

Living a life of daily bread

by Mikka McCracken



What can you learn about your faith by baking bread? Get out your apron, pull out the flour canister and get to work. You'll learn about living a life of intention and attention. You'll learn some patience. You'll learn to live in wide-eyed anticipation. You'll learn to live in community.

“Give us this day our daily bread” is perhaps one of the simplest, most common phrases used by Christians and Lutherans worldwide. But this short phrase leaves a lot of room for reflection and interpretation.

This petition of the Lord's Prayer has also been the theme of the 2010 Lutheran World Federation (LWF) General Assembly, held July 20–27 in Stuttgart, Germany. You are invited, as the delegates have been doing, to reflect on the phrase “give us this day our daily bread.”

There are many meanings to this theme. We could think about daily bread in a spiritual way, as the ritual practice of Holy Communion and the Eucharist, or as anything required for sustenance from day to day. (Much of this work has already been done through the official LWF assembly Bible studies, which are available at www.lwf-assembly.org along with articles, stories and many other resources for study.)

As for my reflection and unpacking of “give us this day our daily bread,” I decided to focus on the most basic element of the petition, literal bread. I am a recent college graduate removed from four years of cafeteria food and an on-campus bakery now navigating the wide-open ranges of the grocery store and the kitchen.

What breads do you remember making growing up? What was the first bread you baked?

I am a big fan of cooking shows, but I am not by any stretch of the imagination the most skilled cook. I am proud to report that I do have my first set of real knives, a few cookbooks and a rolling pin, and that I am a baker. Chocolate chip cookies and banana cupcakes are my signature pieces, but only recently did I try to make bread.

I do remember watching and helping my mother bake bread on the large, smooth, cleared space of our kitchen counter when I was young. I remember different types of bread: Christmas stollen, poppy seed bread for Easter morning, rolls for Thanksgiving and foccacia to accompany my favorite dish in the world, spanakopita (Greek spinach pie). I cannot recall much of the preparation and process, though I know my mother put hours into all these beautiful, tasty creations.

Before you get too excited to hear about my first adventure in bread-making, allow me a disclaimer:

I made pizza dough for calzones. I know that is not the most advanced creation, but let's call it my first lesson in Bread Baking 101. A friend of mine at work gave me the recipe a while back, and I finally had an occasion to try it.

The process

I knew I had all the ingredients at home except the yeast, which my boyfriend, Jake, graciously agreed to pick up and bring home. I had it all planned out: I would prepare the dough between arriving home and leaving for my spin class at the local YMCA, let the dough rise during my wonderful workout, rush home to punch it down (which I was really looking forward to), prepare the filling ingredients, bake and feast!

Well, as life goes, I started the whole process a little later than I intended. Jake and the yeast were late to arrive, and you can't start the process without yeast. I felt rushed! I was half changed into workout clothes, half still wearing work clothes. Finally I had bowl, yeast, spoon and recipe in front of me ready to go.

Step 1: Dissolve yeast into 1 cup warm (about 120 degrees Fahrenheit) water until foamy.

That sounded easy. I tested the tap water with my finger and figured it was close enough. I filled the cup,

How to Use This Resource

This resource can be used by an individual for personal reflection or by a group. Since bread-making is a lost art in some places, use this resource as an opportunity for intergenerational sharing of skills and recipes.

For group use, consider inviting each participant to bring along her favorite bread or bread recipe to share. Set up the room as a circle of chairs with a space for entry or exit after every fourth chair. A display in the center of the circle that features different bread and baking equipment will add an interesting focal point.

This program could easily be made into a half-day, full-day or two-day retreat. Allow time for the group to make bread together. For instance, begin by mixing and kneading bread, and then follow by using this resource while the bread bakes (though it might be hard to concentrate when the wonderful scent starts emanating from the oven!). Finish by eating the warm bread.

For additional resources, turn to www.lwf-assembly.org, where six Bible studies on five words from the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer are featured: "give," "us," "today," "daily" and "bread." Share one or more of the "daily bread" stories from Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, Chile, Germany, Haiti, Iceland, India, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Sudan, Thailand, Australia and the United States. Learn about different kinds of "daily bread" in each of the LWF regions. Expand the content of the retreat by adding in consideration of food security and sovereignty (there's a 24-page PDF on this topic at www.lwf-assembly.org).



poured the water into the bowl and added my yeast. *Dissolve yeast ... until foamy ...* I somehow read that as *dump it in and WHIP the yeast into a foamy frenzy.*

Picture this: Me, ferociously whisking my water and yeast mixture, trying to get the foam to form, when Jake glances over from his perch and exclaims, “What are you *doing?*!” I tell him I’m waiting for my water and yeast mixture to get foamy. He raises an eyebrow and informs me that I don’t look like I’m waiting and that yeast is actually *alive* and that I’ve probably killed off all my yeast-lings in the process of whipping them into foam. He asks if it says in my recipe to stir. I look, and sure enough, nothing about stirring.

At this point, I am exasperated, because I am running out of time, have wasted a packet of yeast and am not sure if my mixture will now get foamy.

After about 10 minutes of pacing, self-deprecation and at one point throwing myself face down onto the couch to force myself to wait for the non-existent foam, Jake encouraged me to start over.

So I dumped the water and yeast from the first attempt down the drain, saying a little prayer for all the dead yeast-ies that I had killed in my haste. Jake advised me to warm the metal bowl before adding the water and helped me guess at a good temperature, which it turns out was much cooler than the scalding temperature I had started with on my first round.

We dumped the yeast packet in and added a pinch or two of sugar at Jake’s advice, because “The yeast need something to eat to do their magic.” (Yes, it was at this moment that it occurred to me that the “magic” has to do with the expulsion of gases and other things that the little yeast get from eating the sugars. Yum!) Sure enough, shortly thereafter I started to watch little patches of foam rise to the surface. I stood over the bowl, watching the froth blossom on the water’s surface, and thought, “this must be what bread makers’ dreams are made of!”

The rest of the process was a breeze. We added the other ingredients, went for a workout and returned to a beautifully risen bulb of dough. After some punching, kneading, rolling and pulling, our calzones were in the oven and devoured before we knew it.

Where do you most often encounter God in your daily life and activities?

Bread-making and the Christian life

The parallels between this—my first official bread-making experience—and Christian life are not lost on me. In fact, I often encounter God in the simplest activities: on a morning run, while singing a particular hymn during church, in the close confidence of a friend, and much to my surprise and joy, here in the making of bread. Here are the lessons I learned.

Lesson 1: Be intentional

I generally have good intentions. I didn’t *try* to kill my yeast with a combination of scalding water and whipping to create foam, but I did. To be intentional is to pay attention, to read carefully and to try to understand a situation and the actors in it. If I had intentionally taken the time to learn about yeast, why it needs a special water temperature, the process that takes place and how it is, in fact, alive, perhaps I would have been kinder and less frenzied. I would have understood the dynamics of the process. To live a life of daily bread is to live a life of intention and attention.

Think about a difficult situation in your life. How can you be intentional about your actions in that situation? In what ways can you read carefully and try to understand the actors and dynamics?



Lesson 2: Be patient

In my sprint toward wanting to be successful at making bread, I forgot the spiritual gift of patience (Galatians 5:22). It took a failed attempt to remind me of that. As I stood, wide-eyed, at the rim of my bowl and watched the blossoming froth of yeast, I felt as if I could wait forever just to see the mystery unfold and wonder in anticipation. I think that is what God intended the gift of patience to be like.

Patience often has a negative connotation. For example, I must have patience to endure this long meeting, patience to endure this cold or illness and even patience to let my “oops-I-just-cut-my-hair-too-short” hairstyle grow out. However, no matter the situation, we are called to trust in God, to wait and watch for what unfolds and for the yeast to work. To live a life of daily bread is to know that patience can be a positive experience when we are able to be at peace and encounter everything in wide-eyed anticipation.

What is the “yeast” working in your life? How does it feel to wait and watch, wide-eyed, for what God has planned?

Lesson 3: Be in community with one another

Remember at the beginning of this article when I said that I am a baker? That’s true to an extent, but in all honesty, Jake is the real baker and I am more the assistant baker. To create and enjoy daily bread is to make it, bake it and break it with others. Without encouragement, advice and guidance, my bread would never have made it past the dead-yeast stage. It wasn’t my bread that succeeded but our collaboration on our bread that had delicious life and provided nourishment.

Similarly, Christ didn’t break bread alone. Bread was shared at a meal with friends. Christ’s body wasn’t given for personal gain but for the wholeness of the body of Christ, for all of God’s creation. To live a life of daily bread is to be in intentional, patient community with one another and with all of creation.

What communities do you belong to? What community collaborations give you life?



Like yeast that a woman took and mixed ...

In the Gospel of Luke, there is a short parable Jesus tells about the kingdom of God. “And again he said, ‘To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened’” (Luke 13:20). This is my one story of bread baking, and combined with your stories and reflections, we are the women who mix in our measures of flour to leaven and help raise the communities and the world that we live in.

Please join us and others from the Lutheran World Federation in sharing stories and reflections on daily bread in our Facebook group, “LWF 2010: Give Us Today Our Daily Bread, Reflections from North America.” (You can get the calzone recipe there too! Click on the discussion tab and find the recipe posts.)

Did you know?

Women of the ELCA resources, such as this one, are available free to individuals, small groups, and congregations. Covering a variety of topics, we are bringing Lutheran perspectives and new voices to issues that matter. By making a donation to Women of the ELCA, you will help us continue and expand this important educational ministry. Give online at womenoftheelca.org or mail to Women of the ELCA, ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009.

Copyright © 2010 Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Written by Mikka McCracken. All rights reserved. May be reproduced for use in Women of the ELCA units, clusters/conferences, and synodical women’s organizations provided each copy is reproduced in its entirety, unless otherwise indicated by the material, and carries this copyright notice. Please direct all other requests for permission to reproduce to women.elca@elca.org.

