

My vacation to the midwest earlier this month turned out to be something of a food tour, especially the day that my friends and I went to the Iowa State Fair. They'll deep-fry just about anything at that fair. We also went to the donut shop that never closes, the fancy tea shop, and a local chain called Carlos O'Kelly's, which is mostly Mexican, but also a touch Irish...And to get me through nearly 2500 miles of driving, I fueled up on multiple Culver's butter burgers and chocolate shakes. It was not my healthiest vacation. But although I consumed a lot more food than usual, I noticed that I consumed a lot *less* news and social media, which really did make the week feel like an escape. When they say you are what you eat, that might be even more true metaphorically than in regards to physical food.

This is the fifth and final week that the lectionary devotes to just one chapter of John's gospel where Jesus talks about himself as the Bread of Life. Jesus feeds the multitude from a boy's lunch of loaves and fish, then the crowds follow after him because they are so impressed by his ability to provide them with bread—no small achievement considering the size of the crowd and the needs of the people, most of whom were living just at the level of subsistence. Jesus encourages them to focus not on literal bread but on him, the Bread of Life, promising them that those who eat and drink of him will abide in him and have eternal life. In John's gospel, Jesus doesn't institute the Eucharist on the night that he is arrested; instead, this is where John gives us a sense of what the Lord's Supper means: communion with Jesus and the sustenance we need to live.

Bread, in its various local forms, has been the staple of survival for most cultures throughout most of human history. The rich could afford meat, and status often was shown by eating higher up the food chain, but for the vast majority, *food* has always meant *bread*. It's no coincidence that the element through which we are promised God's presence in the Eucharist is bread and not, say, rotisserie chicken; it's the food most people are most likely to have on hand, regardless of their economic station, and it's something that everyone shares equally; Wonderbread has a heel, but generally everyone tastes the same thing no matter what part of the loaf they eat. Nobody gets special treatment when we share bread at the communion table, because there is no "best part" no

drumstick or tenderloin, for instance, in a loaf of bread. Setting aside allergies, diets, or medical issues, bread isn't one of those foods that we just get to eat on special occasions; it's everyday sustenance. It would have been unthinkable for Jesus' disciples to imagine living without having bread to eat. This is how vital communion with Jesus is—that without him, we are utterly cut off from life.

If we think of communion with Jesus not just as a weekly act of participating in the Eucharist but as a daily commitment to abide in Jesus, obey his teaching, follow his example, we can see why some of the disciples said “This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?” and why many of them turned back. Loving our neighbors, forgiving our enemies, serving our communities, turning the other cheek, walking the extra mile, washing each others' feet—at least figuratively if not literally...these are not easy things, and Jesus doesn't seem surprised that some of his followers are complaining and deserting. Jesus neither chases them nor blames them, reminding his disciples that *no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father*—just in case we forgot that faith was the work of God, and not our own doing.

John's gospel has often been misread as teaching a kind of turn or burn test of faith: believe this and get into heaven, don't believe and you won't. But John's gospel gives us a pretty clear picture of eternal life as an open invitation to daily living with Jesus, now. Consuming Jesus—not just in communion bread and wine, but in word, prayer, service, and fellowship—changes us and turns us into people who more fully reflect God in whose image we were made. Jesus doesn't force us to do that, because love that is coerced isn't love. Jesus gave even his first disciples the option: *Do you also wish to go away?* And there are plenty of other places where we can try to find sustenance—something to fill up our emptiness instead of the Bread of Life. But when we immerse ourselves in the life of Jesus, and we begin to be transformed by God's vision for our human community, we find ourselves echoing Peter's words: *Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.* Because once we get a taste of the feast of love that Jesus promises, nothing else will satisfy. May that not just be a line of the liturgy that we sing each week, but may it be our lived experience—full and abundant life in the Lord, not just one day in heaven, but every day that we are given from now until then.