

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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“Advent Gifts: The Gift of Bread”

James 2:14-18 | *Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=221552564>*

Two questions for this morning: 1) When is bread more than bread? 2) How can we give the gift of bread this Advent season? Bread has been around for thousands of years, from the time people began cultivating wild grains into domesticated crops of barley and wheat. But bread as we know it owes a special thanks to something else: beer. Once the art of fermenting grain (so it could be brewed into beer) was discovered, it wasn't long before someone used some of the fermented brew to mix up the dough, and the old, flat bread began to rise and become lighter and tastier. Evidence of this early leavened bread can be traced back to the Egyptians over 4,000 years ago. So for thousands of years before Louis Pasteur and the discovery of tiny, microscopic spores of yeast fungi, cooks were saving batches of good dough to mix into new dough, so that the bread would be leavened and rise and cause smiles around the dinner table, especially once they also invented peanut butter and jelly.

That's a brief history of bread, but it doesn't answer our first question: When is bread more than bread? In the modern world, we've been carefully trained to strip objects of any extra meaning and simply concentrate on the thing itself. Bread is a baked product of leavened dough, having weight and texture, usually with a firm, outer crust and softer interior. If we want to say anything more about bread, we say it is a “symbol” for something else, but we treat that as something entirely separate from the actual reality of the bread. Which is unfortunate, because there are many times when bread is more than just bread. A famous example is told about World War II refugee camps in which children, who had known so much loss and hunger, found it almost impossible to sleep soundly through the night. Then a wise camp worker discovered that if the children were allowed to hold a piece of bread while they lay in bed, they would sleep through the night; because the bread meant that they had eaten that day and they would have something to eat tomorrow. For them, bread was much more than just bread.

Before the Enlightenment and, to paraphrase Robert Frost, before “Truth broke in with all her matter of factness” (Birches), symbols participated in the mysterious reality to which they pointed. There was recognized a real connection between the light of a candle, and the light of God that chases away all darkness and fear. There was a strong belief that the bread we share in communion is more than just leavened dough; it sacramentally lets us participate in the reality of the resurrected Christ, the one called the “bread of life.” Religious symbols are signs that point to deeper realities present here in our earthly life, and they are doorways that lead us into encounters with that spiritual reality. The bread clutched in the children's hands in the refugee camp was far more than just something to eat; it was a connection to a spirit of care and a hope that they would survive the next day. The bread we share at communion is a doorway that allows us to step into a place where we stand beside Christ; and where we see with fresh eyes that we're part of a world where others exist beside us with whom we are to share bread so that all will be fed. How easy it can be to forget that basic fact. How wonderful that communion bread can regularly lead us to remember it.



That type of “doorway faith,” an active and aware faith, is what James is hoping to awaken in us when he writes, *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?* He is adamant that if someone is naked or hungry and our responses as Christians are only pious phrases (“Keep warm,” “God bless you,” “Trust in the Lord”), then something is wrong. Long ago Jesus told the parable of the sower (Mark 4) and described seeds that fell on rocky ground, where they sprouted quickly but withered away because they had no deep roots. Faith by itself is just an intellectual exercise: a plant that sprouts quickly but doesn’t put down roots through words and deeds. Faith too easily can be an isolated entry we write in our inner diary: “Today I bought some new shoes, got the oil changed, and accepted that Jesus Christ is God’s love come down to earth. Tomorrow I’m going to the movies.” Faith can be one part of the story we tell ourselves about how the world is and with us at the center of it, whereas real faith tells a story we didn’t compose, one written on the stars and oceans and diversity of faces throughout God’s creation. It is this deeper, engaging, personal-yet-universal faith that we come to know once we actively join in living it out. That’s why James insists that abstract faith is dead. It is “lifeless,” which is not to say that it is worthless. Even a broken clock is right twice a day. No talk of God, even the shallowest talk, is totally devoid of value. It can still nourish, but it is not very attractive. It is like bread without yeast; it doesn’t rise up and inspire. It is for subsistence only, while something so much bigger, tastier, life-filled is readily available to us. More about that in a moment.

In the news recently, there have been several reports about “blue zones” that exist on earth. Blue zones are places researchers have discovered where people routinely live longer and healthier than most people on earth. Some of these zones included communities in Okinawa, Japan; Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Ikaria, Greece; and among Seventh Day Adventists in Loma Linda, California. When they looked at the qualities these “blue zones” have in common, they found areas of overlap: they were social communities with a strong sense of family; they ate more beans than meat and they’d stop eating when they were 80% full instead of getting totally full at meals. They had active lifestyles, not full of exercise routines and marathons, but they simply moved naturally and kept active. Cigarettes were bad; wine in moderation was good; and they found ways to rid themselves of life’s stress. But most striking to me was the fact that all these healthy senior citizens in these groups had some reason to wake up in the morning. They had a purposeful outlook on life, one usually grounded in faith and lived out in a faith community.

Why do you wake up in the morning? For people in the “blue zone,” who stay active well into their 90s, they have an answer for that—and it is rarely anything profound. They have a garden to tend, work to do, friends to visit each afternoon and share a glass of wine with, a nap to look forward to, some time each day to be outside, to enjoy life, to enjoy God. Psychologists will sometimes help their patients by talking about life in terms of a “wholeness wheel”; a wheel that contains parts representing our physical health, emotional health, intellectual vitality, social connections, and spiritual well-being. If one part is ill or unhealthy, the whole being is affected. The “blue zone” people have found ways to maintain these interconnected parts of life in a healthy “whole.” And at the core of this is having a healthy spiritual perspective, a reason for waking up in the morning.

James is basically saying the same thing, but coming at this question from the other side of the equation: not from the person opening their eyes in the morning, but from the perspective of the person on the other side of the door: someone who stands in the morning light, but lacks food, shelter, or hope. Our reason for getting up in the morning



cannot be lived out if we are indifferent (or opposed) to the needs of someone less fortunate ; someone who is also God's child waking up in the morning. Mahatma Gandhi wisely said, *There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.* Faith without works is dead. Faith that cannot see that bread is more than bread, is just a lifeless spirituality. Active faith gives out bread. Active faith asks why children are still hungry. Active faith allows hands to touch and meet as food is shared between them. Active faith sees in others' faces the reflection of Christ's face. And in that type of faith, there's a reason for both sides of the equation to wake up each morning.

We have entered the four weeks of Advent. It is a time of preparation for the birth of Christ as well as the expected return of the risen Christ, when all of creation will be restored and made whole by God's grace. As the media is anxious to remind us, 'tis the season for giving gifts. Fair enough: so what gift do we wish to bring to the Christ child? How about the gift of bread? Remember that often bread is much more than just bread. It points to and leads to a deeper reality: of God, faith, and wholeness, and that especially happens here at this table.

Are there people around you whose lives are incomplete or wounded? Have they said, in some way, *I'm not sure why I get out of bed each morning?* Invite them to share this bread. Invite them to see candle light here, to think about real peace, to hear the splash of water, because those are the gifts for Christ we're going to talk about here over the next few Sundays. If that type of "come to worship" invitation sounds too "churchy," then let people know we have great music planned for these Sundays, special concerts coming up, and beautiful Christmas decorations here. Let your words be more than words. Let them be a doorway into the sacred, that by God's grace and mystery and love is present here. Let your gift to them be an invitation that offers healing where they are wounded, a welcome that replaces feelings of being excluded. Take this call seriously and take it to heart. For James says, "By our works we show our faith." That's so true.

AMEN

