

We grew wheat at the garden this year!

‘Garden Thoughts’ about this experience have been begging for attention from me for



months now, but I put them off over and over again daunted by the prospect of writing a reflection on bread, something so familiar and a symbol so well-known. As I prayed with the experiences of our wheat, I found myself wishing that every parish could grow their own patch in which the people of the parish could participate in the creation of bread, a process with which Jesus must have been familiar. Rather than offering too many ‘thoughts’ this time, I’d simply like to share this experience because after being immersed in it, I will never quite look at bread in the same way.

The process began for us two years ago when we visited Amber Waves, a wheat farm out east on Long Island, and received helpful information from one of the farmers. The following July, we turned over the earth and planted buckwheat – a leggy cover crop with clumps of small white flowers that prepared the soil for the wheat. Before it went to seed, we cut the buckwheat and mixed it back into the earth where it would break down and further enrich the soil. When October arrived, it was time to plant the wheat seed –



soft white winter wheat.

We did this in rows that in a week or so began to emerge as small green shoots. Nurtured by soil, water and sun, the roots established themselves as the grass-like stalks reached up into the air that was getting cooler each day. With the arrival of winter, the young wheat died back and remained hidden under the blanket of snow that enveloped us until April. As days warmed and light grew, so did the wheat – newly emerging in the spring. Nourished, still, by the rain, the sun, the air and the life in the soil, the wheat grew to several feet and in time turned the golden amber color that comes to mind when we think of the

rolling wheat fields of Kansas. July returned, the year having gone full circle, and the seed heads bowed to the earth signifying that the harvest time was upon us

When I think of harvesting wheat, Millet's 'The Gleaners' is what I envision, and I



secretly wish for one of those long dresses with a large-pocketed apron to wear. Our reaping scene didn't look quite that romantic with our jeans and t-shirts in the hot summer sun, yet it was profound and widened our circle of relationship as neighbors and friends joined us to help. First, we cut and gathered the wheat together into sheaves. This worked best in teams of two – one person gathering the stems together and the other cutting. Next, we made several trips to the barn where the bundles of wheat would be stored to dry. Threshing the wheat, or separating the grain from the stalks, took place several weeks later. Initially, we tried threshing it by banging it with long wooden broom handles. Some of the grain was dislodged, but it did not seem to be a very effective method. Before long we discovered that rubbing the heads between our hands was much more efficient and collected more



of the wheat berries. The chickens loved the long tillers of wheat that were leftover after the threshing. When we completed this step, we had a five gallon bucket full of wheat berries, but we still had to winnow the wheat to separate it from the chaff. This involved the use of a fan or a moderate breeze as we poured the wheat from one bucket to another. In this way, light chaff blew away and the heavier wheat fell into the bottom bucket into which it was being poured. After that, we strained it through an invention of Ernie's - a huge box with a thin screen so that the little pieces of sand or dirt would fall through.



Next, we washed it in small portions and allowed it to dry before grinding it in our little hand mill. It takes quite a while (and some bicep endurance) to grind out one cup of flour. A decent sized loaf of bread uses four. When we amassed our first four cups, we began the four hour process of making bread - mixing flour, water, oil, yeast and salt, kneading the dough, waiting for it to rise, punching it down and putting it in the oven. Finally, we baked a loaf of bread and shared it.

From soil to sharing, this experience has illustrated to me just what we are doing when we break bread together. Making bread is no easy feat, and it involves so many hands. When we broke our first loaf of bread, we were being fed by all of those who helped to sow, reap, thresh, winnow, grind, knead and bake. We were fed by the sun and soil. We were fed by time and from those who grew wheat and saved seed for generations before us. I think of Jesus blessing bread and breaking it.



He must have known all of this. He must have known that when he broke the bread, he was breaking something that was inseparable from community and fully united with the earth. "This is my body," he said, this bread baked by women with flour ground from seed planted by people and formed by the earth, "This is my body." When I pray with this story of the Last Supper and see bread in Jesus' hands, I see the world that made that bread. I hear him say, "This is my body," as he breaks the earth in two, "given for you. Take. Eat. Remember

Heather Ganz

