

Whose casserole? John 6:51-58

by [Paul Stroble](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

When my daughter was in grade school, her teacher included a unit on table manners. The rule that amused me was, “When served food, you should never ask, ‘What is *this*?’”

I don’t think I’ve asked that question aloud, but I’ve certainly thought it, especially at potlucks. What is this gray casserole? I can anticipate its quality if I can identify the cook, as one often can in smaller churches.

In John 6, Jesus alludes to the Israelites in the immediate post-Exodus days. As they proceed on their journey, the people despair over the wilderness and long for the plenty of Egypt. They search three days for drinkable water, only to find a bitter spring. They travel farther and still cannot find food. God has promised them a wonderful land, but this definitely isn’t it.

Eventually the Lord provides them with an unidentified flaky substance that sticks to the ground in the morning. Predictably, the people ask, “What is it? Is it edible? What’s its taste like?” The substance is known as manna, which can be translated as “What is it?” (Exod. 16:15).

Manna was sufficient for the people’s needs. It was not, however, sufficient food for eternal life. It was food, period. Jesus contrasts manna with another kind of food, the bread of life.

It is human nature to want to know what food we’re being served. So I ask a similar question of Jesus: What is “the bread of life,” the flesh and blood of Jesus which is “the living bread that came down from heaven”?

We hear these words eucharistically, of course, and that is proper. But let’s for a moment think about broader, related meanings. The word *bread* can also stand for sustenance; in the Lord’s Prayer, our *daily bread* generally means “what we need for life.” *Flesh and blood* can also mean a vital, actual life. So Jesus’ bread of life is his own life, his own vitality. He gives us his life freely. He gives us grace for living. He gives us access to God, forgiveness of our sins, eternal life and much more. We

share life with him more deeply than we share our lives with our relatives and friends.

I'm going through the process of moving my elderly mother to a nursing home and selling her house and belongings. Her house is my childhood home. Since I'm an only child and Mom lives in another state, this process has been logistically complicated as well as emotionally distressing for everyone. But I quickly sent e-mails to several friends all over the country, asking them to pray for my mother and me. I've found grace, peace and a sense of the living Christ amid a difficult situation.

There have been other times in my life, though, when I felt much more lost and uncertain. Although Jesus' bread is life-giving, sometimes we don't *feel* satisfied. I don't want to be flippant and say, "If you don't feel close to God—guess who moved." For whatever reasons, our needs don't seem to be met. Like the Israelites, we feel that God has let us down somehow.

In my own spiritual path, sometimes I've confused manna for living bread. Both are God-given, but manna doesn't nourish indefinitely. Think of manna as the aspects of the church life that are suitable and grace-full but fleeting. Manna is the preaching style of a certain pastor whom you love (but what do you do when a new pastor comes along with a different style)? Manna is the program ministry of the congregation, or the church's music, wonderful and beneficial but sometimes a source of disagreement. Manna is the small group to which you're attached—but people move away and the group magic disappears. Manna is the congregation that you love—that you'd rather would never change. And what if a crisis in your congregation brings out the worst in the people you trusted as spiritual models? Our walk with Christ can be hampered, even ruined, when we allow impermanent aspects of church to define our spiritual journey.

Christ's living bread is quite adaptable to all kinds of circumstances; Christ feeds us anywhere, anytime, in all of the ways I've listed and more. (A favorite book of mine, one that helps readers evaluate ways they grow spiritually, is Corinne Ware's *Discover Your Spiritual Type*.) Christ is our constant benefactor. When we receive his sustenance, we find hope in difficult situations. Amid serious problems, we find solutions that hadn't been there before. Lovely people come into our lives unexpectedly. Not least of all, we receive the peace which allows us to perceive God's grace rather than to become stuck in our unhappiness and our preconceived notions.

Another mistake that I've made over the years is to think that Christ's bread is something that will "take" over the long haul if I'm sufficiently spiritual. "My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink," but eating and drinking is something we must do continually. Again, we can think of this eucharistically, or we can think broadly of the need to abide in Christ—a lovely old word which means to wait upon or dwell with.

That may be one reason why the Israelites, at the early stage of their journey, had difficulty trusting God. Impressive though the Lord's miracles had been, the people hadn't the long-term relationship with God that makes for a deeper trust. Just as we trust the excellent cook to prepare a fine meal, we can trust in Christ's living bread as we abide in him over the journey.