

August 2, 2009
Lectionary 18b
John 6:24-35
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When Deb smells freshly-mowed grass, she remembers playing in the backyard with childhood friends. If Tim gets a whiff of Old Spice, he immediately thinks of his dad and his grandfather. For Jon, it's the smell of gasoline and freshly cut wood—both his dad and grandpa ran gas stations; his other grandpa was a carpenter. Kimberly remembers “Gramps” when she smells Double mint gum. Dana and Ruth both remember family vacations whenever they smell pines trees or the ocean. And Sonia is transported to her mother's kitchen when she smells freshly baked bread. She remembers smelling it on the way into the Iowa farm-house and watching the butter melt onto the thick slices just before eating it...

These are just a few of the results from my quick survey among Facebook friends. What is that certain smell for you—that distinct scent, or odor, that you associate with a person, a place, an activity?

Of all five senses smell is the best at bringing back memories. In fact, if it weren't for your other senses holding you back; you might feel as though you had actually slipped back into that scene—often from childhood because that's when we first encounter new smells.

Well... you smell the bread don't you? Maybe that smell is bringing back fond memories for you or maybe it's just making you hungry. And as we just heard, we're not the only ones focused on food, focused on bread. I thought I'd help us all stay “bread focused” by baking a little bread this morning. (If you're reading this on the Web, you'll need to provide your own special effects...)

What about this crowd following Jesus? The previous day 5,000 of them were fed a bounty with five loaves and two fish. With the aroma of yesterday's wonder bread still fresh in their nostrils, they're after Jesus for more. And who can blame them? “They've seen him do something miraculous. Who knows what else he can do? If he can provide food, then he just might be able to do the same with shelter and clothing; he can protect them from the never-ending uncertainties of their lives,” (writes Charles Hoffman in *Christian Century* magazine).

Who among us would not choose that sort of security? After all, in our time so much of our living is dedicated to the illusion that somehow our complete safety can be ensured and that we can be protected against all the ills and evils common to human existence. This delusional pursuit has become an obsession. So the crowd comes seeking both bread and answers.

But Jesus will not be used for a free lunch, nor will he be followed for the wrong reasons. He steers their needs and their conversation in a new direction, and offers a disarmingly simple message: “This is the work of God; that you believe in the one whom God has sent.” The people aren't so sure they can do that and even have the audacity to ask for a sign. “Prove it,” they said, touting their ancestor Moses and manna from heaven. Jesus reminds them who the author of that bread is.

On this summer morning, perhaps you are seeking Jesus as well. You might be traveling through a wilderness of sorts or seeking security in some way. Some among us are grieving; others are worried about finances, job or relationships. Perhaps you're troubled about your own or another's health. Maybe you too, like the crowd of people following Jesus, are looking for a sign, something tangible, to make the promise of God's presence real.

The people asked for a sign. And they were given one. Jesus proclaims, I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. By this sign—the living bread from heaven; in this person—the bread of life, they and we, you and I, are given new life. In the smell, the feel, the taste of bread we experience the bread of life, Jesus, among us.

And when we share this meal, we remember the deepest connection we have to any person, place or event: Jesus suffered and died for us. Jesus rose for us. And Jesus lives and reveals himself to us in the breaking and sharing of this bread among these people—and all the saints.

Like an old familiar scent that brings back a fond memory or a deep association with love and affection we experienced as a child, I wonder if the smell of bread can bring the same association for us, so that each time we take in a whiff of freshly baked bread, we associate that good smell with Jesus—the bread of life.

One of my friends delights in telling about the time she gathered around the dinner table with her friends and their daughter. As the bread was passed around the table and the wine was poured into the glasses, this young 4-year-old said with excitement and joy, “That smells like Christ!” She had a strong understanding of the presence of Christ in bread and wine. Clearly kids can make the connection without a lot of intellectual work..... that's what we need as adults too.

In this hour, let all the senses envelop you on your journey toward Jesus, the bread of life. Touch your neighbor with the passing of peace. Hear the good news of God’s grace and mercy in word, song and silence. See the cross as it passes through this body of Christ and as your own body bows in reverence. And smell and taste the bread and wine—the bread of life... given for you, so that you may have life and live abundantly.