

## **Bread for the Journey**

John 6:24-35

Crossroads Christian Church

Ephesians 4:1-16

Aug. 2, 2015 Pentecost 9B

Let me tell you a story I like that shows the wisdom and humor of our Jewish brothers and sisters. It's set at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Two Spanish Jews, Jacobo and Esperanza, were exiled from Spain because of their beliefs during the Spanish Inquisition, and they had settled in Israel. They were not wealthy or educated, and they knew very little Hebrew, but they were devout. Jacobo went to the synagogue and he heard the text from Leviticus 24 where the children of Israel were instructed to bake 12 loaves of challah bread and bring it to the tabernacle as an offering to God. Jacobo, not understanding the language well, thought that the story applied to them in their own day. "Esperanza, God likes challah on the Shabbat and you bake the best challah in the world! Next Friday, bake 12 loaves and we can bring them to the synagogue for God!"

So Esperanza baked her best challah, weaving her love and devotion to God into the dough. Friday afternoon, when no one was around, they brought them to the synagogue, opened the ark where the scrolls of the law are stored, and put the bread in. "Buen Appetito," Jacobo said to God, and they left.

A few minutes later, the janitor came in with his broom. He stood before the ark to pray. "Dear God, my children, my wife and I are starving. We need a miracle." He opened the ark, found the challah bread, praised God for providing the miracle he had asked for, and he took it home to his hungry family. God had provided.

The next Friday when the rabbi opened the ark, Jacobo and Esperanza saw that God had eaten every bite of their bread, for none was left. They winked at each other with satisfaction. The next Friday, they brought twelve more loaves, and that bread disappeared, and they continued the practice for 30 years, making challah bread for God. One day, they were putting the bread into the ark, and Esperanza prayed to God, "I'm sorry, God, that the challah is getting lumpy. My fingers have arthritis, and I can't knead the bread like I used to." Just then, the rabbi walked in. He saw them, and became angry. "What do you think you are doing, you foolish couple?"

"We are giving God his challahs."

"Don't you know that God doesn't eat?"

"Well, you may be a smart rabbi, but you don't know everything. God most certainly does eat. We've done this every week for thirty years, and God hasn't left a crumb."

The wise rabbi thought, and said, "Let's hide and see what happens." They did, and the janitor came in. "Dear God, I don't like to complain," he prayed, "but the challahs have been getting a little

lumpy. Still, it's keeping me and my family alive." When everybody discovered what was happening, Jacobo, Esperanza, and the janitor began to cry; the couple because they realized God wasn't eating their bread after all, and the janitor because he guessed God would no longer supply his family with food.

Then a wise scholar came in. "God has been having so much fun watching you all these years," he said. "Now that you know who has been baking the challahs and who has been eating them, you must keep on with it anyway. And you must all believe with perfect faith that it is God who bakes and God who takes, and that God is no less present in your lives."<sup>1</sup>

Although it wasn't literally true that God ate the bread offered by the couple, or that God baked the bread for the janitor, it is as true as true can be that God worked through their hearts to create a miracle. God's love worked through the couple's praise as they baked the challah loaves each week, and God's love worked in the situation to keep another family from starving. The couple served God by saving a starving family. And the starving family had offered praise to God for providing bread. God's work is being done as bread is being shared.

Isn't it amazing how much the Bible talks about bread? Remember the manna in the wilderness that kept the Hebrews from starving? Remember the pan bread that Sarah made to show hospitality to the mysterious visitors when she was entertaining "angels unaware?" Remember Jesus refusing to turn stones into bread in the wilderness? Remember about Jesus feeding the five thousand? Today we heard the promise of the gospel lesson. "I am the bread of life," Jesus said. "He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." The people whom he had fed had tracked him down, and wanted more food. He tried to explain to them that behind the miracle there was a meaning. God was wanting to feed them to give them strength to do God's work, not so they could be dependent on God for a handout. "What must we do, then, to do the works of God?"

Jesus told them that they had to believe that he himself was God's work. Isn't it strange that a group of people who had been miraculously fed came back by saying, "prove it?" Give us a sign? And Jesus said that he himself was the only sign they would receive. Jesus said that God gave them bread of heaven through him, the bread that gives life to the world. The crowd asked Jesus for this bread, and that's when he said, "I am the bread of life."

Isn't this like the story I told earlier? People thought that one thing was happening, while something quite different was really going

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<sup>1</sup> Classic Jewish folktale. A slightly different version can be found on [www.Scheinerman.net](http://www.Scheinerman.net).

on. God's grace—God's giving nature—was at work both times, as God was giving his people bread for the journey—bread—both physical and spiritual—to give them strength and life. God still offers us the bread of life. When we come to the communion table, Christ, the living bread, is present—not literally or magically, but spiritually. When we stop and pause to give thanks and to eat and drink, we are in good company—God's company. Like the janitor at the synagogue and like the crowds on the hillside, we are being fed by God's grace. And why? Not for a handout, not to make us happy, but to sustain us on the journey. We, like Jacobo and Esperanza, bake the bread and offer the bread, we like the starving janitor eat the bread and give thanks for the bread, but it is God through Christ who gives it to us. The bread gives us strength. Each piece of bread we take doesn't have many calories or carbohydrates, but it does strengthen us spiritually to do God's will. Like Jacobo and Esperanza, we feed the hungry in gratitude for God feeding us. We still may be hungry for Sunday dinner after we eat this bread for the journey, but we will be refreshed and blessed for being at this banquet.

God gives us bread for the journey. Our epistle lesson from Ephesians tells us that our unity in Christ and our vocation in Christ are one. We are called to serve the One who makes us one. How? By loving and caring for one another and for the world. We take the gifts that God has given us and offer them to God in faithful service. The church is Christ's body, we are reminded, and Christ, not us, is the head. There is one body—the church—and one Spirit—Christ's Spirit, and we have been given the honor of being parts of that body. We have been given such an incredible gift. How may we glorify God through it? Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

