

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid
 The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost | Luke 11:1-13
 St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Sinking Spring, PA
 July 28th 2019

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Give us this day our daily bread."

I wonder how many times we all have said that phrase in our lifetimes. The Lord's Prayer has become such a fundamental part of a Christian's life of prayer that we say it in most of our worship services, certainly every Sunday, and many folks say it more than once every day.

But the first time it was ever uttered -- or at least the first time it was taught -- was when Jesus' disciples asked him how to pray. Presumably they had been with him for enough time by this point in the story that they would have prayed together, but it wasn't uncommon for rabbis or teachers to teach their disciples a prayer that would resonate with them, that would stick with them, that wasn't hard to remember. So Jesus, who was very good at making his parables relatable to the experiences of his followers, did the same with his prayer, pointing the disciples to something vital, something that was a part of their lives on such a basic level that they couldn't live without it, something both simple and essential, and then showed them that even something like one's daily bread is not only a gift from God but also very much tells them something about themselves and about God.

It wouldn't have been an exaggeration back then to say that much of one's daily life revolved around bread, and the life of a community depended on bread and one another -- and this is still true in certain parts of the world. As a staple of one's diet, bread became the central focus of small villages and towns -- not unlike many of the places Jesus would have walked through in Galilee -- but rarely was it something you could make all on your own. You might plant seeds and harvest grains with the help of your neighbors. You'd probably share the village's mill to turn those raw grains into a fine flour. And then finally, after months of preparation, you'd be ready to bake bread. And even if you were able to complete all those steps by yourself, one's bread still told a tale of a community because it was so often shared.

Bread wasn't just important, it existed in a culture of dependency. Back in those villages and towns of ancient Galilee and Judea, hospitality to one's neighbors was a big deal. It was depended upon -- something in which you'd put your faith, if you will. And even long before Jesus, we hear of this hospitality in the Bible. Perhaps most famously, Abraham sees a group of strangers approaching his tent and runs out to greet them. It was a hot day at the oaks of Mamre, and he knew they would need food and rest for their journey. "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant."

This may strike us as very strange in scripture, that Abraham and Sarah drop everything they're doing to provide for these strangers -- and yet, as the story continues, Abraham and Sarah realize they are not speaking to strangers at all but to God. As it turns out, this act of hospitality is a sacred responsibility to our neighbors, and we might even meet God when we provide for others.

After teaching the disciples his prayer, Jesus tells a short parable about how important it is for us to provide bread for our neighbors. The story is one of inconvenience -- that after huddling up in bed for the night, after the door is locked and the long events of the day are over, a man hears an incessant knocking at his door. "Go away!" he shouts, disgruntled, because getting up to help his neighbor would have awoken his whole household. But his friend is insistent; he, too, has had a midnight visitor, and because of the sacred responsibility of hospitality, he must feed him -- but he has no more bread left from his daily baking and he's hoping and praying that his friend will help him out. And less out of friendship and more out of begrudging hospitality, the sleepy man gives his friend bread for the midnight visitor.

So often we put ourselves into Jesus' parables, and if we were to do that today, which character would you pick? I'd pick the guy in bed. I can most picture myself as him, warm under the covers, tired from the work of the day, ready to fall asleep any moment...and then needing to deal with something unexpected. But what if we were the friend of the friend, the guy who showed up at midnight, after a long day of travelling, and your stomach was rumbling in hopes of a meal to sustain you through the night. If you were that guy, all you should have had to worry about was getting through your travels; because surely bread would be provided to you when you arrived. It was something you'd expect, something you'd relied upon, something you'd looked forward to all afternoon and evening.

This expectation, much like the Abraham and Sarah story, may seem a bit backward to us today; backward to those of us who can order a hoagie at Wawa at midnight if we wanted to or grab a sandwich at Sheetz or a quick bite at 7/11 during so many travels. But maybe it is our expectations that are backwards; maybe our modern ears need to hear a story from an ancient time when bread was provided to the traveler who was weary from the road so that we might really understand what it means to be fed by *daily* bread given by God, given to those who have become wearied by the changes and chances of this life. Because in our lives with the safety net of groceries all around us, bread is everywhere. It is made in such a way and with such new preservatives that it stays good for weeks at a time! We can plan for ages about our bread consumption, and if we could eat a months worth of bread in one sitting so as to feel better about the future, we probably would.

And yet, not only would we be left with a stomach ache, we'd be left with a problem we know all too well from other parts of our busy lives: of trying to do it all, of trying to cram as much into our days as we can, of stressing about the many tomorrows of life, of trying to plan for bread in weeks and months and years to come.

Jesus tells of another reality: "Give us today our daily bread." O God, give us bread for this day. For this moment and for this moment only. For what I need right now. Bread that will sustain me for the moment. And I trust you, God, that this bread will come tomorrow again, from my cupboard or from my neighbor's.

We have come a long way from the ancient Galilean village, but our most popular prayer hasn't really changed. Every day we pray for this bread -- for sustenance for this day, for our modern-day manna in the wilderness, for the bread that nourishes our bodies, for the grain, water, yeast, and salt that fills us and satisfies us.

Like warm bread in hungry stomachs, this line stays with us -- and maybe Jesus gave his disciples this quirky little line -- a line that has confounded biblical scholars because the wording is so rarely found anywhere else in antiquity except for here -- because he knew they needed to hear it, to be reminded of how much work went into even just the bread of one day, of how much we must sometimes rely on the care of our neighbors towards us, and then by comparison, how much more God cares for us, and how much more he who said "I am the bread of life" sustains us than anything else.

And then maybe he was setting them up for something greater -- for a time a little down the road, in a small upper room. And after having a long day of travelling themselves, Jesus would sit with them for one last gathering, one last time together, one last moment of hospitality shared. And he would take bread, this simple, ordinary, unassuming food and tell them "this is my body, given for you." A bread given for the life of the world. A bread given each day for the lives of many. A bread we have come to know as anything but ordinary. The bread of life that leaves us satisfied even to the realm and reign of God. The bread by which we know the kingdom of God. The bread that gives us a glimpse of the great feast that God has prepared for the coming banquet in heaven.

So for the sake of our daily lives, for the sake of the many neighbors we will encounter, and for the sake of the love of Christ Jesus, O God, give us this day our daily bread. Bread for the worries of today. Bread that will feed our hungers and our desires, our neighbors and our friends, our children and our very lives -- bread that will satisfy us midnight and in our many travels, one day at a time. Bread that will feed strangers and our beloved. Bread that will fill us with your life and Spirit in this age and in the life of the age to come.

Amen.