

1

As I was looking through photos of when Jonathan was younger, I came across a photo. What seems to be happening in this picture? ... Many years ago we used to make fresh bread, and this was Jonathan's first introduction to helping prepare a loaf of raisin bread by kneading it.

How many of you have made bread? What steps are involved in making a loaf of bread? ... It takes many steps to make a loaf of bread—getting the proper ingredients, mixing, kneading, letting it rise, punching down the dough, and making sure it doesn't burn in the oven. The best part is smelling the aroma of the bread cooking in the kitchen, and of course, eating it fresh out of the oven.

In a cookbook called *A Taste of Heaven and Earth*, the author says:

The kitchen is a place that sharpens us. It's a place that wakes us up. Our sense of smell becomes keener. We taste with greater subtlety. We see with more clarity.

But there are times when we are not as sensitive, not as focused. We are distracted and

nothing seems to go right. In the kitchen the results are easy to notice. The sauce burns, the bread doesn't rise, and dishes slip out of our hands.

Cooking requires that we be fully present. This is one of its greatest teachings. It keeps bringing us back to what is happening in the moment and continually calls our attention to what we are doing. We smell when the cake is ready to come out of the oven and we taste when the soup is almost done to perfection. When the water boils on the stove, we turn down the heat. Through cooking we can become more responsive to what is happening around us .... We can sharpen our lives by living them with awareness, moment by moment.<sup>1</sup>

The gospel writer John may have had a similar idea in mind when he used the imagery of bread when speaking of Jesus, for the sixth chapter is filled with lots of tasty bread imagery. The chapter

2

begins with the well-known story of Jesus feeding a crowd of people with a few loaves of bread and some fish.

The next day the crowds were looking for Jesus, probably wondering how he might again surprise them. Someone in the crowd asked, “What signs are you going to do today?” and then someone reminded Jesus of the story of how Moses had helped their ancestors in the wilderness find manna, which was a sweet-tasting flaky bread-like food.

Jesus suggested: “I am the bread of life, who comes from heaven.” The crowd probably had in mind the sweet-tasting manna, so misunderstanding Jesus’ point, they said, “Give us this bread always!”

As the crowd stood there with outstretched hands, eagerly awaiting something to eat, Jesus offered them something unexpected: “I am the bread of life. You’ll never be hungry again if you come to me. Not only that—if you trust me, you won’t ever be thirsty either.”

John’s story tells us that some in the crowd began to complain, wondering how this Jesus who was Joseph’s boy could offer such a deal. I imagine someone in the crowd asking, “What did he say? Where’s the bread?”

Another may have replied, “I don’t know. He said something about following him.”

“Does that mean he will take us somewhere else to get the bread? I thought he had it here with him now.”

“I’m not quite sure that’s what he meant. It sounded more like he wants us to follow his teachings, that following his Way is like eating the bread of life.”

“What? That takes time. I was hoping he had bread for lunch today! I didn’t know I had to wait and follow him.”

I think today we still struggle with this notion of Jesus as the bread of life, something we follow rather than quickly consume. Most of us would instead prefer things get done quickly. And when it comes to making bread, I must admit, today I use a

3

bread making machine. All I have to do is put the ingredients in the pan; it mixes, let's the dough rise, kneads it, and cooks it. I no longer experience the sticky dough all over my hands, nor do I have to pay attention to the clock and punch down the dough at a certain time. Sure, it's easier, but I think I've lost something in the process. As the making bread has become less demanding of my time, I somehow still find myself not taking the time to fill up the bread machine with the ingredients.

Now that we don't even have to be present in the room for the bread to go through its stirring and cooking process, we just buy a loaf of bread at the store. We no longer have to be involved in the process of being present in the room in order to have bread, and so this notion of Jesus as the bread of life gets lost in our modern world. We often think of the imagery of Jesus as the bread of life as meaning that Jesus is as necessary as daily bread in our lives. And while I agree with that, I think the imagery goes much deeper. Seeing Jesus as the

bread of our lives implies that Jesus is present during the entire process as we are being shaped.

Being present with someone takes as much time and effort as going through the steps of making bread, and one father was fortunate to recognize the value of presence through the eyes of his child as he was visiting his daughter's preschool.

It was a day when dads could come to visit. But when he got there, he was shocked to discover that only a handful of fathers had come to be with their children.

Later on that morning, all the children were sitting on the floor in a circle. The teacher asked the children to tell the group something about their fathers, something that was special. One child said, "Well, my daddy is a lawyer. He makes a lot of money and we live in a big house." Another child said, "My father is very smart. He teaches at the college and a lot of important people know him." Finally it was time for Sarah to say something special about dad. She looked up at dad, then looked around the

④

circle of friends, and then smiled and proudly said, “My dad ... my dad is here!”<sup>2</sup>

Being present. Being here. When we take the time to be present, we offer one another a gift. Whether it’s showing up at a family event or gathering here for worship on Sunday morning, being present adds something to the experience for everyone.

We sometimes call our gathering at the Table the *Lord’s* Supper, for Christ is present when we gather at this table. But it’s more than that, and so we often call this event *communion*, which is a word that means the coming together for the sharing of thoughts and feelings. It’s an event that welcomes

everyone, with our joys and struggles, sorrows and hopes.

When we come to the table to break bread, we celebrate Christ’s presence with us, but we also celebrate the presence of one another. We don’t eat the bread alone, for it involves many others who help in the process: those who made the bread, the deacons who placed the bread on the trays, the deacons who serve the bread, and each of you as you hold the bread tray so the person next to you can break off a piece.

Jesus: the bread of life, a reminder that God is present in each step of the shaping of your life. May we also offer the gift of presence to one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Bettina Vitell, *A Taste of Heaven and Earth: A Zen Approach to Cooking and Eating With 150 Satisfying Vegetarian Recipes* (Morrow Cookbooks, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Homiletics*, August 7, 1994.