

I confess I got help with today’s sermon, divine help and in a most unusual way. I reached randomly for any book on the shelves in the Conference Room **at Resurrection** that could help me lead a Bible study at The Hermitage when the leader couldn’t be there.

Here’s a paraphrase of what the book said about today’s gospel lesson: No matter what other food a person has, in the eastern tradition a family without bread is considered poor. In other words, in Jesus’ culture bread was considered essential to a healthy diet.

That’s from “Gospel Light: An Indispensable Guide to the Teachings of Jesus and the Customs of His Time,” by George M. Lansa.

As I was marveling at the serendipity (the total coincidence) of this find, another book fell off the shelf and landed on my left foot—not my right foot, mind you, but my left foo! THAT book was Dom Gregory Dix’s famous work on the four-fold shape of the Eucharist. I didn’t have to open THAT book to know what it said. Any seminarian can recite Dix’s description of the four actions that happen when we priests “serve” Christ to you, all tidy on that little platter called a paten. Take. Bless. Break. Give. Those are the four things that happen during the Eucharist: We take the bread, bless the bread, break the bread, and give the bread to you.



Of course, we priests aren’t the only ones who experience these four actions. Jesus **TOOK** the sins of the whole world, **BLESSED** us sinners, **BROKE** himself open to redeem our sins, and **GAVE** (and continues to **GIVE**) himself to us for the sake of the whole world.

Each of you get in on these four actions, too. Don’t we all **TAKE** Jesus into ourselves, allowing him to **BLESS** us and **BREAK** our hearts open in new ways so that we **GIVE** ourselves for others? Christ

Jesus is always insisting that we need to open ourselves, to emerge from the familiar, tidy realities we construct for ourselves.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus insisted that those who would follow him need to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Jesus lost a whole lot of followers that day. A literal understanding of what Jesus meant was against the purity laws of the day, and those laws were understood to have been given by God: Do not be a cannibal; do not consume blood. Jesus was breaking open the people's understanding about God, inviting them to leave the confines of their tidy made-up reality in search of the bigger picture about God.

In a way, the people then had plenty of food—they had the Law. But they didn't have "bread," at least not the bread of life, the bread that comes from God.

In a way, whenever we separate our sustenance from the one who gives all sustenance, we do the very same thing. We think we are responsible in some way for our good health (until we don't have health, and then we blame God. We think we are responsible for our intellect (while we have intellect), for what we earn, even for the other people in our lives. But isn't the one who created us, who gave us life, isn't God the one to whom we should be thankful? This separation, this thinking that WE OURSELVES are responsible for every good gift we have received, this separation begins when we are sure we have God and Christ Jesus all tidied up, all figured out.

Everyone knows that today's gospel lesson is about the Eucharist, right? That's what happened at the Bible study I unexpectedly got to lead: the people patiently explained to me that this gospel lesson is about the Eucharist (and THEY were Methodists, who only receive Communion four times a year). We "tidy up" Jesus in different ways, don't you know?

But what if we need to break open anew our understanding of today's lesson? What if Jesus meant, "Without me, you will always be empty, always be hungry?" What if Jesus meant, "What I offer you is like bread and wine: Without me, you'll always lack something vital?"

Jesus contrasted himself—the Bread of Life—with manna, which took the edge off the people's gnawing hunger but left the people unsatisfied.

- Maybe having the Bread of Life is like receiving love and respect as well as the manna of physical food.
- Maybe having the Bread of Life is being connected in community, as opposed to the manna of just showing up for the Bread and Wine.

- Maybe having the Bread of Life is like what happened to Lou Zarfis before his surgery this week to fix his broken hip. Lou said I could tell you that his surgeon announced that he is a Christian and prayed with Lou unapologetically, no permission asked, for God to guide him in the surgery. The surgery was the manna, but the prayer: Bread of Life.
- Maybe having the Bread of Life is like what happened in our food pantry this week when one of the clients who received food said she hadn't eaten in two days and thanked the people profusely for the food. I ask you to think about just who was fed that day, and how.

Receiving the Bread of Life is what will happen today when we baptize Isabelle. She has the manna of life. But we will be God's instruments in giving her something essential, something she can't get anywhere else in any other way: The Bread of Life is the Way to eternal life.

I challenge you to think about how Jesus is the Bread of Life for you and how you can share this God bread.