ingredients and to coax forth a loaf of sourdough that he later proudly displayed. If we'd been together, he would have broken and shared the bread for all of us to smell, touch and enjoy. He had mastered this challenge and found a relaxing, creative and nourishing new talent.

And he's far from alone. Bread-baking has become one of the most popular hobbies of pandemic life, leading some to try making it a new career. The New York Times reports that "culinary schools have been swamped with inquiries from aspiring bakers.*" During a chaotic time when some aspects of modern life seemed beyond our understanding, the new bread-bakers coped by learning a universally-practiced craft with prehistoric roots. Bread was the first food that humans figured out how to make from elements in nature, and virtually every culture in the world still relies on bread as a staple of life.

It seems natural, then, for bread to be a central symbol of our story of faith. In our best-loved prayer we turn to God seeking "our daily bread" – a reminder that we share a desire for reassurance that in the midst of life's uncertainties, our basic needs will be met.

We also look to satisfy a deeper hunger – the need to know we matter, to be happy, to love and be loved. Such concerns also gripped the people who come with hope to find Jesus in today's gospel story. He offers an answer for them and for us. But is it enough?

Last Sunday we heard the most frequently told of the miracle stories of Jesus. An excited crowd of beleaguered people has heard about his amazing acts of healing. They follow Jesus to a grassy hillside by the sea and he invites them to stay and sit down together. Then, something stupendous happens. He says a prayer and despite the scarcity of food on hand, an extravagant meal of fish and bread appears--enough to feed thousands, with more left over.

No one could do such a sign as this, they conclude, except the prophet the world has been waiting for. With this power, imagine what else he can do. They converge around Jesus in a passionate push to make him king. But he gets away and goes off on his own.

Now it is the morning after the miracle. Jesus and his friends are nowhere to be found. But the crowd still hungers for more of what Jesus can do. How often in life does anyone meet such a wonder-worker as this? So, they hurry into boats and cross the sea to track him down.

And here, unexpectedly perhaps, is where you and I enter the story. We didn't come by boat to gather today; we may not struggle in the same ways that draw this crowd toward Jesus; and we know more about the ongoing story of Jesus' life and teachings than do those in this scene. Yet we come together with motives similar to theirs: we're hungry to fill an empty space in our lives and Jesus offers us a taste of the fullness of life in God.

The crowd catches up with Jesus, and they seem aware that there's a spiritual dimension to his amazing deeds – they address him as "Rabbi." They recall how manna sustained their ancestors in the wilderness. They sense that some sacred energy is behind the bread supplied by Jesus, but they don't know how to get more of it. They ask him questions similar to ones we might ask, perhaps alone in prayer or in a group when we're together with church friends.

They ask Jesus "When did you come here? What must we do to perform the works of God? What work are you performing?" Like the crowd, I've wondered about God's whereabouts and questioned God's timing. Like them, I've promised to do all that a faithful person can to make the gifts of God appear in my life. And, like them, in spite of the evidence of God's goodness all around, I look to God for further assurance that more blessings will come.

As often happens when I question God, Jesus doesn't give direct answers to the crowd. He wants these seekers to look past the physical benefits he's brought and to instead grasp the more important spiritual gift, that is, a bond with God. He says "You are looking for me...because you ate your fill of the loaves...Don't seek food that perishes but food that endures...which God has sent me to give you. God's true bread from heaven gives life to the world, and I am the bread of life" (6: 26,27, 32, 33, 35).

Jesus seems to be saying: I didn't bake the bread; I didn't bring the bread: I am the bread. I'm not merely the deliverer of what nourishes and strengthens you; I am what nourishes and strengthens you. Let your hunger open you to receive me as the bearer of God's love, and our relationship will sustain you not for one mealtime but for a lifetime.

That's a lot to take in, and we can understand why the crowd might find this teaching bewildering. The idea of God entering human experience so intimately was hard to grasp in the first century and remains a challenge in the 21st.

And yet, Jesus seems to win over this contentious crowd. Their craving for bread has drawn them to Jesus but he invites them to satisfy a different kind of hunger with a longer-lasting food. Beginning to sense that God can dwell closer than they could imagine, their outlook on the world will never be the same. They tell Jesus, “Sir, give us this bread always” (6: 34) and they set out on the road of discipleship.

Do Jesus’ words win us over? There are times when our faith does nourish and strengthen us, but there may also be times when we doubt God’s presence in our lives. We may wonder whether the discipleship road is one we belong on. But by coming together in this hour we’re acknowledging – perhaps even celebrating – that we are hungry people; hungry for meaning, strength and purpose that we can’t supply on our own and can’t readily obtain in the world that surrounds us.

I’ve been blessed to talk often with some of you during our slog through the pandemic. Being apart from church and from one another was hard. Among the recurring things I heard you share, two stand out: one was “I miss having the eucharist.” Another was: “I miss doing in-person outreach.” Even though we understood the realities of Covid, we felt a restless hunger to connect with God and one another through the ritual of Communion and to connect with our neighbors through ministries of service.

Surely a community that names these two priorities as integral to its life is well on its way to following Jesus. In urging us to feed our spiritual hunger, Jesus is not ignoring the physical hunger, distress and injustices that his followers-- and too many of our neighbors today-- are experiencing. He knows they need our actions as well as our prayers. But he invites us to make him our companion as we seek relationships outside ourselves and discover how we’re called to love and serve.

A phrase from today’s gospel is echoed when we share Communion and name Jesus as “the bread of heaven.” Jesus knew something about this symbol that may not be easily appreciated by those of us who buy bread at a grocery store, or even by those who bake it with modern equipment.

Bread involves a collaboration between us and our creator; it can’t exist without the ingredients given by God and without the bakers’ careful manipulation of them. As my friend discovered, it can’t be hurried; it involves a series of steps that in Jesus’ day was probably the work of small teams. It relies on transformation, as none of the elements we see in a finished loaf of bread look like they did when preparation began.

Jesus understood bread to be not only an essential source of survival but a reflection of our relationship to God and one another. When we encounter Jesus at the table, even with a thin wafer that comes to us in a paper cup, our prayers place us in the company of all people with whom Jesus broke bread – all of us who wait for our lives to be transformed by God just as the ingredients of bread are transformed by the baker.

May the bread of Jesus continue to do its work in us so that we can give life to the world. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

*Article cited: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/12/business/pandemic-baking-career.html>