

Be what you see; receive what you are.

About a week after my husband Hayne and I moved into our apartment in Munich in 2004, Frau Hagenburger, the lady from across the hall, came over to our apartment one afternoon to introduce herself. She and my husband chatted for a bit while I simply stood there, smiling and nodding along – not having a clue what they were talking about. Before she left, she handed me a couple of dinner rolls and a Barbie-sized salt shaker, held my hand for a moment, and shyly said “Welcome” in English.

Seven years later, not long after we moved into an apartment in another part of Munich, an older couple stopped me one morning on my walk home after dropping my girls off at Kindergarten. Once they realized I had no idea what they were saying, they switched to English. We exchanged a few pleasantries, and since I was from the States, they asked if I knew their cousin in New Jersey or their friend in California. Um, nope. Sorry. They seemed a bit disheartened, but they handed me a bag over the fence and said ‘Welcome.’ The bag contained a loaf of bread and a small container of salt.

As many of you know, we moved back to Munich in 2014. I arranged a playdate with some of our English-speaking friends several days after our arrival, and we were given (yet again) a loaf of bread and some salt. I asked what the deal was (I couldn't help myself). Now you are probably more culturally savvy than I am and already know this, but as it turns out this is an old Bavarian housewarming tradition: the bread representing the wish that we have all of our needs met while in our home – that we will be healthy and nourished and feel satisfied with the substance of our lives. And the salt indicating their wish that we have a bit of our wants satisfied as well – but not too many, as too much salt can ruin the flavor of one's food, too many of our wants being fulfilled can lead to the ruin of one's appreciation for the simpler pleasures in life.

Apparently, a housewarming gift of bread and salt is a well-known tradition throughout many parts of Europe. Which – come to think of it - also explains

the odd looks I had gotten when I greeted newcomers with a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

Bread is a universal symbol for life. It represents not just food, but also health, nourishment and community.

St. Augustine of Hippo, one of our most highly-revered early church fathers, preached a sermon on the sacramental symbolism of bread and wine. He preached, "Listen to what Paul says about this sacrament: "The bread is one, and we, though many, are one body." [1 Cor. 10.17] "One bread," Paul says. What is this one bread? Is it not the "one body," formed from many? Remember: bread doesn't come from a single grain, but from many. When you [confessed your sins], you were "ground [up]." When you were baptized with water, you were "leavened." When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit, you were "baked."<sup>1</sup>

St. Augustine points out that grains must first be crushed [the Latin verb *contritionem* is the word he uses...contrition...contrite], moistened with water to form a loaf, and finally endure great heat before it can come into being. Bread then speaks of both pain and joy, death and life.

Likewise, the wine, too, has double meaning, according to St. Augustine. On the one hand, it is a festive drink – a timeless symbol of celebration and joy. It has nothing to do with nourishment or necessity, "but an extra that speaks of what lies beyond the hard business of making and sustaining a living. Wine speaks of friendship, community, celebration, joy, recreation, victory. We celebrate everything, not least of all love, with wine."<sup>2</sup>

St. Augustine points out that grapes, not unlike the heads of grain, are crushed. Grapes hang together in a bunch, but the juice of them all is mingled to make one single brew. The essence of the grapes, becomes the substance out of which this festive drink is fermented. Likewise, it is through the blood of Christ that we are redeemed.

I want to point out that Jesus is not instituting the sacrament of the Eucharist here: the Last Supper hasn't happened yet. However, we draw much of our Eucharistic language and understanding from this passage and this imagery.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine\\_sermon\\_272\\_eucharist.htm](http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272_eucharist.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [http://liturgy.slu.edu/19OrdB081218/reflections\\_rolheiser.html](http://liturgy.slu.edu/19OrdB081218/reflections_rolheiser.html)

So it makes sense that Jesus would choose these simple, ordinary objects of bread and wine to represent his body.

They represent everything in life and in the world that is young, vital, beautiful, bursting with energy and full of potential. They symbolize the goodness and fertility of the earth as well as the completeness of human enjoyment that God intends for us.

Yet at the same time, the sacramental elements of bread and wine also show forth the sacrifice of all that is ground up, crushed, and baked by violence.<sup>3</sup> Through the Eucharistic feast, we hold up not only that which is whole and fulfilled and complete, but also that which has been brought about by failure, brokenness, and grief.

“We see in the Eucharist both (1) the goodness and joy of life and (2) the pains and shortcomings of that same life. This is the same tension that we need to hold up each day within our ordinary lives.”<sup>4</sup>

When we can live from a place of acceptance that hardship *and joy* are simply part of how life is, when we reconcile ourselves to the reality that we are simultaneously sinful and redeemed, broken and yet made whole, we embody the paradox of the Eucharist.

In a few minutes, we will hold out our hands and get a piece of bread. What we receive is far more than what we are given to eat. It has been ground up, mixed with water, baked by the heat of fire. It is offered to *us*, for *us* to consume for the sake of eternal nourishment.

We will then drink a few drops of wine. What we are offered is more than what we are given to drink. Crushed, mingled with the juice of other grapes, and ultimately poured out – by God – for our eternal benefit, in joy and thanksgiving for relationship with *us*.

St. Augustine has an interesting paraphrase of Jesus’ words regarding bread and wine: Be what you see; receive what you are.<sup>5</sup> I love that: be what you see – be that bread and wine in the world; contrite, doused with water, and baked in the fire of the Holy Spirit – crushed, mingling with the lives of others, and

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<sup>4</sup> [http://liturgy.slu.edu/19OrdB081218/reflections\\_rolheiser.html](http://liturgy.slu.edu/19OrdB081218/reflections_rolheiser.html)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine\\_sermon\\_272\\_eucharist.htm](http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272_eucharist.htm)

poured out for the benefit of all mankind. And then dare to be bold enough to receive what you are: sanctified, redeemed, whole.

Jesus calls us to live as his body in the world. As we are fed with living bread and blood, we (in all our own sanctified brokenness) are to serve as those who nourish the world. In doing so, we are assured that we will live – truly *live* – by having fed our souls on the feast of God’s abundant blessings and self-offering. Because that’s who we are: we are fed with God’s self-offering, we are made perfect, and we are promised an eternity of union and communion with God.

So it seems that Jesus, too, in the form of bread and wine, has given us an ongoing housewarming gift of sorts. More of a continually life-warming gift, really. God has given us all that we need, and then some. We have been welcomed home. We are nourished and blessed, and in turn, we are to nourish and bless others ~ and we are to welcome others home, too.

Be what you see; receive what you are.