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body of christ in a handbag by carol penn-romine

The body of Christ is in my purse, and I don't know what to do about it.

Every minister has a different communion style, and recently, the guest in our pulpit broke a piece of bread off the loaf and handed it to each communicant, who was then to dip it in the common cup and eat. My problem began when the minister tore off and handed me a piece that was big enough to support a meatball sandwich. It was essentially the heel of the loaf, and it came off in one gargantuan slab.

What are you supposed to do when this happens? Hand it back and ask for another? Stuff the entire piece into your mouth and look like you've contracted mumps as you creep back to your seat? Or munch away like a squirrel and try to polish it off before the closing hymn? I bit off the part that was soaked in grape juice and palmed the rest, slipping it into the side pocket of my purse when I got back to my pew.

Now I don't know what to do with the rest of the body of Christ that's nestled in with my sunglasses and car keys. It's been riding around with me all week, and I keep encountering it in the grocery, at the bank, in a meeting. I can't bring myself to chuck it into the garbage can. That seems somehow disrespectful. We Protestants hold that the bread's significance is symbolic, so why can't I toss out what is essentially a scrap of stale bread? Is it mere superstition? Am I concerned, somewhere in the depths of my soul, that if I toss this bit of stale bread into the trash some bad luck will befall me, that I'll roast in hell or, worse, that I'll spend eternity playing Scrabble with Pat Robertson (or even worse than that, Twister with Karl Rove)? If I were Catholic, this problem would never have arisen, because the priest would have placed a tiny, uniformly sized unleavened wafer on my tongue and that would have been the end of it.

This was not a problem in the church where I grew up. During communion back then, the body of Christ was presented to us as Chicklet-sized and shaped bits of crust that looked like fish

food—there's an interesting symmetry there—and registered on the palatability scale somewhere between an oyster cracker and hardtack. I haven't seen those little squares on the communion plate since Methuselah had acne, since it's more fashionable nowadays to receive the body of Christ from a common loaf of bread.

With the proliferation of gourmet and artisanal breads during the past few years, dozens of options await those who wander the grocery early on Sunday morning in search of a communion loaf, the alluring fresh-bread aroma drawing us further and further down the aisle and playing havoc with our sleep-addled brains. When I was a child, the most exotic bread on the shelf was Roman Meal, but something tells me that choice would be in very poor taste for communion. (Unless, of course, Roman Meal was actually made of finely ground Romans, in which case there would be poetic justice.)

The trouble is, these fancy breads can cause problems never envisioned by their bakers. Once the minister broke open the loaf during communion to discover that it was filled with whole garlic cloves that had been baked into it. There was nothing to do but continue, he decided, so that Sunday communion was a gourmet affair. While it was disconcerting, he concluded that the upsides of the garlicky loaf were that it made the sanctuary smell like an Italian restaurant and that many of the communicants got back in line for another round.

Then there was the Sunday of the parbaked loaf, a bread that is, as its name suggests, only partially baked, the theory being that if you finish baking it at home, you'll have fresh bread, plus your house will smell as if you have done all the work yourself. Not knowing that he was grasping a crust filled with raw bread dough, the minister broke it open and executed a perfect pizza commercial "cheese pull." When I stepped up and pinched off a gob of dough and dipped it into the cup, the fruit of the vine rolled right off. I vowed to double dip next time.

Episcopalians take the safe route by providing the recipe for bread contributors to use, while the rest of us Protestants just wing it. Those of us charged with picking up a communion loaf on the way to church approach the task with fear and trembling. Some breads tear easily and dip into the cup without disintegrating, while others, particularly sourdough loaves, put up a fight. Some melt the instant they hit the juice, so that the last few people in line for communion face what looks like grapey gruel by the time they reach the altar. And some—as I well know—have heel portions that are tough enough to resole shoes. Which brings me back to that scrap of stale bread in my purse.

This morning I again encountered the body of Christ, this time in a parking lot. When I reached in to get my car keys, out came the bread. Next to the car loitered a couple of pigeons looking for a handout. Since these are my least favorite birds, it felt right to feed them and erase some of the ill will I'd directed their way over the years.

"Hey guys, body of Christ," I intoned as I tore the bread in half and lobbed the pieces at the pigeons. I noticed a woman get out of her SUV and try not to make eye contact with me as she scurried for the store entrance with an ever-quickening step.

Leaving those sanctified birds to polish off the body of Christ, I drove away in search of the fruit of the vine to help lubricate my thoughts as I pondered the mysteries of communion. Perhaps there really is something to be said for sacramental fish food.

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