

## Bread ...

“The great mystery of the doctrine of Holy Communion,” a wise pastor once said, “is not how the body and blood of Jesus are present in the elements of bread and wine, but how you get away with calling that wafer ‘bread’ in the first place.”

When a new person or family joins my congregation without a church background, I take the time to meet with them in the sanctuary to explain why we do things the way we do. (See “Preach Your Building 1”) If they are unfamiliar with communion, I will fetch a few wafers from the cabinet and let them taste. Invariably, before a young person nibbles at one, he or she will ask, “What is it?”

That, of course, is the question that the children of Israel asked when God first sent them manna to eat in the wilderness in Exodus 16. “Manna” means “What is it?”

Our lectionary includes that portion of Exodus every third year, and I always take that opportunity to remind folks that one of the reasons we use wafers instead of some other form of bread is to connect ourselves with this story. Our prayers over the bread and wine connect us with Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. The bread we use takes us back almost 1300 years earlier to Moses and the long journey to the Promised Land, at least in terms of its appearance. Manna is described in the story as a white, flake-like thing.

“What is it?” The wafers we use are made from a batter of flour and water, baked in a press for just a few minutes and then stamped into small circles. White, flake-like things.

Most congregations in my tradition use wafers for Holy Communion, though over the years I have seen an increasing number switch to everything from pita bread to challah. You can find a dozen different recipes for home-made communion bread on the internet (as well as videos showing how the wafers are made). It is a pretty safe bet that what was on the table at the last supper was nothing like the wafers we use each Sunday nor the *matzahs* that are part of the Jewish Passover ritual. For a while in college the only church I could get a ride to on Sundays used plain sandwich bread, crusts removed and cut into small cubes. I’m pretty sure the disciples would have asked “What is it?” if something like that showed up at the Last Supper.

So something resembling real bread of the sort that Jesus would have recognized would be good to use for communion. But some things need to be thought through,

particularly with respect to how the communion wine is served and what to do with the leftovers. A couple of experiences I have had over the years will serve as illustrations.

Once upon a time I was served a piece of whole grain, seeded flatbread, torn from a larger loaf. The process resulted in quite a few crumbs in my palm, which I pondered as I made my way to the chalice of wine where I was to dip or intinct the one large piece before eating it. There was no way to prevent the crumbs from falling into the wine, as was the case for everyone who had dipped their bread before me. Floating on the surface of the chalice was a thick layer of crumbs and seeds, through which I dipped my morsel. I was taught to say "Amen" after receiving communion, but all I could muster that time was a silent "Yuck."

A large conference with some 300 participants was scheduled to conclude with a communion service. Two large loaves of challah we placed on the table and several large ceramic chalices filled to the brim with wine. As the celebrant stepped up to the altar to begin the prayers, she announced that communion would be served by intinction. You could tell by the look on the servers' faces that this was not what they were expecting. Freshly torn challah, no matter how faithfully blessed, quickly becomes a soggy sponge when dipped in wine, and by the time I reached the communion station there was quite a sizeable puddle of wine on the floor.

For some congregations the bread retains no inherent holiness beyond the end of the service. I have seen children and adults indulge in several additional bites once the bread is removed from the altar, and the crumbs that inevitably fall to the floor are simply swept up and thrown away. My tradition holds that once blessed, the bread remains sacred and should be handled with reverence. The fewer crumbs the better, in this regard. And we have the option of saving or reserving consecrated elements for use at a later time.

All things considered, we will continue to use wafers in my congregation for three reasons. The first, already mentioned, is the Exodus connection. Second, wafers are much better for intinction, which about a third of my congregation does. They are easier to dip, don't leave crumbs and don't drip as much as some other breads. Finally, like many congregations in our tradition, we believe that the bread and wine of communion continue to be holy after the service is concluded. Taking those consecrated elements from the gathered community to those who cannot be present because of age or illness is a great comfort to many. Simply put, the mechanics of storing and transporting blessed wafers is easier to manage than a corner of some larger loaf.

And though the members of my altar guild have always said they would set out whatever sort of bread I wanted to use, I think they are happy not to have to vacuum the floor after each service.