

WONDER BREAD

**November 18, 2007 ~ Thanksgiving Sunday
Holy Trinity UMC**

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say, “Today I declare to your God that I have come into the land that God swore to our ancestors to give us.” ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of your God, ⁵you shall make this response before your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor who went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the God of our ancestors; God heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O God, have given me.” You shall set it down before your God and bow down before your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that your God has given to you and to your house.

John 6:24-35

²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which this Chosen One will give you for the Chosen One bears the seal of God.”

²⁸Then they said to Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God to believe in the one whom God has sent.” ³⁰So they said to Jesus, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘God gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³²Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is God who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴They said to Jesus, “Teacher, give us this bread always.” ³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Wonder Bread! What comes to mind for you when you hear the words “Wonder Bread?” Red, blue and yellow balloon packaging of a white bread that’s been on the shelves for over 80 years?

I remember well the day that our Camp Fire Group went on a Field Trip to the Wonder Bread factory. I was at the impressionable age of 10 and it was the first time that I had witnessed “mass production.” I was fascinated by the huge vats. They looked like massive cauldrons beating pounds of flour and salt and water and yeast together. I was thrilled to see hundreds of loaves rising on tiers of shelves. And oh! The aroma of baking bread was wonderful. The ovens were enormous and the loaves perfectly golden. I watched conveyer belts carry the cooled loaves of bread to the slicing machines and then on to wrapping machines and finally past the human eye of quality control before the loaves of Wonder Bread went off to market.

And best of all, we got to take a loaf of Wonder Bread home!

Many years have passed since my 4th grade trip to the Wonder Bread factory and my appreciation for bread has evolved in a way that is quite parallel to our Gospel lesson. Like Jesus’ contemporaries, I loved bread because it satisfied my hunger. A favorite after school snack was a slice of bread and butter with sugar sprinkled on top! Bread represented nourishment – a basic necessity of life.

And when I prayed “Give us this day our daily bread” I pictured the next full course meal that I would consume and it always included a slice of bread.

My mindset was the same as that of the mindset of the folks who followed Jesus after he had fed 5,000 (not including women and children) on the hills of Galilee with merely five barley loaves and two fish. Earlier in the 6th chapter of John this miracle is recorded. So when we meet Jesus in vs. 25, Jesus accuses the crowd of being more concerned with their full stomachs than with the power of God that was responsible for the miracle. Eugene Peterson’s translation of the lesson has Jesus saying to the crowds “You’ve come looking for me not because you saw God in my actions but because I fed you, filled your stomachs – and for free.”

The people recognize that Jesus is telling them the truth. Of course they are pursuing him because their bellies are full. This man, who can perform miracles, might continue to give them a free lunch. And so it is that Jesus sets them straight. “Don’t waste your energy striving for perishable food like that” he says. “Work for the food that sticks with you, food that will truly nourish you – not only now but for eternity.” And then Jesus speaks in the third person. He alludes to the “one whom God has sent to provide that bread.” The crowd is curious. “Why don’t you give us a clue about who you are, just a hint of what’s going on? When we see what’s up, we’ll commit ourselves. Show us what you can do.”

Then Jesus reveals the truth about himself. “Right now God is offering you bread from heaven, the *real* bread. This is a wonder bread that you’ve never known before. I am the Bread of Life and if you follow me and commit yourself to me then you will never hunger, you will never thirst.”

Jesus is not talking about food for our bellies, my friends. Jesus is talking about food for our souls! And the promise is simply this. If we believe in the One who is the Bread of Life, the one who lived and died and rose from the grave then we, too, will have a soul that is forever satisfied and a life that is filled with blessings and abundance. This Wonder Bread is so satisfying that we will never again go hungry. The hunger for truth is satisfied, for in Christ is the truth of God. The hunger for meaning is filled, for Christ alone is abundant life. The hunger for love is completed, for in Christ is the love that is victorious over sin and death.

But the wonder of this bread does not end here. It begins here because as we are nourished, so we, in turn, share the Bread of Life with others. It becomes our source, our sustenance, our very reason for being Jesus' disciple and partnering with God here on earth.

Last weekend, the Church within a Church Movement, of which I have been an active member, hosted a gathering at Union UMC in the South End of Boston. We honored Rev. Gil Caldwell, an African American pastor, prophet, and teacher of the Good News. Here is a man who has given his life to the causes of justice and worked to dismantle racism, to make the United Methodist Church a welcoming home for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians of every race and every culture, to work for peace in any corner of the world where there is conflict and war. During the weekend celebration of this living saint, many amazing stories were told. One remembrance took place in 1982.

The story begins in 1982 in Pickens County, Alabama, where two black women, Maggie Boldman and Julia Wilder, were teaching elderly people how to cast absentee ballots. White folk arrested these two women and tried them for voter fraud. These two women – one a teacher of 35 years and the other a mother, grandmother and great grandmother were sentenced to years in prison. Incensed, the black young people wanted to burn the courthouse down. Rev. Joseph Lowery, a native of Alabama, Civil Rights Leader and Chair of the National Black Leadership Forum at the time warned the people, "It will make a good fire but it won't help Maggie or Julia much at all. Let's go to church" he urged.

And so, after praying all afternoon and half the night, the gathered congregation finally discerned God's will. "March" God told them

And march they did. Through Pickens County, to the state capital in Montgomery and on to Washington, D.C. they marched. And as a result of their 2,000 mile, two month march through 72 cities, registering black voters along the way, they got Maggie and Julia free and the Voters Right Act extended.

But it wasn't as simple as it sounds! Their march was threatened by politicians who didn't want them negroes to make a scene in Pickens County. And so the week before the march was scheduled to begin, white folk were passing out hams and turkeys to the black folk, telling them to go home and to keep quiet and not to stir up trouble.

Dr. Lowery couldn't believe it! 1982! black folk selling their soul for a ham? A turkey? 300 - that's how many he expected to find gathered on the Pickens County Courthouse step to begin the march. Oh! How utterly discouraged he was to find only 100 there on that cold, wet February morning. Angry, defeated, Lowery wailed at God. "How can my people do this? And all for a ham or a turkey!"

But not letting his insides show on the outside, he led the marchers forth. No one could see his tears because of the falling rain. First stop was Aliceville, Alabama, 14 miles along the route. They arrived in less than 3 hours. Heavy hearted, he turned the corner into Aliceville. There at the Community Center were 200 black folk with marching shoes on their feet, holding baskets full of ham and turkey sandwiches! It was bread that held the ham and the turkey together. The ham and the turkey were symbols of food for the belly but it was the bread that reminded all of the marchers that only with the Bread of Life could there be sustenance for their souls and justice for all God's people. Bread. Wonder bread. The Bread of Wonder that satisfies our deep hunger forever.

This coming week there will be plenty of food to fill our bellies. Yes, there will be turkey and cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and vegetables galore, and spicy pumpkin pie to satisfy our physical hunger. But to this amply laden table, I invite you to place a symbol of the Bread of Life, the real Wonder Bread of our lives. Let it sandwich all of our blessings and be the source that gives us life in the Spirit.

During the reading of the lesson from Deuteronomy, baskets of little loaves of bread were brought forward to the chancel. This bread is our symbol of the God who is with us in Jesus Christ. Each little loaf represents the One who came to tell us "I am the Bread of Life. Anyone who comes to me will never be hungry."

In the past few weeks, I turned my kitchen into a mini Wonder Bread factory. I prayed for you as I baked bread. Today, I invite you to take your symbolic loaf of bread home with you and place it on your Thanksgiving table. It will be a reminder that Jesus dines with you on Thanksgiving. Perhaps you will break your little loaf of bread and share it with family and friends asking each person gives thanks for a blessing in his/her life.

God's Wonder Bread – given that we might have life and then, that we might share that life, so that all creation might have life and have it abundantly! Alleluia! Amen!