

SPREAD the LOVE**Introduction**

In past summers we have enjoyed a video lecture series about the history and culture of the culinary arts, recognizing that religious customs and rites often involve food. Obviously, as Christians, we are spiritually riveted to the Great Thanksgiving—the Eucharist—in which the priest consecrates ordinary bread and ordinary wine to become sacred. Through the intercession of the Holy Spirit—the term is, in Greek, the *Epiclesis*—the bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of Our Lord in a manner most mystical. So food and drink are clearly central to our faith! Recently a friend of mine who is a proclaimed unbeliever sent me a short tale about a modern day confluence of religious practice and food and beverage. I shall share it with you now:

Story

The people at Starbucks managed to arrange a meeting with the Pope at the Vatican. After receiving the papal blessing, the Starbucks official whispers, "Your Holiness, we have an offer for you. Starbucks is prepared to donate \$100 million to the church if you change the Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread' to 'give us this day our daily coffee'." The Pope responds, "That is impossible. The prayer is the word of the Lord. It must not be changed."

"Well," says the Starbucks man, "we anticipated your reluctance. For this reason we will increase our offer to \$300 million." The pope replied: "My son, it is impossible. For the prayer is the word of the Lord, and it must not be changed."

The Starbucks fellow says, "Your Holiness, we at Starbucks respect your adherence to the faith, but we do have one final offer: We will donate \$500 million - that's half a billion dollars - to the great Roman Catholic Church if you would only change the Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread' to 'give us

this day our daily coffee.' Please consider it." And he leaves.

The next day the Pope convenes the College of Cardinals. "There is some good news," he announces, "and some bad news. The good news is that the Church will come into \$500 million." "And the bad news, your Holiness?" inquires a Cardinal. The Pope replies: "We're going to lose the Wonder Bread account."

I think it's safe to say that we shall keep the traditional language "give us this day our daily bread," here at St. James!

Mustard Seed

Today's Gospel lesson uses a tiny food item to help us understand a bit more about the Kingdom of God. Mustard seeds are very small round seeds of various mustard plants. The seeds are about 1 or 2 mm in diameter. They are from the mustard plant, which is a cruciferous vegetable related to broccoli, brussel sprouts and even cabbage.

Mustard seeds can be traced to different areas of Europe and Asia. The white variety originated in the eastern Mediterranean regions, the brown variety is found in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains and the black variety comes from the Middle East. Obviously Jesus was quite familiar with the seeds and the plant. Imagine with me that Mary probably used mustard as a spice to enliven her cooking. The nutritional value of mustard is well documented, making it a highly desirable commodity then and now.

I learned with interest that mustard seeds are mentioned in ancient Sanskrit writing dating back about 5000 years ago. That precedes the New Testament example by 3000 years, so we can be confident that when Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a grain of mustard seed his listeners knew exactly what he was talking about.

Jesus acknowledges that the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; however, when it is sown it grows up and

becomes the greatest of all shrubs, putting out large branches. Why even the birds of the air make nests in its shade. This mustard seed, and plant, is therefore valuable and desirable. With it one finds nourishment and comfort. What a great message this parable of the mustard seed was to help ordinary Jewish people begin to comprehend that God's kingdom is not only benevolent, but generates magnificent blessings to all who make their home in the nest of God's love.

More about this parable

One aspect of this parable lies in its developmental character. By that I mean that Jesus spoke of someone scattering seed on the ground, which would sprout and grow. The earth nourishes the growing seed to reach its maturity. Then the time comes to harvest the mature plant with the sickle. It makes us think of the power of putting forth seeds—ideas—teachings—which will sprout in time.

Often we speak metaphorically of planting seeds with children and young people. Drop in an idea, teach ways of behaving ethically, make them familiar with religious concepts and imagination, help them discover roadways and paths of moral living, etc. Chaplains, in particular, use the language of planting seeds in their ministry with young people, and pray earnestly that the seeds of righteousness will indeed sprout!

Don't we as parents and grandparents do the same thing? We instill to the best of our ability the essence of our faith, the building blocks of healthy living and honesty, and we pray diligently for our children's safety and security in a most uncertain world.

Disciples

I believe that Jesus looked at those who followed him with a similar mindset: they may not have been literally his children, but the crowds who followed him and even his disciples, were spiritually immature regarding what God and God's grace was all about. Jesus was there with them teaching and

preaching that faith in God and faith in God's ways offered salvation—healing-- for their souls.

He distilled the message of love for all to hear. He scattered the seed of the Gospel by teaching the Summary of the Law: love God and love humankind—God's creation—as one loves him or herself. He showed them and us that if a little love is shown to one another it will sprout and spread and grow and produce an amazing result! Love begets love. Love overcomes discord and safeguards against cruelty and violence.

This is the message about the type of kingdom on this earth that Jesus was doing his level best to teach and model. He was not violent. He did not seek to bring harm to anyone. He preached and lived a model of peace even though he was not, as my mother would say, a "milquetoast."

Faith and love

It is customary to equate the imagery of the mustard seed with the scattering of faith. I ask you today to expand your imagination about this powerful mustard seed parable and consider it a story about love. Faith and love are companions to be sure, but as the great theologian Paul put it so beautifully in his first letter to the people of Corinth, in Chapter 13: "And now faith, hope and love abide, these three: and the greatest of these is love."

In conclusion on this Third Sunday after Pentecost, allow me to encourage you to embrace the gift of God's love and spread the seeds of that love everywhere. The frontman of the Dublin-based rock band U2, Paul David Hewson, better known as Bono, says it simply: "Spread the love!" Let's just do that. And do it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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