

"Give us this day our daily bread."

DAILY BREAD

--It doesn't get more basic than bread.

The most widely consumed food in the world, bread is something that has been around literally for millennia. Remarkably, it is probably central to the formation of the first human societies, with early people's nomadic lifestyle fundamentally affected by the rise of agriculture and the subsequent formation of towns. Bread plays a huge role in all of that change and transformation.

When we think of bread, it is wheat that comes to mind, but in the past it is made from virtually any grain--corn, barley, rye, millet, rice, and something called amaranth.

Recent finds suggest that humans start baking bread as far back as 15,000 years ago. Traces of starch can be found on prehistoric mortar-and-pestle-like rocks, as far back as 30,000 years, the pasty gruel probably baked on rocks as "flatbread." Other very early sightings of such flatbread have been identified in the Middle East, India and Central America. Bread is a staple everywhere.

I know, that's probably more history about bread than you ever cared to know. Bear with me, if you will. We're building here towards something.

--Given its long history, then, it is no surprise that bread should so prominently figure in our Scriptures. A careful investigation of Holy Writ shows, in fact, that the word "bread" is used some 325 times in the books of the Bible. Tellingly, it ranks right up there with the other outstanding nouns found in Scripture. That says something.

Story after story is told with bread factoring into its narrative--beginning in Genesis 3, where a ticked-off Yahweh curses the fallen Adam with the words, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground . . ." (3.19a); and continuing through the gospels and the Letters of Paul. Bread is to be found in the Exodus tradition, read this morning, where God miraculously feeds the grumbling line of pilgrims by "rain[ing] bread from heaven" (Ex 16.4); in the ritual "Bread of the Presence," set on a table of pure gold in the ancient tabernacle (and later temple), carefully arranged in two piles of six loaves each, sprinkled with the finest frankincense, as a food offering to the Lord (Ex 25.30; 35.13; 39.36, etc.); and in Jesus' feeding of the multitudes with "seven loaves . . . [and] a few small fish" (Mk 8.6-7); to say nothing of the place of bread on the table at the Last Supper, or of the evangelist John speaking of Jesus himself as the "bread of life" (6.35,45), as "the living bread that came down from heaven" (6.51).

--In short, there is a large and significant background lying behind the seven little, dull-sounding words that constitute our focus for the morning as, over these Lenten weeks, we continue to work our way through the Lord's Prayer a little bit at a time.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Apparently, there is a world of meaning here to be explored.

It was mentioned last Sunday--and it will be repeated every Sunday morning through Palm Sunday--that what we pray week after week is to be compared to the two versions of this prayer that we have in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. In terms of the present line, actually, we have some slight variations to consider.

Examining the Greek carefully, in Matthew (6.11), we have an eight-word sentence, to be translated as "Give to us this day our daily bread." In Luke (11.3), we have a ten-word sentence, nuanced slightly differently, to read something like, "Give to us each day (or day after day) the bread belonging to the morrow."

In short, in Matthew, the petition is to be fed today, this day, now, at present; in Luke, it is more about being supplied in advance for the next day, for tomorrow. If you check the footnotes in your Bible pertaining to these verses, you'll see how the early manuscripts struggle with the tension in meaning here between asking for today's bread vs. asking for tomorrow's bread, in finally yielding the wording of what we recite every week.

--Having said all this, I suppose that you'd now like me to suggest just what any of this delightful abstract information has to do with life in the fast lane--you know, where we live day by day. Ok, remember, you asked for it.

Let's begin with this: As far as we are concerned, the petition in the Lord's Prayer is not really about food. Sorry about that. Admittedly, understanding "bread" in the literal sense might have concrete meaning in Third World countries for persons living on the margins of surviving--and for that matter, real meaning for Jesus' 1st Century hearers, many of whom are among the poorest of the poor. For us, however, never worrying in the slightest where our next meal or dessert or snack is coming from; where pantries, refrigerators, and freezers in most homes are embarrassingly bulging to the bursting point, food would be an especially absurd thing for persons to ask for.

"Give us this day our daily bread." Really? Like we don't already have it, in every imaginable form?

For us, then, the Lord's Prayer is not about what bread is but about what bread means. I already told you what that was in this morning's opening line: It doesn't get any more basic than bread.

Understood more symbolically, then, seeking bread represents the desire to take in and assimilate that which is a satisfying response to the universal, substantive, fundamental needs of humankind--what are truly the necessities for our lives if we are to live and grow and flourish. And, remember, I'm not speaking in physical categories here. "Bread" is about the genuine basics that are involved in our emerging full humanness. Asking for "bread" is requesting to be nourished in ways that serve to "grow us up," so to speak, to supply us with what supports our health and wholeness and maturity.

Understood thus, "bread," it seems, continues to play a huge role in human change and transformation.

--So, we ask: This day and each day, God, supply us with what You know we genuinely require in order to handle the challenges and disappointments and disciplining of the moment, and in order to be able to embrace favorably the grace-filled opportunities for the future. Supply us, daily, with the sufficient basics necessary for a higher existence in You.

Assuming that we are awake for these few minutes, we come to understand that, buried harmlessly in the Lord's Prayer here, this is one of those "be careful what you pray for" lines. In reciting it by rote, mechanically or unconsciously, we typically have no idea what we are asking for. We are not asking, "Give us what we want"; we are asking, "Give us what we need." And we are not asking, "Give us what we think we need"; we are asking, "If we are to grow, if we are to grow up, give us what we really need."

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Are we really certain about that request? In the hands of God, some of that sort of "bread," to be sure, can be quite exciting and engaging. But some of it can also be quite unwanted and even alarming. Gulp!

Do stay tuned!