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“The Quiet Miracle”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 5, 2012

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15; Psalm 51:1–12; Ephesians 4:1–16; John 6:24–35

The crowds search high and low for Jesus,
piling into their dinghies and slapping the water with their oars,
like the clapping of 10,000 hands, hoping to flush him out of hiding.

And they do find him, finally, settled on the far side of the sea,
ready to field their buck-shot barrage of questions:

When did you arrive here?

What must we do to perform the works of God?

What sign are you going to perform

so that we may see and believe in you?

What work are you going to perform now?

Seeing that their questions and his answers are on two different planes,
Jesus concludes with a statement concerning his identity and a promise:

“I am the bread of life,” he says.

“Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,

and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Early in 1921, the Taggart Baking Company of Indianapolis, Indiana,
put out advance publicity saying that “wonder” was coming into the world on May 21.

This great “wonder” being promoted as the best new thing
was *Wonder Bread*, a new slow-baked bread that would be pre-sliced,
“wonder-cut,” they called it, without threat of drying out.

We have to understand that unsliced bread was the norm until just recently,
and that pre-sliced bread was deemed an innovation and a *miracle*
in the history of bread-baking.

Americans rushed to grab the red, yellow, and blue adorned bags of bread off the
grocery store shelves.

A second breakthrough "wonder" came following World War II
when *a government-sponsored program* enriched Wonder Bread with
vitamin and minerals to combat certain diseases such as Beriberi and
Pellegra which had plagued and decimated children and troops during
the Great Depression and ensuing war.

This vitamin and mineral supplementation became known as
"The Quiet Miracle," greatly reducing the incidences of these diseases in America
with the addition of twelve essential vitamins and minerals
to the bread-making process.

And in 2006, Wonder was one of the first brands to introduce whole grain white bread
that appealed to the consumer's love for the taste and look of white bread,
but with the nutrition of whole grain breads.

That was quiet miracle number three for Wonder Bread.

Nevertheless, in 2007, the makers of Wonder Bread announced the loss of 1,300 jobs
and the end of the production of Wonder Bread due to a precipitous decline in sales.

But the hue and cry of the public went up, and in September of 2009,
Wonder Bread made a comeback, and in gratitude to the people for their
support and demand for their product, Hostess Brands, the manufacturer,
donated thousands of loaves of bread to the San Diego Food Bank and to the
Los Angeles Regional Food Bank to support missions of providing food to
people in need, advocating for the hungry,
and advancing human caring.

Larry Norman, a Christian singer/song-writer,
immortalized Wonder Bread in a song written in 2000 called "Up In Canada".
It goes something like this:

*When I was up in Canada, I didn't have much money
My shoes had holes and my feet were cold,
My nose was kinda runny (it wasn't funny)
I met a long hair on the street,
He said, "Look, you look like you'd like to eat."
I said, "A glass of Coke and a hotdog's fine,"
He said, "Well, how 'bout some bread and a glass of wine?"*

*He took a loaf of Wonder bread, and then he bowed his head,
And then he filled my cup, "Drink it up," he said.
It tasted better than the health food blend.
He looked straight into my eyes – I was quite surprised!
He said, "You're locked inside but I can set you free,
And you will live forever if you follow me."*

*Lead me on, lead me on, lead me on,
Lead me on where you're going.
You know my body's tired but my heart's inspired... Lead me on. Lead me on."*
(Larry Norman, with Randy Stonehill, *Up In Canada*, "The Cottage Tapes": 2000)

Is this what Jesus means when he says, "I am the bread of life?"

Is he our daily sustenance, our quiet miracle, our healer of diseases before they ever start,
our source of life-giving outreach and care to those who literally hunger and thirst?

Is this Jesus whom we meet at the Lord's Table our quiet miracle of vitality:

as quiet as the rising of bread dough;
as quiet as the touch of hand to hand;
as quiet as a hug;
as quiet as a nod of affirmation?

Theologian and author Eugene Peterson says,

"Without the Eucharist... it is very easy to drift off into imagining Jesus

as our Great Example whom we will imitate, or our Great Teacher
from whom we will learn, or our Great Hero by whom we will be inspired.
And without the Eucharist it is very easy

to drift into a spirituality that is dominated by ideas about Jesus
instead of receiving *life* from Jesus.

The Eucharist says a plain "no" to all that.

The Eucharist puts Jesus in his place: dying on the cross and giving us that sacrificed *life*.

And it puts us in our place: opening our hands
and receiving the remission of our sins" (quietly).

(Eugene Peterson. *Christ Play in Ten Thousand Places*, p. 203)

The crowds search high and low for Moses and Aaron,
slapping them with their complaints like whipping boys,
each one smarting to the quick.

"If only we had died at the hand of the Lord in Egypt," they bellyache,
"we would have died satisfied, rather than languishing in this wilderness,
dying of hunger."

Behind their complaint of physical discomfort, of hunger and thirst,
I think, lies a profound sense of abandonment.

They see before them two very human persons, Moses and Aaron,
also hungry, also dehydrated, also losing weight, perhaps,
also on the verge of perishing.

But what they don't see or sense is the presence of God, continuing to lead them,
continuing to provide for them, continuing to reassure them, even
in their discomfort.

So out of insecurity, they lash out, using words as their weapons.

And God hears their complaining, and God sends them a sign of his presence:

a raining down of bread from heaven, bread that will give them *life*.

And God gives them this sign of his presence, silently in the darkness of night,
so that they will know that I AM, the Lord God, is with them, is for them,
is beside them, is on their side, even in the shadow of the valleys.

This summer, when we were at Chautauqua in New York,
Hedge and I had the opportunity to meet a rather remarkable lawyer from Cleveland
who ended up staying with us in our condo for three days.

Like Moses and Aaron and the whole congregation of Israelites, he is Jewish.
And while he is not dying from hunger, as the Israelites lamented,
he is at risk of perishing, we learned, from stomach cancer,
and he had just begun an experimental round of chemotherapy
prior to his arrival at Chautauqua.

This lawyer has dedicated his life to passionate advocacy for the arts in Ohio,
serving as a tireless lobbyist before the Ohio State Legislature
on behalf of the non-profits that support culture and the fine arts.
He has secured grants for the artistic community and has kept their concerns
real before the state's budgeting committees.

This lawyer is also a tireless baker of bread.

He told us that each Christmas/Hanukkah season, he might bake 400 loaves of bread
of various kinds, wrap them with his holiday greetings,
and deliver them to all of his friends in high and low places,
and places in between, as a way of saying "thank you,"
"I am there for you," "I appreciate you," "I value you,"
"I am advocating for you."

It is quite unusual, I think, for a man, whose primary occupation is NOT that of a baker,
to find time to produce 400 loaves of bread AND DELIVER THEM
to all his friends and acquaintances for the holidays.

"Hey," he will tell you, "no one said that the bread is any good!"

Nevertheless, it is his signature of good will in the community.

I found that to be terribly interesting and heart-warming.

Is this what Jesus means when he says, "I am the bread of life?"

Is Jesus our quiet miracle, our advocate, our supporter, our cheerleader,
our lobbyist in high places?

Does Jesus make his presence known and leave as his signature of good will

a loaf of bread on our table, wrapped in the ancient words of proclamation,
"This is my body broken; this is my blood poured out... for you"?

Is this Jesus whom we meet at the Lord's Table our quiet miracle of advocacy:
as quiet as water on a baby's head;
as quiet as a nod of forgiveness;
as quiet as the hush of the busy world at day's end;
as quiet as the dawning of a new day, or a second chance?

A friend of mine—I'll call him Peter—recently related an incident
that had happened to him at seminary.

It seems he had a falling out with another seminarian I'll call Jeff.

As a matter of fact, my friend became so angry with Jeff,
that he vowed to himself *never to speak with him again*
(yes, these kinds of things happen, even at seminary).

But Jeff either never got the message or never seemed to absorb it fully
because he followed Peter around from class to class, relentlessly,
in an effort to break through the wall of silence
and seek some workable resolution to their disagreement.

But Peter would have nothing to do with Jeff and rebuffed or dodged every
attempt he made at reconciliation. Peter shut him out completely and totally.

One day, when Peter was walking back from the refectory, the dining hall,
carrying a basket of 37 sets of knives and forks for an upcoming luncheon,
Jeff approached him for the umpteenth time, attempting to apologize.

To which Peter, feeling threatened, and with his acknowledged penchant for the dramatic,
said, "If you don't quit following me, I'm going to have to take these
37 sets of knives and forks and hurt you."

And Jeff replied, "I don't care if you stab me with every one of those knives and forks,
if that's what it takes to allow us to speak to one another again."

It was a Jesus moment for him, Peter said,
the exact kind of thing that Jesus would have said,

the kind of thing Jesus already has done for us
to render reconciliation a possibility.

And Peter, in this moment of clarity, in this epiphany, in this point of grace,
says he put the basket of knives and forks down on the ground,
and he put down his anger,
and put down his wall of silence,
and put down his resolution to never speak again,
and made peace with Jeff right there on that spot.

I can imagine the whole people of Israel coming towards Moses and Aaron
with their raised knives and forks, threatening to do harm
if they don't provide food right there in the wilderness.

And yet God feels compassion towards the crowd and rains down
the bread of heaven on them,
countering the heat of their anger with the cool abundance of his grace.

And I can imagine the crowds at Capernaum, their stomachs growling
as they rush towards Jesus with their raised knives and forks,
wanting more of the loaves and fishes that Jesus seems to generate,
and being frustrated and confused when
Jesus tells them he's not just about stomach food, perishable food,
but about soul food that endures to eternity;
that he is their soul food.

Is this what Jesus means when he says, "I am the bread of life"?

Is Jesus our quiet miracle of reconciliation,
the one who silently suffered the slings and arrows, the 74 knives and forks,
of our anger and misunderstanding,
if it means a future of peace for us, his people?

Is Jesus our quiet miracle of reconciliation,
the one who silently offers his body to be broken, pierced 74 times for
our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities,
if that is what it takes to lead us on a pathway to righteousness and peace,

to set us free from our woundedness and brokenness?

Is this Jesus, the one born not in a house of royalty or a house of fame
or a house of wealth, but in Bethlehem, which literally means "house of bread,"

the one whom we meet at the Lord's Table

as our quiet miracle of reconciliation:

as quiet as a prayer;

as quiet as a blessing;

as quiet as resurrection;

as quiet as a miracle of peace? Amen.