

April 23rd, 2023

Earth Day Outdoor Service

Third Sunday after Easter

First: Acts 2:14a; 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Second: 1 Peter 1:17-23; Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

“For the Love of Bread!”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight for you are our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Allow yourselves to imagine the modern day road to Emmaus. Maybe it has a poorly built sidewalk, or perhaps no sidewalk at all; gasoline powered vehicles fly by without a care for the pedestrian or bicyclist; the ground is barren and littered with trash. If there is any vegetation, it might be the highly desired yet water inefficient nonnative grasses of choice. Those who are walking might be too involved with their cell phones to look up and see Jesus standing there, ready to walk alongside them. If they do look up and see him, they may lack the social skills needed to maintain a conversation outside the use of emojis, acronyms, or text messaging. What does any of this have to do with Jesus? Well, I'm glad you asked. For those of you who are new, the outdoor service always coincides with Earth Day and ultimately the road to Emmaus leads us to the table for a meal.

Which brings us to the next question for consideration: How do our food systems relate to our faith? A study in 2018 found microplastics in 90% of table salt. Another study conducted in 2022 by Gruber et al determined the average adult consumes approximately 5 grams of plastic per week- roughly the mass of a credit card. More recently, on a remote island over 700 miles off the coast of Brazil, researchers were stumped by blue colored “rocks” that had surfaced on the beach of the green turtle refuge. The island is a protected habitat for this species of turtle with no human residents, save for members of the Brazilian navy which have a base there. Testing revealed these strange formations to be “plastiglomerates” from fishing nets that had traveled long distances to then end up on the beach,

get super-heated, and incorporated into the geology of the island, forever preserved in the earth's environmental records. Fish used to be one of the healthiest animal proteins we could consume; their bodies are now riddled with microplastics they ingested, thinking it to be food. Alright, but where's Jesus in all this?

Well, Jesus loved to eat. There are numerous times in the Bible where Jesus was going to, coming from, or involved in a meal at some point and there is no shortage of food in the Bible. Olives, grapes, milk, fish, cheese, figs, honey, everyone's favorite - locusts; the list is extensive. However, no other food is talked about or used in the Bible as often as bread with an astounding 492 references. Second place was wine coming in at around 150 mentions. Bread, in the Bible, refers not only to the carbohydrate-rich, grain-based food we know and love; it could also mean the meal itself.

Most of you know, I had the pleasure of attending a convocation about food and faith at SMU's Perkins School of Theology this past fall. Aarti Sequiera, who stars as a chef on the Food Network, was one of the keynote speakers. During the first evening she spoke about the Scripture lesson from the very first sermon I ever wrote exactly one year ago today. Before this event, I knew food was important. I grew up sitting down at the dinner table with my family every single night and praying the same prayer at every meal. I have always enjoyed the church potlucks. My own family has a small garden and tries to produce as much of our own food as we can but when she talked about that passage again, she framed it in a way that I had never considered before.

Imagine being one of the disciples: you don't know what else to do with yourself so you're out there in the boat, carrying on with your old trade of fishing fish because you're still new at the whole fishers of men bit mere days after the brutal, bloody, traumatic death of your very best friend. You're intensely sad; the pain is fresh and raw. You may even be disappointed because his death (and the end result of it) was not what you were hoping for... Then imagine seeing that best friend brought back,

waiting for you on the shore, lovingly preparing a meal for you and all the other sad people in the boat. That's real comfort food. When she re-framed the story for me through that lens, my journey with food and the Bible began.

Another keynote speaker at the convocation was Norman Wirzba, a professor at Duke's School of Divinity. I introduced myself to him as soon as he entered the room right before a panel of Syrian women were going to speak about their experiences as refugees of war and (to my great excitement) had prepared traditional Middle Eastern foods for everyone to partake in afterwards. He and I got in line together and sat down. Somehow all the keynote speakers ended up at my table... including Aarti who seated herself immediately to my left. I did my best to be cool around a famous person; it's a good thing I don't have television and had not developed a following beforehand because I am a fan now. Norman asked me what I did; the basic 'get to know you' questions but I could tell his curiosity was piqued when I shared that my major in college had been agriculture.

Kyle encouraged me to take Norman's small session, which I did. In the group he led shortly after lunch, we talked about how the church is going to address food insecurity and housing in our growing population and diminishing resources; how the church, collectively, owns more acreage than any other entity on this planet. We broke into smaller groups and talked about ways we could address these issues within our own communities beyond that of the more common ways such as food banks, meal programs, and fundraising.

As a society, we have become disconnected from our food. I would dare to venture most of the older people in the congregation probably grew up with, at the very least, a family garden, or more likely, a family farm. Those days have faded away and with those changes, things are lost. When we think about how and what we consume as food now, it's no wonder the world is such a mess. Pre-packaged means convenience... but it also means plastic and often preservatives and chemical

stabilizers. My point is not to shame anyone who eats these foods, I too am guilty, but rather to get us thinking more about where our food comes from and how we, as a church, can address food and on a larger scale, environmental issues from different directions. During my small group session at the convocation, I was inspired and feel compelled to convince the church to plant fruit trees somewhere on our property, perhaps closer to the road with a sign along the lines of 'take what you need'. It would not only provide food, but it would also make a statement about who we are and who we think deserves to eat; physical representations of Jesus' inclusive table.

During my travels on mission trips as a teenager, we often ate in the homes of the families for whom we were building. The bread that was served was sometimes the only food on the table I recognized. Naan, tortilla, challah, brezel, roti, croissant, bagel, loaf, pan- every culture has its own styles and names for bread. In Arabic the formal word for bread is khoobz (خبز); however, there is another colloquial word for bread that has dual significance. This word, ayesh (عيش), also means "life". We see this reference in pop culture during the Stevie Wonder song "Isn't she lovely?" where he sings the feminized version of the word "Life is Aisha, the meaning of her name". Bread is life; a staple and one that is not quickly produced.

Turning grains into flour takes an enormous amount of time and energy. Although there are many cereal grains out there and referenced Biblically, wheat is the most common one used to prepare bread. It is incredibly diverse in terms of varieties, but they all fall within two categories: fall wheat and spring wheat. It is a grass that loves the sun, has minimal fertilizer requirements, and doesn't need all that much water either. After working the soil, broadcasting the seeds, and letting the plants grow (which may or may not include a period of dormancy), it is finally ready for harvest. This process is also lengthy. The plants eventually change color and bend over, signaling they are ready to be cut. Today we use combines to make this work faster and more efficient, but back in Biblical times, it was the good, old scythe. The plants are cut quite long to be stood upright and tied together. Now comes more waiting.

The plants need to dry for a couple of weeks; it's ready when the seed head becomes hard and crunchy. Next is the threshing, done by hand, of course. The wheat is beaten so that it shatters, and the grain disconnects from the wheat head. Then on to the next step where one must separate the wheat berries from the chaff (another famous Biblical metaphor) to get pure grains. But the work's not over yet. The wheat is then ground; by hand, yet again; and **this is one of the most labor intensive parts of the entire process**. Dried wheat berries are incredibly hard and rightfully so. They must maintain a tough exterior to overwinter and start the lifecycle once more. After we have a ground flour, then, depending on the type of bread we are making we need other ingredients, some of which are microscopic but pivotal in creating the fluffy interior of yeast breads. After the right proportions are achieved, there is other work that occurred before all this effort of raising and milling the wheat to be formed into a dough. One must have an oven or super-hot space to cook this style of food. Enter more manual labor; this process involved multiple steps and I will spare the details, you get the idea and finally, we get to bake the bread. Likely the briefest step in the entire process (except maybe eating it) and most of us know there is nothing like the taste of good, homemade bread.

George Patterson has been very supportive of my exploration into ministry and periodically leaves reading materials for me at the church. There were two articles in the February/March 2023 issue of *Sojourners*, an American Christian magazine which places emphasis on the church and social issues: one was related to theology and bread by Tyndale Momentum; the other was written by Zachary Lee about food and the inclusive table championed by Jesus. In Zachary Lee's article, he explores three films related to food culture and juxtaposes their messages with the one we get from Jesus. "In one of his final moments with his disciples, Jesus transforms the seemingly simple act of eating into a call to action. "Take, eat, drink, do this in remembrance of me." Jesus says to his friends. Do not consume mindlessly. This table should be marked by sacrifice, not by exclusion." Tyndale Momentum's article focused on Kendall Vanderslice's book *By Bread Alone*. Momentum goes on to tell how Vanderslice, who holds a

master's in gastronomy and in theological studies, reminds us that "we can find God in the simplicity of bread- and at that same meal, we can find each other".

Eating is one of the most literal acts we are called to do by God. We eat all the time but maybe we need to change how we eat, where we eat, the source of our food, who we share our food with, how our food is grown, transported, fertilized, and further consider how it is impacting our home, the Earth. In other words, how we can change our food systems for the better?

Norman Wirzba was raised in a religious German-speaking agricultural community in the Northern United States. During the harvest season, they would decorate and fill the altar with the bounty from the fields. That community placed those crops in the church because they knew what it took to make that food happen, where it came from, and to thank God for her hand in it. In the large group session, he spoke about a course he was asked to offer to ecology students called 'The Spirituality of Nature'. The class was late at night, and it was not uncommon for the students to bring food and eat. He questioned them one evening to ask if any of them had prayed over their meal beforehand. The general response was something along the lines of 'Why bother?'; Norman's response was this: "Something died that you might live."

When we buy the meat already in cuts, we lose touch with the animal, do not consider it a gift, and fail to give thanks for the sacrifice of it's life. When vegetables and fruits are available out of season in the grocery store year round, we may not consider how that food choice impacts the environment. When we stop raising wheat, we forget how that grain came to be and take it for granted. After all, Jesus died that we might live.

1 Peter 1:23 says: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." In John 12:24 Jesus says to the crowd "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it

produces many seeds". We know all these seed analogies are directly related to Jesus and he frequently refers to himself as the 'Bread of Life'. Today 1 Peter 1:20 says Jesus "was chosen before the creation of the world and was revealed in these last times" and Acts 2:36 tells us "God has made this Jesus". Given the steps it takes to produce bread, it's no wonder God had to take her time to make Jesus known to us. She's not the type of mother who's going to hand out prepackaged rolls, call us saved, and move forward. She is old school; making it from scratch with home grown glyphosate free grains and wild caught yeast because truly receiving the bread, "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38), is a lengthy process. To echo a sermon Kyle preached earlier this year, God is going to do things on God's time.

And let it be known God's time means **we need to get together and we need to act**. The reading from Peter urges us to obey God's truth and to "love one another deeply, from the heart". As always, Jesus shows us the way to accomplish this and in today's message this includes the following instructions: everyone sit down at the table (and yes, I mean, everyone), take the bread (our meal), give thanks (call on the name of the Lord), break it (take what we need), pass it around (share); and then our eyes will be opened and we will develop that sincere love for our brothers and sisters. The psalmist asks: "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" and then goes on to answer his own question for Psalm 116 commands twice that: "I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people". It is important that we keep our promises to God together. It also mentions we lift a cup and call on the name of God. *It's interesting to note the two men in Luke's story do not recognize Jesus until after the bread is broken and passed around and that the story mentions the breaking of the bread twice.* God want us to be around a table sharing a meal; drinking a cup of tea and praying together; spending quality time with one another, and in those moments where we take time to receive the bread on God's time, we will come to recognize Jesus in the person across from us.

When we were living in Kuwait, approximately mid-November of 2001, my family and I had gone to the market downtown. People were cooking flatbread in the stone ovens... it also happened to be

Ramadan. We had to sneak bites in the car and took great care as eating in public could result in arrest. It was our first time in a Muslim country, and we learned that during Ramadan there is complete and total fasting from food and water during the day (with some exceptions such as the very young, pregnant, sick, or elderly). Then when it is truly night, everyone gets together and stays up late to feast and pray. They do this every, single night for the season of Ramadan which typically lasts about a month. Our Muslim brothers and sisters are doing at least one thing right.

We are on the road to Emmaus every day of our lives. Are we taking the time to sit down at the end of a long day to commune with one another? Are we remembering to express gratitude for the food before us? Are we setting aside our devices to be present with our children to teach them how to engage with others and to demonstrate that they matter more than an object? Are we fully loving each other and the Earth? We vote with our dollars at the grocery store every time we shop for food. We can choose to live with less plastic and waste. We can choose to break bread with those who are different from us, or we can isolate ourselves and stay within our own ethnocentric group and ideals. Because if we aren't paying attention as we walk, Austin Heights, Jesus could slip right by us... and that's a meal we don't want to miss.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, One True God, Mother of us all.

Amen.