When I was a little girl growing up in Pennsylvania there was a storyteller, named Robin Moore, who would tour elementary schools across the state, telling 200 year old stories from the time when my part of Pennsylvania was the “Western frontier” for Europeans.

Some of his stories were fanciful folktales like the one about the woman who turned into a coyote at night and would unravel her human skin like so much spiral bound leather.

And some of his stories were based in the history of the early Europeans of Central Pennsylvania, like the character of Maggie Callahan, who became the feature of three young adult novels.

The first of Maggie’s books is called, *The Bread Sister of Sinking Creek*.

Moore tells us, seven generations of Callahan women had possessed the family secret that allowed them to make bread good enough that people clamored for it wherever they went. Now Maggie’s time had come. She traveled fourteen days over stony trail on a pack animal.
only to find that her aunt and uncle had packed up and moved on to the Ohio Valley.

Aunt Franny left a note inviting Maggie to follow when she can, and she also left Maggie’s strange inheritance, a carefully wrapped pouch of “spook yeast,” what you might know as sourdough starter for making the Callahan women’s favored loaves of bread.

With winter coming on,

Maggie cannot follow her aunt and she has no family to return to from where she came.

So, she is forced to hire herself out to the foul-tempered Mrs. McGrew, whom she helps with housework and childcare.

On the side though, the legend of the Callahan women’s bread-baking talents remains among the people with whom she has settled.

And with a little practice and a little luck,

she finds she is able to support herself rather well with the secret pouch of yeast around her neck.

The bread keeps her going.

It gives her hope of a new life, of earning enough money to prepare for passage to find her aunt in OH.

It gives her solace too, as she follows her aunt’s scribbled teaching to take her troubles to the bread, finding the kneading of each loaf a wonderful release of all the sorrow and frustration she holds within her.

Finally, when she begins her trek
into the “wilds,”
   it will be the bread that physically sustains her.

She speaks of the yeast that lives in the pouch around her neck
   as living beings, as indeed they are,
but moreover she ascribes to them a level of spiritual significance
   perhaps even a certain magic, in the best sense of the word,
carrying as they do both her inheritance
   and her hope for survival.

Living into her identity as “bread sister”
   gives Maggie new life and new hope
   when she needs it most.

In today’s text Jesus teaches that he is the “bread of life”
   and that “whoever comes to him will never be hungry”
   “whoever believes in him will never be thirsty.”

By this I don’t think Jesus is promising
   a life on this earth without food or drink.

I think he is talking about the kind of life-saving promise
   Maggie Callahan found in that pouch of spook yeast
   her Aunt left behind for her.

It’s that kind of bread
   that feeds our bodies, minds, and spirits
   --that keeps us going
   through our hungriest days and thirstiest hours

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Jesus calls himself the bread of life
and teaches his followers they must eat his body and drink his blood
in order to find life.

It’s an odd metaphor, and, as you might imagine, in the lines that follow today’s scripture,
we find that followers of Jesus were pretty grossed out by that suggestion.

It’s hard to say exactly how they would have understood it.
Those original hearers may well have had in mind sacrifices made to Yahweh by the priests
on the altar in the Temple, the likes of which only God was said to consume,
making this a hard and confusing teaching indeed.

Or, they may have heard Jesus’ words quite literally,
suggesting an actual cannibalistic act.

Whatever it was exactly that disturbed them,
the numbers of people following Jesus quickly dropped.

Only a few followers remained at Jesus’ side,
those called, yet imperfect 12 disciples.

So, Jesus asks them, “Do you also wish to turn away?”

Peter answers him, “Lord, to whom can we go?
You have the words of eternal life.”

You get the feeling that maybe Peter would leave too if he could.
Maybe some days we feel a bit like Peter.
After all, it’s not so popular in the US any more to be Christian,
especially amongst the youngest of us.
Yet, if you are sitting here today,
you are likely one of those of us
who just can’t get away from this tradition,
this way of life that struggles with the life, death, and promises of Jesus.

Why can’t we quit you Jesus?
Is it something in the bread?
What are we looking for?

Perhaps we too, like Peter,
are hanging on for those words of eternal life.

Maybe we too are hanging on
because we know there is something here with Jesus
and in this Jesus-following tradition that will save our souls.

Maybe we too are hanging on
for the kind of salve, deep wisdom, and sacredness
that truly heals us in this life
and at times seems so deep it can feel as though
we have touched eternity itself.

Kneading bread is hard work.
It is easy to quit. It is easy to buy it from the store.
But some people still bake bread.
For some, it is the hard work that makes it worth it.
In the kneading, in the sinking one’s hands down into the dough
and engaging the muscles
that’s where the healing can be found.

Jesus himself makes the connection between bread and flesh.
With two thousand years of Christian history and practice behind us,
we may jump quickly to hearing this teaching
as a setting out of the practice of communion.

But if it is that, it is a more common place, and I think, breathtaking practice
than it is often given credit.

Remember that we are reading from the Gospel of John, which claims early on that in Jesus
“God became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

Eating Jesus’ flesh and blood,
if only in the symbol of bread and cup,
ought to give us pause
that what we take in is that of God made flesh.

In this vein, Vernard Eller,
Church of the Brethren scholar of the last century,
writes about Jesus’ ordinance of communion in the gospels,
particularly in John, this fleshy book.
He claims that it is any time that we are gathered,
eating and drinking, sharing and worshipping together
that we may find Christ in our midst,
that we may consider ourselves in a way at communion,
remembering the way that God has become flesh
and moved into our own neighborhoods and our own hearts.

I know that I have already found nourishment
not just for my body, but also for my soul
in sharing a meal with all of you,
whether it is at a picnic or in one of your homes for dessert
or gathered for communion or love feast.
I have found there is something that happens when we break bread.
Even if life has been hard lately,
or if Jesus’ teachings seem strange,
or if community seems strained,
those moments
can be times when a large or small part of me is often moved to say
“Ah, there you are, Jesus,”
in the laughter shared,
in the plate passed
in the truth unloaded
in the thanks expressed
in the love spread.

One way to start your own spook yeast or sourdough starter
is to set out a clean glass jar
with a little bit of water and a little bit of sugar.

If you’re lucky and patient some of the wild yeast
that are in the air will begin to collect and grow.

If you’re lucky enough to have a several generation’s old
sourdough starter to pass on,
well then, you are quite lucky indeed,
and set up well to make some delicious bread.

If you sit here today, like Maggie Callahan,
you are recipients of generations who have walked this way of life,
recipients of this tradition of following Jesus,
gifted by others who have come before with
something very much like that pouch of spiritual spook yeast.

Those who have come before have smoothed these pews,
written these hymns,  
and passed down a particular flavor of bread.

But we don’t have to be only recipients.  
We can be bakers. We can be sharers.  
We can be those who carry that yeast to the next generation.

At the beginning of John chapter 6,  
the disciples are engaged in the feeding of the five thousand.  
Jesus tells them to pass around 5 barley loaves and two fish  
and they bring back 12 baskets full of leftovers.

When they start passing those baskets, they don’t know what’s going to happen,  
but they do it anyway, and they are overwhelmed by what happens.

They don’t make the bread. They just pass it out.  
They don’t multiply it. They just marvel at it.

We too can join in that work,  
feeding ourselves and feeding others.

When we find ourselves in the wilds of life,  
In those times  
we have no other choice  
but to draw on all that we have been given,  
all that we are made of,  
all that we have been fed  
and find something there upon which to build  
something from which to knead bread for new life.

Everyday in our city and across our world, there is someone hungry and thirsty,
whether that hunger is an empty stomach
or for a world without violence,
whether that thirst is for love, dignity, and justice,
or for a deep connection to the Holy.

We who carry this bread of life close to our hearts,
    I pray we may find within us the kindness and love
    that stirs us to feed others with the bread of life too,
    the kind that may even give us the reputation
    of bread sister, bread brother, bread sibling,
    carrier of that sacred tradition.

I pray that when we break bread together
    we will taste of the presence of Christ in our midst.

May it be so. Amen.