

Holy crumbs for a holy world

As the children make their way out the door, trails of leftover communion bread go with them.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue



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My favorite part of a communion service comes at the end, after the music and prayers and preaching, when worshipers wander around the sanctuary, filling the space with conversation. After the recession to the narthex I make my way back to the front, weaving in and out of congregants standing in the aisles.

At the altar I find crumpled and stained cloth napkins, silver dishes covered in crumbs, a little puddle of juice at the bottom of a cup. But I'm here for the bread, the remnants of those round loaves that were ripped in pieces and gently placed into

people's hands. I gather up what is left, cradling it in the crook of my arm. These are the leftovers, the communion bread that didn't get eaten during the great feast.

I'm a guest here, a Mennonite pastor working at a Methodist church. Over time I've learned the methods for how to care for this sacrament, the house rules—although some of these details spiral into more questions. On Sunday mornings I like to think of the consecration echoing to the sandwiches in the shop next door. I wonder if those holy words get into the muffin sitting on my desk. And when does the Holy Spirit evaporate from the elements? At the end of the day? Is it a calendar day, or by dusk are sacred mysteries fading away with the last light?

I do know this: when the ritual is over, we properly dispose of the bread. Here much is left open to interpretation. According to the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, the leftover elements are to be “consumed in a reverent manner” or returned to the earth by pouring, burying, or burning. The *Book of Worship* reminds us that “what is done with the remaining bread and wine should express our stewardship of God's gifts and our respect for the holy purpose they have served.”

At our church, this reverent consumption is interpreted for us by the children. After worship, they head back to the altar, too. While I'm gathering the fragments of bread, the children begin to gather around the rail, attempting patience.

I turn toward them, my arms full of bread. “Would you like some more?” They reach out their hands before I finish my question, and I tear off pieces of the loaves and give them away. The littlest ones peek from behind the legs of the grown-ups, cautiously waiting until I extend my hand with a piece of bread. Some lean out from the arms of mothers and fathers, steering their parents to me. A few other adults venture to the altar as well, and I tell them that they can have some, too. I want to give all the bread away, so I tear off large portions—not the bite-sized morsel of the communion service but a hunk with some weight, more than a mouthful.

The mysteries of bread have taught me that we have enough—for children and for sparrows.

Sometimes the kids get there before me, and when I arrive the bread is gone. I smile at their gleeful feast. Theirs is a devotion of desire, the devotion of those who wish to draw near for more. If only we were all so eager to receive Jesus, just as we are.

As they make their way out the door, trails of crumbs go with them, down the path to the parking lot, out into the world. I imagine those crumbs blown into the rosebushes and magnolia trees that line our sanctuary. I imagine them being found by the birds and squirrels. Holy shrubs, holy squirrels and sparrows, all touched by the *epiclesis*: “Pour out your Holy Spirit.” God’s body feeds the world—God’s body for children and flowers and earth.

A few months ago we started to make our own communion bread. A member of our church is a baker. She wanted to feel in her hands—to feel in the bread—how this holy, ordinary mystery comes into being.

One time we baked bread that barely made it to the table on time. We got the timing wrong, and the loaves emerged from the oven only minutes before our worship began. We paraded them to the altar during the opening hymn. The smell of baked crust filled the room, and our mouths watered throughout the service. When we held up the loaf and broke it, steam wafted above the altar, hovering for just a moment. A few worshipers looked at me with wide eyes as they closed their hands around the piece of bread I had given them. “It’s still warm!” the children whispered.

Another time a lone baker, new to making our communion bread, came in with a long face. “I’ve learned that parchment paper and waxed paper aren’t the same thing,” he confessed. We gently cut the waxy bottoms off the bread before placing it on the altar.

The youth of our church made the bread one week. The flat loaves appeared on Sunday morning, dark brown and thick. As people took the bread to their lips, I saw on their faces the shock of surprise. The bread was sweet. Afterward, one woman reminded me of Psalm 119: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”

One recipe we tried required no kneading. We mixed together ingredients—water, yeast, flour, and salt. Then we waited. It demanded no other help from us. The yeast would turn it into bread, though I wasn’t sure it would work.

A day later, when we came back to peer into the bowls, we saw the dough, doubled in size, bubbling up, dotted with holes from the fermentation, a process we did not control. It became bread, without my belief. We baked and broke and ate together.

Twice our bread did not rise at all. We found ourselves waiting in line at the 24-hour grocery store, Hawaiian bread in the plastic handcart.

Then there was the time we ran out of mixing bowls. We found a heavy cast-iron pot tucked in a back corner of a cupboard in the church kitchen. We placed the dough in it to rise overnight, and we talked about the church meals that had happened in this kitchen over the decades, the sauces and stews cooked in this pot—all the funeral receptions and wedding lunches, the Easter breakfasts and youth mission dinners, potlucks and summer camp snacks. The residue of those occasions of love and sorrow were being baked into our bread, infusing our communion.

We put the bread left over from communion to good use.

Sometimes, when the weather is good, we take the leftovers outside. The children follow me, and I tell them that we can give the bread to the birds. I let them break the half-eaten loaves into little pieces, specks of bread that we spread out in the yard for the cardinals and bluebirds. We run through the grass with the crumbs.

“I will make for you a covenant on that day,” says Hosea, “with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground.” A covenant with bird and worms—a covenant that is meant for us. As the birds peck at the ground, taking holy love into their winged bodies, I sense Hosea here with us. He laughs as he tosses out bread crumbs, bending down to see the whole world graced. This is the covenant of bread, crumbs under foot, now crushed and broken; this is the ordinary body of Christ, the common body on the cross, now food for the breadth of creation.

Hosea says this is a covenant that tells of the day when swords and shields, buzzing drones and suicide bombers, will be abolished from among us. I believe all of this to be true, for a moment.

The mysteries of the bread have taught me that we always have more than enough: enough for sparrows and children, for hospital beds and nursing homes, for postpartum mothers and sick teenagers. We have enough for the trees and for strangers, enough for roses and for one another. Here, the holy purpose the bread has served is also a covenant formed around and within us, God’s life in the roots of trees and the bellies of birds. There is enough for the entire world—trails of crumbs infusing all of it with the sacred love of God.

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