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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR B, PROPER 13
EXODUS 16:2-4, 9-15
PSALM 78:23-29
EPHESIANS 4:17-25
JOHN 6:22-36

I've had the city of Bologna, in Italy, on my mind lately. This week, the porticoes of Bologna, which started to be constructed in the 12th century and are now found throughout the city, were added as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I was born there and go back when I can. Obviously, this wasn't possible during the pandemic and now it's been a few years.

One of the things I did instead during the pandemic, to try to make up for not being able to go, was to order a tigelliera from Bologna. I imagine that you may be wondering what in the world is that. In fact, I was speaking with a friend of mine here in New York, who is originally from Napoli, and even she's never heard of it. It's something very specific to the region around Bologna.

Essentially, it is an aluminum cast for cooking small round breads, called tigelle, over a gas stove. The breads have a diameter of about the size of the priest host I will use in a bit, though they're thicker, and taste almost like a soft pretzel. They go well with mortadella or cheese. Or both!

Of course, I want all the best ingredients, so I make sure to use Paneangeli, which is the bread of angels. It's a brand of yeast whose name comes from a verse in Psalm 78 that we read today: "so mortals ate the bread of angels."¹

There is something satisfying about working the dough with my hands -- doing it all myself -- not having to rely on others.

While it does give me a taste of Bologna, it doesn't quite do the trick of transporting me to the destination I'm seeking.

¹ Psalm 78:25.

In today's gospel passage from John, those that ate bread with Jesus were also looking for more. They're seeking him, but he isn't there. So they travel to the other side of the sea.

They continue to seek Jesus even if they don't fully understand. Initially, they had wanted to make him king after he fed them, though they had misunderstood what it meant to be the messiah and what type of king he actually is.²

Now, Jesus will provide more details about the true bread. Jesus tells them not to "labor for the food which perishes," where laboring for food could be understood as working to earn money for the food.³

The underlying Greek verb (ἐργάζομαι) could also indicate laboring in the sense of the physical work of preparing the food, perhaps along the lines of working dough with one's hands to make bread.⁴

Those that sought out Jesus then repeat the same verb in the subsequent verse. They ask him what they ought to do in order to labor for "the works of God."⁵ Here the sense is more "to carry out" or "accomplish."⁶

That is, there is a bit of a word play going on in the Greek. Is the labor of carrying out the works of God analogous to physical labor? Can we think about it as working on dough to make bread? Can we do it ourselves?

For those listening to Jesus, they would have had the Law in mind as "doing the works of God,"⁷ devoting oneself to Torah, which is what gives life to Israel.⁸

But, our gospel passage indicates that this is just a taste of what is now being offered.⁹ Jesus responds by telling them to believe in him, the true bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the whole world. Not just Israel.

² John 6:15.

³ John 6:27.

⁴ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 389.

⁵ John 6:28.

⁶ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 389.

⁷ John 6:28.

⁸ Francis J. Moloney, *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John*, Vol. 4 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 211-212.

⁹ *Ibid*, 209.

This isn't the type of labor that they had been expecting. They won't be able to do it all themselves. They need to believe and they need to rely on God. Moses didn't give them the bread from heaven. It was the Father.

This is the bread that transforms us and helps us to "put off [our] old nature" and "put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness," as it was put in our Epistle reading.¹⁰

If we were created in God's image,¹¹ is it really a "new nature" that we're seeking or is our goal to return to what we once were before we blurred up the gift of God's image that was given to us in creation?

Writers from the early Church, such as Irenaeus in the 2nd century and Athanasius in the 4th, recognized that humanity, when we return to our Lord, couldn't be exactly the same as it initially was with Adam and Eve before the fall.¹² Something has to be different this time so that when we return to God, there won't be any more falling away.

Origen of Alexandria, a brilliant 3rd century Christian writer who was never canonized as a saint, largely because he was misunderstood, has a legacy that modern scholars often seek to rehabilitate these days. He's traditionally thought to teach a circular philosophy in that we will return to a unity with God in a state that is identical to where we were initially at creation.¹³

A recent paper, however, describes Origen's theology instead as being "spiral."¹⁴ I like this language and imagine humanity walking up a spiral staircase. The concept is that it is not quite circular even if much about it is. By returning to God, we end up back where we began. But, it isn't identical. We've been changed. We've come full circle and then some.

The difference is the sanctification we've experienced on our journey by participating in God's grace.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:24.

¹¹ Genesis 1:26-27.

¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.16.1-2; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 3-5, 7.

¹³ Alexander H. Pierce, "Apokatastasis, Genesis 1.26-27, and the Theology of History in Origen's *De Principiis*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 29, no. 2 (2021): 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 189.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 185.

As we seek Jesus, believing in the “bread of life,”¹⁶ we’re actively joining in a process, but one that we can’t do on our own without God.

We are letting ourselves be changed by the bread “which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.”¹⁷

“Lord, give us this bread always.”¹⁸

✕ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ John 6:35.

¹⁷ John 6:33.

¹⁸ John 6:34.