

What is God's Favorite Bread?

August 5, 2018

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who gives us our daily bread, and who asks for nothing but gratitude in return.

What's God's favorite bread? It's hard to imagine life without bread, isn't it? It's a simple food—flour, water, yeast, and a little salt. But it's essential for life, in some form: the carbohydrates in bread are among our bodies' favorite source of energy.

Now, David, the King, no doubt had really good bread in his court. If you go to Israel today—you might even sample some of the kinds of bread he would have enjoyed. For instance, there's this thick pita bread, called Ash Tanar—that's a sourdough that gets coated with a little olive oil and a distinctive powdered spice called za'atar that's a mixture of thyme, marjoram, sage, and ground sesame seeds that is absolutely delicious. Or, nomads like the Druze feature a very light pita—paper thin, that then gets wrapped around almost anything, such as spicy olives, some sea salt, a little lemon juice, and feta cheese: getting hungry, yet? David probably didn't know rye bread—so often associated with Jewish delis—but that's only because most Jews in America emigrated from Eastern Europe, where rye bread was typical. But my favorite Israeli bread has got to be challah—the round, braided bread that is often shared among the entire community (including any guests, in many synagogues) in Friday evening or Saturday shabbat services.

Now, challah takes its name from *halal*—the idea that the bread is set apart; or acceptable. A tenth of every loaf was to be set aside for the priests, but the idea more broadly is that letting go of a part of one's daily bread is in fact a way to remember to live with an attitude of gratitude that makes one open to the presence and gifts of others, rather than being miserly and scheming and a micro-managing penny-pincher.

So, let's imagine that David ate challah. Does that make it God's favorite bread? Last week we heard about how David raped Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah—and now we begin to hear about the consequences of those choices. The Biblical writers ascribe these consequences of David's behavior to God, but let's be real: kings face succession crises—their families are usually a hot mess. Kings deal with jealous wives (note well the plural). And Kings deal with scheming advisors. None of that is God's doing—it's just what comes with being a King. And when a King or politician isn't *honest*, it eventually catches up with them. And when they are guilty of crimes such as treason, or rape or murder—it usually catches up with them sooner rather than later.

So, David's impending troubles are his own doing. Bathsheba's first son—David's child, dies just a few days after our reading for today ends. Who knows—the stress of being raped by the King, and then losing her husband to war, probably did not exactly lead to good prenatal care. And Bathsheba does, somewhat later in II Samuel, gain a measure of justice: she gives birth to Solomon, who, of course, goes on to become King himself (with 700 wives and 300 concubines of his own, according to the Bible) Solomon then

goes on to build the Temple on the site where down to today the remnants of a later version of that Temple can be visited.

When I was there in 2015 with my son, Justin, we sat by the South wall (not the wailing wall, but a quieter section) for a few hours, just imagining what Jerusalem must have been like in the days of David and Solomon. And later that night, after having walked through the city for hours, and saying goodbye to Justin (who had to be back to Istanbul, where he was working at the time), I sat in the hotel hot tub and watched the stars come out in the sky over the holy city.

But, back to David . . . Typically, David's favorite son wasn't the steady and wise Solomon, of course—but it was, instead, Absalom—the wife of another of his brides, Maakah, who was the daughter of a King who gave Maakah to David in a treaty, of sorts. (And I hope I'm not shocking you with the lurid details of David's relationships with women—notably his multiple wives. But if you want the strongest arguments *against* the idea that there was EVER a Biblical norm of marriage as One Man and One Woman just READ THE BOOK and pay attention to these details. And if you're not afraid of a little satire—I encourage you to google “Mrs. Betty Bowers, America's Best Christian, Explains Traditional Marriage to Everyone Else.” It uses scripture against the idea that there's one nice, neat, Father Knows Best model of 1950s marriage in the Bible. Not so much . . .

But, once more, let's return again to our story about David, and Absalom, and bread—don't forget about the bread—we'll get there, I promise! So, David loves Absalom, who is, by all accounts, a charming, beautiful, and conniving, spoiled brat. He eventually turns his own people against David, takes over the court in a palace coup, and proceeds to begin sleeping with all of his father's wives and concubines. And, again—I am not making this up. Put the general point like this: Kings put the funk in dysfunction.

But Absalom had a fatal flaw—he lacked his father's killer instinct. Rather than immediately attacking his father, who had fled the palace with only a few soldiers and courtiers to protect him, he spent his time—well, I won't get graphic, but let's just say that David had earned his first wife, Michal, by buying her from her father, Saul, by delivering to Saul a specified number of foreskins from the enemies of the Israelites, the Philistines. And there's those biblical family values for you once again!

In the meantime, while Absalom was, hmmm, David reassembled his army. And eventually there was a big battle—called The Battle of Ephraim Woods. But David wasn't there, because the people had asked him to stay with them (democracy being a notably fickle form of government). Anyway—in the battle, Absalom gets his beautiful hair caught up in the branches of an oak tree, where he hangs, tangled. Now, David had pledged his officers, including his chief general, Joab, to “treat gently for my sake with my son, Absalom.” He was his spoiled favorite—even when he'd slept with his daddy's wives. So, as Absalom hangs there, alive—David's generals debate his fate. And guess what happens? Joab—David's most trusted general, takes his lance and runs it through David's beloved son, and Absalom dies. And when David gets the news, he breaks down and weeps, uttering one of the most famous lines in the Bible, that later would inspire

William Faulkner and many other writers: ““O my son Absalom—my son, my son Absalom—if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!”

And where, you might be asking by this point, was God in the midst of all of this King-based family intrigue and carnage?

One of the most beautiful and poignant interpretations or adaptations of the story of David and Absalom—and, yes, bread, comes, not surprisingly, in the form of a novel. The book was written in 1948, by the South African author Alan Paton. It's title is *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

I won't give away the plot—in case you haven't read it, but the key characters are a pastor, and his son, named Absalom. And, in *Cry, the Beloved Country* there's a murder, and sexual infidelity, and, eventually—the donation of some serious bread as a sign of forgiveness and healing for a nation. (The gift is actually milk—but cows who give us milk eat grass, which gives us bread, etc.)

So, what's God's favorite bread?

In our gospel for today, Jesus offers people the bread of life, and then says: “I am the bread of life.” Could this be God's favorite bread?

Shortly, we'll have the chance—all of us—to share in some bread of our own. Why bread? Here's one possibility.

In his book on the Eucharist—a fancy word for Communion—the Roman Catholic scholar William Cavanaugh writes that when we share in eating bread together, what we are doing is remembering that no matter how horrific things have become; no matter how hard the powers bear down upon us; no matter how much we hurt—God is present to us in the simple act of sharing bread with each other.

Cavanaugh pushes the point even further, based on his work in the 1990s among Christians in Chile—many of whom were tortured and killed for their work to liberate the common people from oppression. He writes:

Torture creates fearful and isolated bodies, bodies docile to the purposes of the regime; the Eucharist effects the body of Christ, a body marked by resistance to worldly power. Torture creates victims; Eucharist creates witnesses.... Isolation is overcome in the Eucharist by the building of a communal body which resists the state's attempt to disappear it.

So, what is God's favorite bread?

Some of you know that I live in Clintonville—a small town of about 5,000 that has, like so many others in America, fallen on hard times. For decades—from the First World War down to the 1970s, Clintonville was known as the home of Four Wheel Drive—one of the truly great innovations in technology. I'm grateful every time I take a turn a little too fast in my truck that all four wheels are engaged.

But what's little known is that for most of its early history—until it got bought out, FWD was a cooperative enterprise. Now, if you don't know what a cooperative enterprise is, then you need to bone up a bit on Wisconsin's socialist past. For, you see, for much of the 1920s and 1930s and beyond, socialism wasn't necessarily a dirty word. In fact, it was a way of doing business. The flourishing of Four Wheel Drive in Clintonville—and around the world, since FWD trucks went truly everywhere—is one example. God's favorite bread is any bread that is shared.

For another example, check out the film by Frank Capra (the same guy who gave us *It's a Wonderful Life*). The film is entitled simply *Our Daily Bread*. It was made in 1934—during the Depression. It tells the story of a down-on-their-luck young couple living in New York City who are deeded a farm in the Midwest. It's a dusty place, and the couple has no farming experience. It's not going well. So, the young man puts out a sign—inviting anyone who is driving by and willing to work—to share in the profits of their collective labor.

And—again, I won't give away the ending, but near the end of the film, after some serious sexual temptation to the leading character, and some serious despair tempting the leading female character, in one of the most famous scenes in cinema history—a team of men dig a mile-long trench with nothing but pick axes and shovels to help irrigate their newly planted field. And their collective labor produces—you guessed it—their daily bread.

So, what is God's favorite bread? Put it this way: When we eat, God is happy. When we share our bread with each other—as we did last week to the tune of over \$1,200 for Habitat for Humanity—God is happy. When we work together, God is happy. When we live in peace with each other in our families, and in our societies, God is happy.

So, whether you like rye, or potato bread, or sourdough, or cheesbread, or pita, or raisin bread, or challah, or even—my childhood desire that my parents refused to buy, Wonderbread—it doesn't matter to God. Any bread is God's favorite, as long as there's enough to be shared with everyone.

So, let's eat!

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