

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 3, 2019
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
“Stewardship of the Poor”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Deuteronomy 15:10-11
Christian Scripture: Luke 14:12-14

Seven of eight in “Be the Church”
and
One of Four in “Give Us This Day our Daily Bread”



For the first time in the history of the Christian church and Christian homiletics, two sermon series are being preached at the same time! Wow! How amazing is that? While I am very impressed, I can assure you that our administrative assistant while struggling to draft this week’s service bulletin was not.



Welcome to the *seventh* sermon in our eight-week series “Be the Church”. During this sermon series, we have explored ‘what does it mean to “Be the Church?”’



And welcome to the *first* of four sermons in a series dedicated to our Stewardship Campaign entitled “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”! Though within the midst of two sermon series this week, today we have one theme: ‘Care for the Poor’.



Bread is a staple food prepared by baking a dough of flour and water. It is popular around the world and is one of the world’s oldest foods. Let’s hear a little fun facts about bread.

It takes nine seconds for a combine to harvest enough wheat to make about seventy loaves of bread.

I would like everyone to get your calendars out. Please make note of the following: February 23rd is National Banana Bread Day. April 1st is National Sourdough Bread Day. September 16th is National Cinnamon Raisin Bread Day. December 22nd is National Date Nut Bread Day.

Each American consumes, on average, 53 pounds of bread per year.



Related to our celebration of Holy Communion this morning: Bread is closely tied to religious expression and the Eucharist. Hot cross buns commemorate Lent and Good Friday, Greek Easter breads are set with eggs dyed red to denote the blood of Christ, and Jewish families celebrate the coming of the Sabbath on Friday evening with *challah*.

In 1997, Kansas wheat farmers produced enough wheat to make 36.5 billion loaves of bread, or enough to provide each person on earth with six loaves of bread.



I always appreciate a little history: Napoleon gave a specialty bread its name when he demanded a loaf of dark rye bread for his horse during the Prussian campaign. “*Pain pour Nicole*,” he ordered, which meant “Bread for Nicole,” his horse. To Germanic ears, the request sounded like ‘pumpernickel’, which is the term we use today for this traditional loaf.

Scandinavian traditions hold that if a boy and girl eat from the same loaf, they are bound to fall in love. That is what must have happened with Stephanie and I. Legend has it that whoever eats the last piece of bread has to kiss the cook.¹ I will consume the last piece of bread for lunch for sure!!!

Bread has a central role in the Hebrew and Christian faith traditions. When the Hebrews fled from Egypt’s Pharaoh, they encountered a desert wilderness in which thirst and famine threatened them.

¹ <https://mobile-cuisine.com/did-you-know/bread-fun-facts/>, accessed 3 November 2019.



God sent ‘manna’ from heaven, which was some kind of melt-in-your-mouth bread-like substance that appeared on the ground like dew (Exodus 16:15). ‘Manna’, or bread, from that point had come to be seen by our faith ancestors as a symbol of ‘God’s provision’. It was a gift from God, a life-preserving gift.

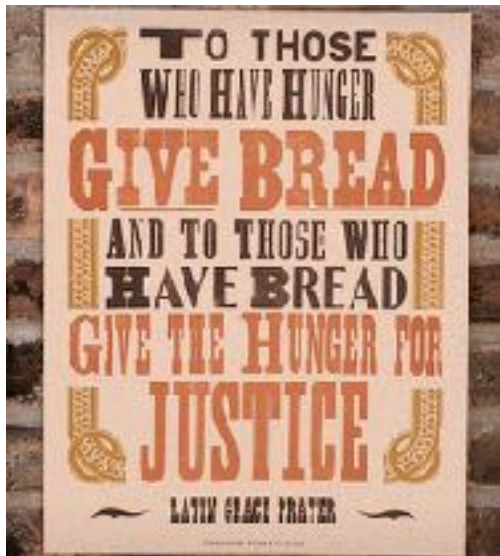
[At least three theories exist for what manna was: One, "the little pills forming as yellow, sulphur-like drops on the tamarisk twigs". Two, the sweet-tasting secretion of a kind of plant lice that infected certain shrubs in the Sinai Desert. And three, "a dried form of algae or drought-desiccated and wind-dispersed lichen."²]*



² Smithsonian.com, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/what-the-heck-was-manna-anyway-56294548/>. Accessed 3 November 2019.

*Due to time constraints of the service, I omitted that in brackets.

The prophet Elijah received bread from a raven when he was in the desert fleeing from King Ahab (I Kings 17:4-6). Here again, bread signifies that God often provides in most unexpected ways and in our hours of greatest need.



If we look into the story of the Hebrews and of Elijah, we can very easily see that both were fleeing from injustice, the injustice of Pharaoh and Ahab. And it is not difficult to see that there is the link between the absence of justice and the absence of bread. Conversely, there is a link between the provision of justice and the provision of bread. Hence, Jesus used bread as a symbol of the provision of justice by God.



When Jesus taught his disciples to communicate with God, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread”. Give us justice! You see, bread is food and food is, symbolically and literally, justice.



On the night of his betrayal, when Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples, he said his body was bread. And it would soon be broken. Broken bread is symbolic of injustice. That injustice was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Friends, read with me now a quote (found in your worship service bulletin) from arguably ‘the greatest Christian who was *not* a confessing Christian’ to live since Jesus (who also was *not* a Christian), The Mahatma, the ‘Great Soul’, Mohandas Gandhi.



Gandhi observed this truth: “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread”. And did not Jesus say, “Take this bread and eat, for it is my body, broken for you”? The provision of God’s justice feeds us and it is shared, it is demonstrated, *despite* its breaking. That is, through injustice endured and overcome we will foster ‘God’s realm on earth just as it is in heaven’.



This morning, friends, we recognize the first Sunday of our Stewardship Campaign. In doing so, we focus on the theme “Care for the Poor”. Centre Church carries out the fundamental ministry of caring for the poor through its Loaves and Fishes ministry that I pray will never ever cease.

[Recall some weeks ago we learned that King Josiah ‘found’ in the Temple a book that Moses, who led the Hebrews into the Promised Land, supposedly wrote.



In this book that we read this morning, Moses commanded that when anyone who becomes poor approaches you “Give freely to him and not begrudge him your bounty...” (Deuteronomy 15:10). It is through our sponsorship of the Seasonal Overflow Shelter (SOS) that we feed those who are hungry on many cold Vermont winter nights. Our volunteers organized by the Mission and Service Board cook, transport, and serve a banquet, not much unlike that mentioned in our gospel reading, for the poor and homeless. And we too are not repaid by them. Do not begrudge this.



The gospel reminds us that we shall be repaid by God in heaven, if we are not already satisfied, blessed, and rewarded by the mere act of sharing in fellowship (Luke 14:14).]*



Through your tithes and offerings, we are able to maintain the building and appliances and pay the utilities that enable this beautiful ministry to foster. I believe the Loaves and Fishes ministry points to the core of who we are as a people of faith gifting a God-given provision to those who experience hunger and poverty similar to the Hebrews and Elijah. As you contemplate your pledge to our church at the end of November and as you discern what it means to “Be the Church”, look no farther than downstairs. If you doubt, come on Tuesdays and Fridays and volunteer with Ruth [Tilghman]. Or come and just get in the way, like I always do, while serving. You will see downstairs in Memorial Hall what we experience sacramentally here on Sundays - God appearing in the form of bread to the poor.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.