

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Bethany Ulrich

August 1, 2021

I imagine the crowd at Galilee that we read about today like those of us who wanted to bake in those early days of the pandemic. But when I had this urge , I couldn't find the main ingredient- flour- anywhere.

I imagine the crowd like many of us going from store to store looking for that prized ingredient, desperate to find that thing that would solve their problems that would satisfy the hunger they were feeling.

To understand their hunger and what made them chase after Jesus, it helps to remember that the crowds had just been fed by Jesus in the miraculous feeding of 5000. They were so impressed by this meal, a few verses before our text today tells us they were going to **force** Jesus to be their king so that JESUS could provide for them like this EVERY day. And when Jesus left, they pursued him.

You see the folks in the Galilean countryside were known for being a group of outcasts and sometimes bandits that lived from day to day. They had no leader and perhaps didn't have enough to eat all the time. They wanted not only full bellies, but they wanted that continual assurance that they were going to be okay, that the uncertainty every day wasn't going to overwhelm them or defeat them.

In the uncertainty of daily life, they want JESUS to conform to THEIR demands, THEIR expectations- they want to force him to be king - and then, if they can't have

Jesus as king, well, they want to know, “what must we do to perform the works of God?” ...How can WE do this OURSELVES?

I can definitely relate to that uncertainty. If you're like me, you've lived with so much uncertainty this past year, perhaps you find that baking bread isn't the only thing that uncertainty has driven you to... perhaps it has driven you to try to force **order and control** in your homes or workplaces, like the Galilean crowd tried to force Jesus as their king. Or perhaps it has driven you to try to compensate for the uncertainty with your own plans and ideas about how this year is going to go and when YOU can get back to the activities YOU want....like the Galilean crowd wanting to learn how to perform Jesus' miracles for themselves.

Today is my final day as Vicar and Pastoral Intern. And I admit that from the moment I started this internship, I had my own ideas and plans- I dreamed about the day we could go back to in-person worship. That was the flour, the ingredient, I was looking for and thought I NEEDED in an internship experience- to make and become bread. To be honest, even now, I cringe at the thought of churches potentially having to ever go back to purely online worship and ministry.

When it comes to making bread, or anything for that matter, it is easy to force OUR ideas and OUR expectations of what goes into that process. But Author Gunilla Norris, in her book and reflections on “Becoming Bread,” reminds us that there are a lot of things that go into making of bread. It's not JUST water, yeast, flour ...there

is **a lot more**. She says that **willingness** is an important ingredient. ¹And when we don't have it, it often comes out as **willFULness**. When this happens, she says, we act out of fear, trying to compensate for the uncertainty. We demand: "Feed **ME** how **I** want to be fed!"

In our text today, the people are demanding food **on their terms** and Jesus sees right through the surface-level hunger of the people. Jesus sees the clear tell-tale signs of their hunger **beneath** their hunger-- the uncertainty, fear, and all the ways they try to make him conform to their expectations.

And Jesus speaks to that deeper hunger when he says I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE. I am your main ingredient, your basic provision for that basic primal fear and uncertainty.

Jesus points them to a **willingness** rather than **willFULness**. He points them to an openness to recognize their hunger beneath their hunger and be open to the possibility of sustenance for THAT hunger. To be open to all the teachings of Jesus and to open their hands to the deep and abundant life he gives, rather than demanding what THEY think is best.

So too, Jesus invites US to recognize the hunger beneath the frantic flour-searching, and the other things we might try to do when we face uncertainty.

¹ Gunilla Norris, "Becoming Bread: Meditations on Loving and Transformation," (New York: Bell Tower, 1993), 17.

We too are invited to a willingness, an openness, to see and recognize that uncertainty and our hunger for stability born out of such fear and vulnerability. We are invited to recognize **that hunger** so that we may be open to how God has fed and is feeding **THAT hunger**. Jesus invites us to see our own uncertainty, not impose our own solutions, but rather take a moment to see what is around us, see what God has already given us, the sustenance *already present* in our lives.

But, what does this look and feel like? I love how Gunilla Norris puts it: She says, “When we can open the cupboard door in the heart’s kitchen, we are expressing this acceptance of creatureliness. As we look at the ingredients inside...the ones we like and the ones we prefer to deny...we are beginning to trust God to make bread out of all that.”²

Like I said, throughout this past year, I’ve held onto my vision of what church should look like (which is pretty much pre-pandemic church). But I’ve also seen how, even though the cupboard didn’t look like I thought it would and I didn’t have all the ingredients I thought I would, I’ve STILL been able to learn and grow in ways I never thought possible during a majority online church experience and I’ve seen God make bread out of what we do have.

For example, I’ve been truly amazed at how even in the midst of a pandemic, this community wrote 85 letters to immigrants in detention during Advent, made 45 bags of Christmas cookies for homebound neighbors, surpassed our Lenten Service Project goal, continued monthly feedings with the Night Ministry, started the Little

² Norris, *Becoming Bread*, page 18.

Free Pantry, and not to mention, expanded digital church ministries through worship livestream and digital Sunday school throughout the whole year.

Dear friends, as we come to understand Jesus as the Bread of Life, as we become marked by *willingness* rather than *willfulness*, and open to God's ingredients not our own, we see that sustenance and nourishment come from where we least expect.

As I'm ending an internship at WPLC that began in uncertainty a year ago and now is ending in another round of uncertainty with the delta variant on the rise, I realize that life is one wave of uncertainty after the other. But I also know that God has fed us abundantly this past year and will continue to sustain us in whatever comes next.

As we come to God's table today and as we are nourished by this Bread of Life may we indeed be empowered to not act and live in uncertainty or fear, but rather out of that abundant life that comes from joining in *God's* mission and participating in *God's* Vision and making God's delicious bread- with or without flour.

AMEN.