

The dessert of life?

A treat can be nice, but it's hardly daily bread.

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

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The month of August heralds one of my favorite saints. St. Lawrence was one of seven deacons of the church in Rome in the third century. Lawrence was the church treasurer. His job included the distribution of charity and caring for church properties. In 257, the emperor Valerian launched his persecution of the church. He seized all church property and forbade people from gathering to worship. On August 4, 258, the bishop of Rome and six deacons were discovered and arrested at a

cemetery where they had gathered to worship in secret. They were all executed and conveniently buried right in the cemetery. Lawrence alone was left alive, because Valerian wanted to get his hands on the church's treasury. Lawrence was tortured to get him to reveal the treasury's location.

Lawrence finally agreed to gather the riches together from varied locations, insisting that he needed three days to do it. The emperor and his officials believed this, assuming that the treasure was very great. Lawrence used the time to give away everything to help the poorest of the poor in Rome. He then gathered the lepers, orphans, and widows, the blind and the lame and other poor people of the city. When the emperor came and demanded the church's treasury, Lawrence opened the door to where these poor and marginalized people were gathered. "Here is the treasure of the church!" he said.

The enraged emperor had Lawrence killed in Rome on August 10, when he was only 33 years old, the age of Jesus at his death. "Where your treasure is," said Jesus, "there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21).

In the sixth century, Gregory of Tours wrote an account of the lives of holy men and women, recording any miracles attributed to them. Of Lawrence, he wrote that during a church building project, the priest overseeing the work found himself with nothing to feed the workers. After praying to St. Lawrence, he discovered that a previously empty basket held a fresh loaf of bread. While one loaf was not enough to feed the men, the priest shared it around anyway, and it multiplied to feed all of the workers for ten days.

For those who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, this is the summer of bread. I am reminded of a talk I once heard when I attended seminary in Argentina. Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves was visiting and spoke with the students. Alves, who died in 2014, was one of the founders of Latin American liberation theology. I clearly remember the title of his talk: "El Evangelio No Es Un Postre!" The gospel is not a dessert! I can no longer remember how he developed this theme, but we can use our own imaginations based on Alves's evocative title.

Food pyramids have changed over the years, but one thing has remained constant. Dessert, unless you're talking about fresh fruit, is not foundational for the food pyramid. Nutritionists might like to ban it altogether, but let's be real. Who doesn't love dessert? Most of us do, and quite a few put Jesus in the dessert category, but

not because of an abundance of love for him. There are many problems with thinking about the gospel as a dessert.

We don't need dessert, but it can be a nice extra—if we have room for it after everything else we've consumed. Then there are desserts saved for special occasions—hardly daily bread.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that dessert comes at the end of the meal, what we might call pie-in-the-sky Christianity. That expression comes from a song written by Joe Hill in 1911. Hill was a labor organizer with migrant workers. When he faced a brand of religion that dismissed labor organizing and promoted a wholly otherworldly salvation, Hill wrote a song called “The Preacher and the Slave” that begins like this:

Long-haired preachers come out every night,  
Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;  
But when asked how 'bout something to eat  
They will answer in voices so sweet  
You will eat, bye and bye,  
In that glorious land above the sky;  
Work and pray, live on hay,  
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

Jesus' message, as I understand it (with help from Martin Luther), is that the next world is taken care of for us, and so we are freed to focus our energies and treasures on caring for those in need in this world.

In *Night*, Elie Wiesel's memoir about his concentration camp imprisonment as a teenager, he writes that the Nazis determined bread to be the only food that would keep people on the edge of life, with just enough energy to perform slave labor. Bread was rationed out in portions to keep most people right above the level of starvation. “Bread. This was my whole life,” writes Wiesel. “I was a body. Perhaps less than that even, a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time.”

Time was marked by access to bread. That is how millions of fellow humans mark their time this very day. Jesus calls us to their side to mark our time according to that hunger. To carry that hunger with us to the altar—hunger for justice, peace, and love. The gospel is not a dessert. “I am the bread of life,” says Jesus. “Here is the treasure of the church,” said Lawrence. We can go and do likewise.