

The Real Bread of Life

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 19, 2018

I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

I was excited to hear that Panera Bread is opening a second location in Columbus. It will be just a mile and a half away on Macon in front of the old Kmart, which is good news for that particular corner. For those who haven't tried it, Panera is a fast casual restaurant specializing in breads, baked goods, salads, and sandwiches.

I heard an interview recently with the founder of Panera on the podcast How I Built This. He told a fascinating story with three main points.

First, when he started the business in the late 1980's, he realized people were growing tired of fast food. As he put it, "They wanted more than a lot of food cheap." So he focused on fresh baked artisan breads. Ciabatta. Focaccia. Baguette. Brioche. Honey Wheat. Tomato Basil. Sourdough.

Second, Panera was one of four restaurant businesses he developed early in his career. All were doing quite well. Panera was the smallest of the four, but he thought it had the most potential. So he sold the other three and put the money in Panera. He downsized in order to grow.

Third, by the early 2000's, Panera needed to expand. They had this great concept and people were flocking to the stores. But real estate costs were high. As he put it, "Everybody was leveraging up their balance sheets, putting on debt, borrowing money to buy back stock. Grow, grow, grow." He didn't want to do that. It seemed too risky. Costs were too high. But in 2008 when the recession hit, all of a sudden, real estate and construction costs were down. He realized this was the moment he had been waiting for. Over just a few years, Panera built lots of new stores, and the company tripled its stock value during the recession. He grew wisely. When the right moment came, he didn't hesitate.

Our gospels lessons for the last several weeks have focused on bread. It all started at the beginning of John 6, when Jesus fed a multitude with five barley loaves and two fish. After that miracle, Jesus started teaching about bread. Not Panera Bread, not even the barley loaves that fed the crowd or the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness, but the living bread of Jesus, the bread from heaven that gives life to the world.

And oh, we need this bread. We are sick and tired of fast food, aren't we. We have had enough of the things that do not satisfy. We are hungry for meaning. We are hungry for peace of mind. We are hungry for relationships to be mended. We are hungry for justice, for all God's children

to have what they need. Like King Solomon, we are hungry for wisdom. We have been to the drive thru of busyness and emptiness and anxiety and bitterness and greed and they do not satisfy. We are made in the image of God, and God made us hungry for the things of God. We are hungry for living bread.

So thanks be to God we find that living bread in Jesus.

It is possible that Jesus had Eucharist in mind, even then. At this altar every week we share in a ritual that we sometimes describe as eating the flesh of the son of man and drinking his blood. Episcopalians don't go so far as to claim that the molecules in the bread and wine materially change into something else. But we do claim in faith that in this holy ritual God comes to be with us. You may have sensed something like that when you've taken part. By God's presence in and with the bread and wine they become more than they already are. And just as the bread and wine are changed, so we are changed into Christ's body for the world. Through this holy mystery we become more than we already are. We become a kind of living bread ourselves, the body of Christ for others. So, yes, Jesus may have had Eucharist in mind when he spoke these words.

But he also seems to have been speaking about the life to which Eucharist points. Eternal, abundant, real life. The Greek words here are the life of the ages. Not just an endless amount of time after we die, but the life of eternity, the life of God, life as God intended it to be. Eternal life is that life of fullness and meaning and peace for which we all hunger. The real bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

So Jesus invites us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. But it's a particular kind of eating. The verb for eat actually changes in this passage. Most English translations miss that. At first, in verse 51, Jesus says simply whoever eats this bread. But by verse 54 the word changes to something more visceral. Whoever chews on this bread or whoever gnaws on this bread. Friends, little nibbles and sips of the life of God will not satisfy. Jesus invites us to take a big old bite and chew on this life, to grind our teeth into the life he offers and let that wholesome living bread nourish us.

A few months ago, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry gathered a team of folks from across our church to think about how to do that, how to invite the whole Episcopal Church to take a big bite, to pull up to the spiritual feast God has already laid out before us and dig in. The result is this Way of Love document we've been talking about. The Way of Love is a series of seven practices to help us chew on the abundant life of following Jesus. These practices are not new. They are old family recipes. The ingredients are simple. We **turn** from a life of emptiness and embrace the life of Jesus. We **learn**, especially the scriptures and the life and teaching of Jesus. We **pray**, dwelling intentionally with God every day. We **worship** together in community with others, nourished weekly by the sacraments. We **bless** by giving our time and our resources in service. We **go** across boundaries to meet Jesus in all people. And we **rest**, receiving the gift of quiet and fellowship and peace.

Today we are re-committing ourselves to this Way of Love in our ministry pledges. We invited the congregation this week to reflect on these seven habits and sign up for different ways to live them out through our ministries at St. Thomas. If you haven't done that yet or need more time it's not too late. We will celebrate this commitment over lunch together.

And in his own way, the founder of Panera has good advice to help us along the way. First, decide you want the real food. Second, be willing to let go of some things to invest fully in that which leads to abundant life. And third, when you see the moment to act, seize it.

As you all know, Aretha Franklin died this week. She had a remarkable career and witness. So many amazing songs. She supported the Civil Rights Movement. She sang at three Presidential inaugurations. She famously filled in for Pavarotti at the 1998 Grammys. She was the first woman inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. But several reports this week focused on her 1972 double platinum gospel album *Amazing Grace*.

The album was recorded live in worship services over two days in January at the New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in South Los Angeles. She sang with her mentor James Cleveland and his Southern California Community Choir. Her dad, Rev. C. L. Franklin was in the congregation. He spoke on the album and reminded everyone, as if they needed reminding, that his daughter may have sung lots of different songs, but she had never left the church.

Precious Lord, Take My Hand was on the album, of course, just like it was also on the very first album she recorded at her Daddy's Detroit church when she was just 14. Martin Luther King loved that song, so she sang it at his funeral and we'll sing it today. But the first song of that January service was a little lesser known. It's a song by Marvin Gaye – *Wholy Holy*. That's *Wholy* with a W, and *Holy* with an H. It wasn't written as a gospel song per se, but Aretha sang it that way. She made it about being fully, completely, wholly dedicated to following the Way of Love.

Wholy Holy
Come together wholly
People we have got to come together
Because we need the strength, the power
And all of the feeling
Wholy Holy
We should believe in each other's dreams
Jesus left a long time ago
And said he would return
He left us a book to believe in – yes he did
And in it we've got a whole lot to learn
He can't talk out, can't walk out now
We can rock this earth's foundation
Yes we can
Can't you see us, brothers and sisters,
Talking about love
Love, love, love

We can rock this earth's foundation
Wholly Holy

Friends, decide you want the real food. Be willing to let go of some things to invest fully in the abundant life. And when you see the moment to act, seize it. Even today. Thanks be to God.

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The interview with the founder of Panera is here -

<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=606517556>

The words to Wholly Holy are here

<https://genius.com/Aretha-franklin-wholy-holy-lyrics>

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Rev. Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
2100 Hilton Ave.
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org