

### *Bakery Theology in a Low-Carb World*

by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral (John 6.48-51)

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My great-uncle Arthur was very ill at the end of his life. His wife, my great-aunt Gladys, was of course sad about it all and went to a priest for assurance that Uncle Arthur would be in a good place after he left this world. The priest, being very progressive and kind, said, "Dear Gladys, getting to spend eternity with God is as simple as spelling a word." "What word?" my great-aunt wondered. "Love." Isn't that beautiful?

Well, Aunt Gladys went back to her husband's bedside. He was a little concerned about the end as well, and so he decided to bear his soul to her. He confessed indiscretions and mistakes...gambling debts and flirtations, lies he'd told things he'd kept from her. Finally, after unburdening himself, he felt better. And he said, "Sweet Gladys, do you think now that I've come clean about it all I'll make it to heaven." And Aunt Gladys said, "Oh, Honey, I just talked to priest about this very thing. He says spending eternity with God is as simple as spelling a word." "What word," he asked. "Antidisestablishmentarianism!"

To explain what I believe our gospel lesson is telling us today, I want to share another story that might be easier to grasp, but that may be offering a similar message.

In Luke's gospel (chap. 16), there is a story about a rich man and a poor man. The story imagines a rich man who ignores an indigent person named Lazarus. Lazarus is in poor health, probably in no small measure from his lack of proper nutrition. We're told in fact that he is basically surviving on the scraps from the rich man's table. What the rich man throws out, Lazarus finds and eats. Lazarus dies and the story says he is "carried by angels to Abraham's side." One might assume that means Paradise.

Well, for some unknown reason, the wealthy man also dies. As it turns out, he does not make it to Abraham's side. He is able to see Abraham (we aren't told if Sarah or Hagar are nearby). He is also able to be heard by Abraham when he calls out to him. In his arrogance, even in death, he presumes to imagine that he is somehow superior to Lazarus. The rich man calls out to Abraham asking him to send Lazarus to him to provide him some comfort...as if Lazarus were his servant. The rich man says he is experiencing anguish, and would like Lazarus to come tend to his needs.

Abraham does not pass the message on to Lazarus. Instead, Abraham responds to the rich man, saying in effect, "too bad; so sad. It's not going to happen." The rich man then thinks of his family and says (again thinking of Lazarus as his servant), "Send Lazarus to my family to warn them that they could wind up like me." And Abraham says, "they have the scriptures...Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them." And, of course, Lazarus is not sent to do the rich man's bidding.

Luke is rethinking some very old theology. It's nice to know that our spiritual ancestors gave theology a re-think once in awhile. When we ask questions, we are in good company. It was once thought that good luck meant one was favored by God while bad luck meant God was not particularly happy with someone. But the unlucky Lazarus is ultimately the blessed one in this story, while the very fortunate rich man does not fare as well in the end. Maybe circumstances do not adequately demonstrate one's relationship to the divine.

Beyond rethinking the theology of luck, Luke is also showing us something else that is very important. The rich man is not out of relationship with Abraham and the faithful because of his beliefs. We aren't told what he believes. What his theological opinions might be are irrelevant to this story. What we know is that he didn't treat Lazarus particularly well. He may not have been overtly mean to him, but neither did he care about him. He had no compassion for one who suffered, for one who did not enjoy some of his privileges. And by not realizing his unity with Lazarus, he didn't experience his unity with commonwealth of God...that commonwealth that is made up of the least of these.

The rich man had the scriptures...telling him, "Hear, O mortal, what is required of you; only to do justice, and love mercy, and live humbly..." (Micah 6.8); "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the orphans and plead the case of the widows" (Isaiah 1.17); "When you reap your harvest...leave something for the poor and the alien" (Lev. 19. 9-10), and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19.18). What kept the rich man from right relationship with the divine wasn't what he believed about the divine; what kept him from right relationship with the divine was how he failed to be in right relationship with his fellow human-beings.

"The rich man was cut off from joy because he chose to not offer comfort to those who needed it when he had the means to do so...Every preacher who has ever frightened his or her congregation with threats of hell, every parent who has rejected her or his child for being gay, every bully who has tormented the weak or the different, and every keeper of power who has fought to keep power at the expense of the powerless should re-read the parable of the rich man and the poor man. A new reading might suggest to them (and to us all) that peace and joy are the result of kindness, goodwill, tolerance and love. Cruelty, even disguised as religious values, can never bring peace and joy."[1]

The rich man's estrangement wasn't because of what he did or didn't claim to believe; his estrangement came from being too stingy with his love; because, as it turns out, "God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them" (1 John 4.16).

I don't believe in an afterlife prison called Hell. "When New Testament writers were seeking a metaphor to describe what it must be like to feel separated from the grace and beauty of Life, they used Gehenna, aka 'Hell' as their image. To them, Jesus was their savior or healer or one who helped them feel whole.

Jesus gave them a way of understanding God as the love that gave them assurance that every life was sacred and infinitely valuable. Jesus, then, 'saved' them from fear of ever feeling cut off from God, or of being in 'hell'".[2] If the rich man could have seen the sacred value of Lazarus, he would have experienced his own sacred value so much more deeply. There can be no feeling of separation from God, that is, there can be no hell when one does justice, loves mercy, and lives humbly. There is no feeling of separation from God when one loves one's neighbor as one's self. The life of love is the godly life.

That's what John is saying with this bread metaphor today. The bread of life, the bread that John saw in Jesus and claims on Jesus' behalf as being his very nature is the life-giving, nurturing, sustaining bread of divine love.

Bread is wonderful metaphor for unity.

The ground is part of the bread...it gives life to the wheat.

Water is part of the bread...it too gives life to the wheat.

The farmer is part of the bread...her labor planted and harvested the wheat.

The baker is part of the bread...he mixed the ingredients and baked it and sliced it.

The one who eats the bread is part of the bread, or the bread at least becomes part of her.

The ones with whom we share the bread are all part of the experience, as they too assimilate the nutrition of the bread.

To say, "I am bread" is to say, "I am a symbol of oneness that is all-inclusive, life-giving, nurturing, and joyous."

"I am bread" doesn't mean disaster for people who hold one opinion instead of another; I Am Bread means we are all bread...we are all part of the experience of bread...earth, water, heat, labor, sharing, eating...who gets left out? No one! Lazarus won't be left out of the divine feast where the bread of life is served. No one is left out. That's the message of "I am bread." Because if I am bread, then you are bread, and we are all at the table of divine love. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor. 10.17).

It's not about a doctrinal opinion that we unlovingly defend or promote. It's about the love we share, regardless of what our opinions happen to be. The rich man believed in God...but he didn't believe in Lazarus. That was what kept him from knowing God more fully. Condemning, ignoring, judging the Other...the gay Other, the Lesbian other, the Transgender Other, the agnostic Other, the Muslim Other, the Jewish Other, the Catholic Other, the disabled Other, the immigrant Other, the Other who lacks access to health care...failing to care about the Other is what keeps us from experiencing the Love that God is.

Theologian Rudolph Bultmann tells us, "John portrays Jesus as...calling us all to a deeper sense of what it means to be whole and human. To come to the God present in Jesus for John was to discover the [divine] in each of us."

We share in the one loaf that is the bread of life...we see it in Jesus...if we look, we'll see it in the Lazaruses of the world (the Other), and even in ourselves. I am bread. You are bread. We are all part of the feast of unconditional, all-inclusive, everlasting love.  
This is the Good News. Amen.

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**Divine Love flows through me.  
It blesses my mind and body.  
It blesses my life and my loved ones.  
It leaves no one out.  
And so I give thanks.  
Amen.**

"The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread." Mother Teresa

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[1] From my new book, *Wrestling With God Without Getting Pinned* (2009)

[2] Ibid.