

Late Wednesday night, I returned from my visit to see my mother Donna and my stepfather Will at their new residence in a senior living community in Southern California. Their new place is smaller than their previous home of almost forty years, but they have done a beautiful job in decorating and making it comfortable. Naturally, they could only bring a few items, so they needed to choose wisely. I was thrilled to see that the cookie-jar from my childhood home in Northern California made the cut. Slightly larger than a bowling ball, it is a smiling, wide-eyed lamb's head crowned with a slightly silly removable straw hat. Whenever you remove the hat and tip it to get a cookie, a horn implanted in the hat calls out like a bleating lamb: BAA-AAH. (At least, that's what it sounded like fifty years ago—these days it now resembles a lowing cow: MOO-OOO. Maybe the jar is just tired.) I cannot tell you how many times my brother and I, when young children, tried to sneak a cookie from the jar only to be betrayed by that loud, ovine horn that warned everyone in the house of its impending emptying.

It's funny how we remember certain artifacts from our childhood more than others. When Donna and Will were preparing to move, I saw in a cabinet an apparently ordinary yellow Tupperware bowl and I was transported back in time. It was the bowl my mother used to make the starter mix for our round, cross-hatched loaves of homemade sourdough bread. Unlike other kinds of bread that need added yeast to make the dough rise, sourdough bread simply needs a fermented mix of water and flour. She made her starter in that yellow, Tupperware bowl and left it to ferment for seven days on top of our refrigerator (right next to the cookie jar!); each day she added a little more flour and water to replace what was consumed as the starter magically became a bubbling, living thing. When it was time to make the bread, she took a little of the starter, mixed it into the dough, and then again replaced what we took from the starter mix with more flour and water. If cared for, the starter mix can last indefinitely and make countless loaves over its lifespan. You might remember in Larry McMurtry's 1985 novel *Lonesome Dove* that when it is time to move the cattle from Texas to Montana, "Gus" McCrae is heartbroken to leave behind his precious sourdough starter which he had kept going for ten years. In fact, the San Francisco Boudin bakery received their starter from the original goldmining 1849'ers and have kept it going ever since—that batch has made bread longer than this church building has stood. For me, therefore, sourdough starter is a mystical thing: it is a living memory that makes the present rise into the future.

Today's Gospel reading is part of an extended conversation Jesus has with His followers after He miraculously fed a crowd of over 5,000 with just five loaves of bread and two fish. Naturally, the crowd is thunderstruck, and not just because He fed their bellies. Like

sourdough bread, the meal they just experienced has a mystical, time-collapsing impact. They remember their past and how the great hero Moses, in their wilderness journey to a Promised Land of their own, gave their forefathers manna: the bread from heaven. They also perceive a hint of their promised future described by the prophet Isaiah, who wrote that after the Messiah conquers their enemies, he will provide a celebratory feast. Isaiah writes, “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow of well-aged wines strained clear (Is. 25:6).” This mingling of past history and future promise gives them present joy: they rightly intuit that God is with them and actively works for and among them. The problem is that their intuitions are limited: they fail to understand that Christ did not merely come to give them more bread, or another Promised Land, or any kind of worldly victory; instead, Christ came to give us Himself, Who exceeds every kind of Bread, Promise, or Victory we might think we need.

We have come to church today to receive another kind of mystical bread: the consecrated Bread of the Eucharist, which is the Real Presence of Christ. Unlike some traditions, we do not claim to understand exactly how this happens, but following the ancient, universal Tradition we simply trust that it does. As the Anglican priest and poet John Donne wrote in the 17th century (and as Queen Elizabeth I cited):

*He was the Word that spake it;
He took the bread and break it;
And what that Word did make it;
I do believe and take it.*

In the Eucharist, He descends to us today in the consecrated Bread and Wine as much He descended among us two thousand years ago in the Bethlehem manger. At that time, eternity entered time and was transfixed by it. The Son of God—co-eternal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit yet One in perfect love—condescended to become one of us to live and die as we do. He died on the Cross, rose from the dead, and Ascended back into Heaven to prepare a place for us. Once and for all, He took away the guilt of every selfish thought, word, and deed every man, woman, and child has ever done or ever will do. Once and for all, He conquered death. He promises to all who simply trust in Him that just as He is risen from the dead, so too He will raise us. It is true that He still reigns in Heaven in His Resurrected Body; it is also true that He dwells in all of us through the Holy Spirit whom He sent to us at our Baptism and Confirmation; it is no less true that He mysteriously makes Himself present to us in the Bread we receive at the Altar rail. He does this objectively—for real, through His own power—not subjectively, limited by our state of mind.

In this, He changes everything, especially us. He changes us, not only eternally but also day by day. From the moment of our Baptism, we were forevermore adopted into the family of Christ the King; immediately and eternally we stand in that relationship of love. But the “daily bread” we ask for from the Father in the Lord’s Prayer refers to our daily need for His daily grace. We depend on Him not only for every material need but also for the things that are even more important: trust in times of fear, hope in times of confusion, love in times of sadness or solitude. And for as long as we live in time, our times of greatest need need time and grace to grow, to ferment, and ultimately to rise.

Inevitably, there are times when we might feel like a cookie jar, gradually being emptied by hungry children—we can be gradually emptied either by the ways we give of ourselves to others or by the ways life takes things from us. If this emptying goes on long enough without replenishment, sometimes even our prayers sound less like the cookie jar of my childhood—a robust lamb bleating out a warning cry—and more like that cookie jar as it now is: a tired, old cow surrendering a mourning moo. Especially during these times, it is even more important that we come to this place on Sunday mornings. Here, like the yellow Tupperware bowl my mother used to make and sustain our sourdough starter, we find replenishment. Here we find a place of prayer, silent and aloud. Here we find a place of companionship with friends, strangers, and a host of unseen angels. Here we find mercy, help, and grace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who is on His Throne in Heaven, Who is in the Sacrament of the Altar, and Who is in the hearts of His faithful, patient people. Here we find the Bread from Heaven Who is our daily bread and Who is at work to make us rise.