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The holy gospel according to St. John that sixth chapter: Glory to you, O Lord.

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were beside the sea, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

If you have attended a Lutheran confirmation class, either as a participant or adult leader since 1970, you have likely heard or even asked yourself this deep theological question:

Can one use pizza and Coke instead of bread and wine for communion?

Two years ago I would have answered the question something like this.

Well, I suppose if it were dire circumstances and someone was near death and that was literally all we had, I would use the crust of the pizza and forgo the Coke. Pizza crust is a form of bread. And Luther assures that God is equally present in just one of the elements. Then I would affirm their theological wonder and say something like “Isn’t it amazing how God can work through all sorts of things? Even pizza crusts!”

Two years ago, this was a hypothetical question to me. A mark of theological curiosity and playfulness from youth who are flexing their faith muscles and pushing boundaries. However, in the summer of 2020, this hypothetical question became real to me. My congregation at the time and I wrestled with this question and I was changed through the process.

In the early summer of 2020, I started offering at home communion to the congregation organized in “communion circuits”. I named them this because of the tradition of circuit preachers, who would ride on horse back from church to church to preach. The church admin would organize my route and then I would set out in my Outback and go from house to house.

Each household would provide their own communion elements. I would stay outside. At least 15 away and masked the whole time. They would have their masks on except for when taking the elements. Sometimes they would stay inside of their home with the glass door shut and we talk through the door.

While I don’t think anyone actually used a pizza crust for communion, I did not bless a single wafer that whole summer. Instead I blessed:

Every kind of cracker imaginable, including Cheez-Itz and those chicken flavored ones.

A leftover Bojangles biscuit.

A single crouton.

Bread that had been sliced into cubes and put on individual napkins for a family to have communion before a funeral.

And this is the one that hits me in the feels: a piece of bread from a home loaf of sourdough bread. The widower had baked the bread himself from the sourdough starter that he had feed for 14 years following his wife’s death.

I blessed wine, juice from all sorts of fruits, sports drink, and water.

I did so without hesitation because I didn’t know if I could hand them the wafer and wine safely.

I did so without hesitation because I didn’t want them to go to the grocery store on a special trip for communion elements.

I did so without hesitation because we were in the wilderness and this was the manna that God had provided in their pantry to sustain them for that day.

I did so without hesitation because I knew they needed the assurance of God's forgiveness, presence, and hope with them.

And as I said the words of institution over and over again, I was changed in the process.

You see most of the communion that I have received in my life have been by wafer. My home church, second call, missionary year, all wafers. So I am very used to seeing, tasting, and feeling Jesus in this way. Yes, I had bread a significant amount of times, but by the numbers, the wafer wins.

Pandemic expanded how I saw Jesus and felt Jesus. To see Jesus in all these other places changed me. Every family became their own altar guild. Men whose main and meaningful contribution to worship was setting up the Christmas tree and Good Friday shroud were now preparing communion for themselves with love and devotion. They had joined the Altar Guild. Children who were not yet communing themselves would set the plate of crackers for their siblings and lift the elements up to the sky as I said the words of institution. A homebound member told me with tears in her eyes that another member had bought her grape juice boxes for communion so she wouldn't have to use water anymore.

Jesus had been with us each and every Sunday before the pandemic when we gathered in the sanctuary, sang the full liturgy, and received communion with wafers and prefilled glasses of wine and juice. All of those moments were good and holy and real.

And now Jesus was with us in the wilderness and diaspora. We were away from what we had known and we were scattered. Like the Israelites who ate manna even though it wasn't what they were used to eating in Egypt, we had shared communion in driveways, porches, yards, garages, and parking lots. We spoke only necessary parts of the liturgy. Pandemic communion was not as full or abundant as pre-pandemic communion was. Yet all of those moments were good and holy and real.

Jesus was the bread of life for us in those crackers, croutons, and even Bojangles biscuits.

This expansive view of Jesus is beautifully articulated in a hymn called the Rice of Life that is a part of the newest hymnal, All Creation Sings. J. Andrew Fowler wrote this hymn in 1990. The description of it says: Quote: What if wheat was not the basic, staple grain of our diet? This hymn looks at the sixth chapter of John through the lens of an Asian diet. The text writer takes John 6 and retranslates it to “The living rice . . . came down eternal life to give.” While it may feel strange in our mouths, it would make sense in Malaysia, where this text originated. End quote.

The hymn text reads:

- 1 The rice of life from heaven came
 to be true life from God above.
 Receive this gift; God's mercy claim;
 in joy and pain give thanks for love.
- 2 True rice the hungry world has fed,
 the rice required for life below.
 Provide this gift; God's mercy spread;
 in weakness God's compassion show.
- 3 The rice of God for all is meant;
 no one who comes is turned away.
 Believe in Christ whom God has sent;
 in humble trust God's will obey.
- 4 The living rice, for all a sign,
 came down eternal life to give.
 Abide in Christ, the living vine,
 in Christ, with people die and live.

What this hymn taught me is that Jesus intentionally comes in many forms to nourish us. What I learned from a pandemic and out of necessity, that is that Jesus is not exclusively a wafer and rather that Jesus is all nourishment in all forms, turns out to be intentional. Though it may not be what I am used to, Jesus is the rice the life and that is good and holy and real.

The truth is that Jesus is the bread of life, rice of life, corn of life, potato of life, and I suppose even the pizza crust of life. Jesus comes to all people in all places in many and varied forms. To feed us. To sustain us. To nourish us. To grow us in love and strength so that we may join in the mission of feeding, sustaining, and nourishing. Amen.

