

One day either in my first or second year of seminary, a friend asked if I wanted some sourdough starter. Never having baked with it before, I was intrigued and said why not. It sounded like something fun to try. As she handed me the bag, she directed me to utilize only a portion of the batter, not the entire amount. Once I had taken what was necessary for a recipe to bake a loaf or two, I would then feed more flour and water, of equal measure, into the mix to keep the starter going and let it ferment for a few days. As she continued to explain, after some time, bubbles would begin to form, indicating that the yeast was starting to become active and multiply. Once it reached that frothy, billowy stage, the starter would be ready to be used again. At which point, I would pass the saved starter on to another person and encourage him or her into the communal baking and sharing of this bread.

As evidenced by this process, and as some of you might know, the starter can last for a long time, many, many years actually, and it grows by dividing. It also serves as an agent in which wild yeast—which lives in the air, in a bag of flour, on the surface of grapes—is cultured. Though wild yeast has been around for much longer, as Emma Christensen states in an online article, “domesticated commercial yeast replaced it for most baking because it’s easier for companies to mass produce, it’s easier for bakers to store and use, and it proofs our breads and pastries in a fraction of the time. By contrast, wild yeast...[which] needs a medium [that] has to be constantly maintained and monitored, likes cooler temperatures, acidic environments, and works much more slowly to proof breads.” As Emma points out, though, and as any baker probably knows, wild yeast offers a richer, more stimulating flavor as well as a stronger texture.

When I arrived back at my apartment, however, and excitedly opened up the bag in eager anticipation of the fresh, warm bread that would soon delight my watering taste buds, the

pungent odor almost knocked me back. Granted, I wasn't expecting it to emit the fragrance of its baked form straight out of the oven, but I was certainly *not* ready for the sour scent that had assaulted me.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” With full bellies, the once eager multitude that had just recently shifted into complaint mode, as we heard last week, now teeters on the edge. The sharp smell of Christ's odious pronouncement evokes within them a visceral reaction. As arguments amongst themselves pursue, the formerly simmering tension and dissension now begins to boil. And rather than turning down the heat, Jesus cranks it up. “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” As if what he had been saying up to this point wasn't already strange and off-putting, it gets even more bizarre, and, to be honest, repulsive. Raise your hand if this text makes you cringe, even a little. Let's face it, it sounds as if he's talking about, well, cannibalism. A topic that, understandably so, makes every molecule within our being squirm. If I were new to the Christian faith and this was one of the first stories I heard, I would, in a likelihood, run away, as fast as my legs could carry me. The undeniable discomfort of this text has, in part *I* think, possibly led certain churches to understand holy communion as a symbolic act, while some firmly adhere to the bread and wine being his actual body and blood, and others falling somewhere in between on the spectrum. This has resulted, sadly, in some pretty painful and destructive divisions within the body of Christ, as the disputing amongst ourselves continues still today.

As a seminary professor reasons though, “according to Jesus, at least in John, it’s not about what’s right or wrong, about certainty, about answering all of the questions correctly, but about relationship. Because [in this gospel], faith...is never a noun, but always a verb. Belief is not a thing but a living relationship with Jesus. The only thing to ‘get’ is that Jesus wants to be in a relationship with you. That’s the answer. That’s what’s ‘right.’” “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide in me, and I in them.*”

Not falling too far from the tree, we too want a domesticated gospel message. One that is easier to mass produce, simpler to store and use, and that gives rise to more pleasingly tangible results in a fraction of the time. We would rather toss the sour-smelling batter. Yet, God has kneaded into the world a wild proclamation. One that works according to the Lord’s time frame. One that generates a richer, more stimulating flavor and a significantly stronger texture. And one that requires the medium of relationship. A catalyst that has to be constantly maintained and monitored. One that deepens and grows as it is continually fed with worship, study, service and fellowship. One for which the untamable Messiah died and rose.

“Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. You may not comprehend *how* this takes place or what *exactly* it means, but, know this: I hunger to be bonded with you. As I daily and freely give myself to you, my life bubbles up within, activating the yeast of my undying grace. Grace that fills your emptiness. Grace that bakes a qualitatively better life, now and after death. Grace that is *not* diminished when shared with others, but rather is multiplied across this world that I so love. So come, abide in me as I abide in you.” Amen.