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Bread of Life

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It's summertime so that means it's also...ice cream season!

My favorite is black raspberry chocolate chip – but, you know, not every place makes it the same way.

There was a dairy in my hometown growing up, called Bliss Brothers', and the best kind of black raspberry chocolate chip is theirs, obviously

Other places attempt it, and I enjoy it, and every once in a while, I find a place that tastes awfully similarly (and sometimes it's because they sell Bliss Brothers' ice cream)

But when it's the right kind of black raspberry chocolate chip, I am transported back to childhood and memories of sitting at the counter at their restaurant licking my black raspberry chocolate chip in a sugar cone

Food can do that, can't it? Transport us back in time, connect us to old memories.

For good or ill - ever get sick from something and can't ever eat it again?

Turns out that might be evolutionary in nature – eat a poisonous berry and get sick, don't want to eat it again so our brain recalls that feeling<sup>1</sup>

But it works the other way around, too: have a meal surrounded by wonderful friends and lots of love? Our brain stores those tastes, and smells, and memory, too.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brainfacts.org/thinking-sensing-and-behaving/learning-and-memory/2015/taste-and-memory>

Outside of ice cream, the meal that is one of the most evocative of memories for me is my family's Christmas Swedish Smorgasbord

It has all the fixings my great grandparents used to make: Swedish meatballs (not too big, not too small), pickled herring, pickled beets, bruna böner (baked brown beans), korv (a potato sausage), bondost (farmer's cheese), and hard tack.

I always felt like the Swedish Smorgasbord of my family's Christmas celebration wasn't much in comparison to the seven fishes of my Italian friends, but man, now, simply the smell of any of these things cooking in the kitchen and I'm flooded with such wonderful memories.

When I sit down to eat this meal every year, it's as if I'm surrounded by all the saints who have come before and enjoyed this meal with me – even the people who I never met but who gave these traditions to my grandparents who then handed them down to my parents and then to me and now me to my family.

In 2000, my parents took my brothers and I to Sweden to visit family and to see where my grandparents and great grandparents were from. I got to see the house where my great grandfather was born and we visited a lot of cemeteries to see the gravestones great-great and great-great-great grandparents

One afternoon, we went to a restaurant that had all those fixings from our family's Christmas Swedish Smorgasbord – the meatballs, the herring, beans, beets, all of it!

As we sat down to eat my mom said proudly to her distant cousin, "We still do this at home every Christmas! We make all this food" feeling a kinship and connection to the food and to our heritage

The cousin looked at her a little puzzled and said "Oh we don't do that anymore, too much work"

My mom was rather deflated and a lot astonished

But it was this interesting realization that the “traditional” Swedish smorgasbord that we worked so tirelessly to replicate every Christmas was, in a way, a relic and replica of a 100 year old Swedish Christmas Smorgasbord that was transported across the ocean and became an immigrant’s connection to home that we have handed down to three subsequent generations

The Sweden and Swedish traditions that I identify with as the grandchild and great-grandchild of of Swedish immigrants is very likely *not* the Sweden and Swedish traditions that current Swedes embody and hand down

My grandfather, ahead of that trip 24 years ago, said “my, do you think they have highways in Sweden these days”

The memory of our Swedishness – in all it’s wonderfulness and beauty and comfort – is not the same as modern Swedishness as you’d experience it in Stockholm or Gothenburg today

In this week’s gospel lesson, that collision of memory and contemporary context is on display in John’s story of Jesus preaching in his hometown

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

In saying such a thing, Jesus has evoked an image from the story of his Jewish ancestors in the wilderness after escaping Egypt where, in their time of need, God provided nourishment for the them in the form of manna from heaven

It was a crusty, cracker-like substance that appeared on the ground each morning

While not that exciting to eat – much like hard tack if I do say so myself – it not only provided the sustenance the people needed to get by, but it also symbolized God’s devotion and deep care for God’s people – it showed that God will provide

“Manna,” “bread from heaven,” “bread” evoked this emotional memory for the Jews of Jesus’ day in such an important way

It was then no mistake on Jesus’ part that he boldly proclaimed “I am the bread of life”

Much like the astonishment my mom felt when her cousin told her “we don’t do that any more,” Jesus’ contemporaries were astonished that Jesus would take this element, bread, and, in a way, change the meaning of it

“what do you mean you don’t do this anymore?” – “what do you mean you’re the bread of life?”

Is it not relatable that there are times when we are not ready for our traditions to change? When we are not ready to change the emotional relationship we have with a certain tradition, food, or practice?

One Christmas Eve my mom mistakenly said, “what if I don’t make the bruna böner this year?” to which I loudly guffawed!

Little did I know that my Swedish cousins hadn’t had bruna böner at their Christmas meals for years!

And, no doubt, they were creating beautiful, new memories of holidays spent with loved ones around a table eating a new, different meal

Maybe it was ham? Maybe a roast?

For my family in Sweden and for my family here and now, ultimately what that meal evokes – those meatballs, the herring, the beets – what it helps me and my family remember is the connectedness we feel towards one another, what it helps me and my family remember is abundant love

Susan Hylan, Associate Professor of New Testament at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga writes that in Jesus claiming to be the bread of life, the manna, Jesus is saying that he is “that miraculous substance with which God cultivated relationship with [God’s people] and sustained them in the wilderness.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is saying that that cultivated relationship and that sustenance are still wholly available to God’s people, **he** is the embodiment of that relationship now

Jesus did not come to replace that relationship God had with God’s people since long before his own birth – Jesus came as the embodiment of that relationship God had and has with God’s people

What the manna evoked for the Israelites and what Jesus evokes for us, like my family’s meal, is the connectedness we have to God, what the manna and Jesus help us to remember is the abundance of love and grace that God has for you and me, that God provides

Likely, in all this talk about Jesus as bread, being the good Christians that we are, we can’t help but think of the meal with bread in which we partake nearly every week: the meal of Holy Communion at which bread and wine become body and blood

It, too, is a meal that likely evokes emotional memories that connect us with all the saints who have gathered with us around that table in the past, even the saints we do not know but who handed the tradition down from generation to generation

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-19-2/commentary-on-john-635-41-51-3>

And, definitely, it's likely, that the way in which you participate in that meal has changed at some point – maybe the bread used to be a wafer, maybe you now need the gluten free option, maybe you grew up in a different tradition that used cups or grape juice instead of a chalice and wine, maybe you used to kneel to receive the host rather than stand

There is something about Holy Communion that is both ancient and contemporary

There is something about Holy Communion that evokes memory and reminds us of our connectedness to God, our connectedness to God's people, and our connectedness to abundant love

Jesus *is* the bread of life, and whoever comes to the table to receive the gift of his presence will never be alone, will never be hungry for love, and will never be thirsty for forgiveness

That will be true whether it's a wafer or bread, a chalice or a cup

Traditions change, but the love of God is eternal.

Thanks be to God, Amen.