

Lent 5 Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Last month, a box of bagels became the latest image to break the internet.

The bagels in question were purchased at a Panera in Saint Louis.
Well, I've eaten Panera bagels,
and while they're not my favorites, they're not bad bagels.
The problem with these particular bagels was how they were sliced.
The bagels were not sliced in half horizontally.
No, they were sliced vertically,
so that each bagel yielded about eight thin slices –
or more, if you count the smaller slices on either side of the hole.

The photo was posted on Twitter by Saint Louis businessman Alek Krautmann,
along with this tweet
“Today I introduced my coworkers to the St. Louis secret
of ordering bagels ‘bread sliced.’ It was a hit!”

I confess I was taken aback when I saw the photo.
It never would have occurred to me to slice a bagel like that.
I'm such a creature of habit when it comes to food.
But apparently the vertically-sliced bagel
is a popular thing in Missouri.
Who knew?

But if my reaction was one of mild surprise,
much of the rest of the Internet erupted in horror.
Such an abomination could not be tolerated!

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” one person tweeted back.
“How dare you sully those bagels,” said another.
“Stop attacking food, you monster,” said a third.
A fourth declared that “This feels like something that should get a person
sent to Gitmo.” One bakery worker responded that if someone asked him to
slice bagels like that, he'd refuse.

“I have standards,” he said.
 “Beg God for forgiveness,” someone else proclaimed.

Within a day, the post had gone viral,
 and the whole world started weighing in.
 It did not go well for Mr. Krautmann’s box of bagels.
 One prominent rabbi wrote
 that all Jews should come together
 to declare that bagels must not be abused like this.
 Then a Moslem cleric joined the conversation,
 and declared that, on this one matter, he stood in solidarity with the Jews.

In all the bagel-related backlash over the next few days,
 I only saw one soul brave enough
 to publicly declare that maybe, just maybe,
 changing the way we slice bagels
 isn’t such a bad idea after all.

Liel Liebovitz, a senior writer for *Tablet Magazine*,
 and a contributor to the book “The 100 Most Jewish Foods,”
 wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Post*
 defending the vertically-sliced bagel.

“As a Jew of noble proportions,
 who lives life from schmear to schmear,
 I am giddy to side with the St. Louis slicer,” Mr. Liebovitz wrote.
 “In one masterful stroke of the knife,
 that nameless hero toiling behind the counter
 did something I never imagined possible:
 He or she made bagels interesting again.”

When you think about it,
 changing the way we slice our bagels
 really *does* make a lot of sense.
 Who needs all the carbs and all the calories
 that come with eating bagels the traditional way?
 But slice it differently, into thin bagel sections,
 and you still get a mouthful of yeasty goodness.
 It still tastes like bagel.
 But it goes further.

And it's better for you.
It's a bagel configured for *our* times,
designed to meet the dietary needs of 21st century urban dwellers,
rather than the 17th century Polish farmers who invented them.

I don't know about you,
but I'm thinking those St. Louis bagel slicers
are sort of like prophets.
Because really, what is a prophet
but someone who glimpses the future
and acts on it,
before the rest of us realize what's happening.

Like Isaiah, who says
"Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing."

Prophets are always doing crazy things.
Even crazier than slicing a bagel vertically like bread.
Isaiah, for instance,
who wrote some of the most beautiful passages in the Bible,
once stripped off all his clothes and wandered around naked...
for three years.

Jeremiah once fastened a cattle yoke to his shoulders
and wore that for quite a while.

But hands-down, the craziest prophet had to be Ezekiel.
Ezekiel once drew a picture of Jerusalem under siege
on a clay tablet.
Then he lay down on his left side
with an iron pan separating him from the tablet.
He lay that way for 390 days.
Then he rolled over on his right side
and did the same thing for 40 more days.

No, seems nobody is as crazy as a prophet.

When you look at all the crazy things prophets have done
our Gospel account of Mary of Bethany
breaking open an expensive jar of perfume
and pouring it all over Jesus' feet
doesn't sound *so* outrageous, does it?

Still, Judas was right.

That nard could have bought a lot of meals for hungry children.
His reasons for pointing that out
may have been sneaky and underhanded
but that doesn't make his point any less valid.
Perfumed feet is not high on anybody's list of wise stewardship practices.
It WAS a crazy thing to do.

But here's the thing:

Just like Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jeremiah before her,
Mary of Bethany was a prophet.
We don't normally think of her as a prophet.
Normally, we just think of her as one half of a sister act.
But Mary was, indeed, a prophet in her own way.
And her crazy act of extravagance was a prophetic act.

It symbolized something that God wanted people to know.
It symbolized Jesus's coming death.
And beyond that, it was an extraordinary act of love.
By wiping his feet with her hair,
Mary foreshadowed Jesus's own act
of washing the feet of his disciples,
on the night he was betrayed,
just a few days after this meal in Bethany.
Maybe he got the idea from Mary.

But Judas just didn't understand.

He didn't understand the meaning of Christ's incarnation.
How could he?

In Christ, God was doing a new thing.

A thing that had never been done before.

In Christ, the Word became flesh

and came and dwelt among the poor and needy of the world.

Christ came not simply to give a few coins to the hungry.
He came to give the bread of life to the world.

What that means for those of us who follow him
is that we know our task isn't finished
when we've filled baskets for the poor at Thanksgiving
or donated socks and underwear for the St. Francis Center –
though that's a good start.

What it means is that we're called to live our whole lives
as servants in behalf of a needy world.
At times, that may mean we're called to do crazy things:
Things that appear foolish,
things that should get a person sent to Gitmo.

Maybe right now, God has laid it on your heart to do something,
something crazy,
something your kids are gonna complain about,
something your friends will criticize,
something Twitter could explode over.

But maybe, just maybe, like Mary,
or like that Saint Louis bagel slicer,
you shouldn't listen to any of that.
“Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old,” God says.
“I am about to do a new thing.”

What new thing might be about to happen in your life?
What if all you have to do is stop looking at your life horizontally,
and change your perspective,
and look at it vertically.
What if your life doesn't have to change dramatically,
it just gets sliced a little bit differently?
What if that's all it takes to make life interesting again?

So, you see, there's more than one way to slice a bagel.
And there's more than one way
for the bread of life to make its way
into the hands of a needy, hungry world.

Maybe if we just let down our hair,
and slice what we have a little bit differently,
that would make all the difference.

Because you never know when God is about to do a new thing.
Our God is hard at work, even as we speak,
making a way in the wilderness,
and charting rivers through the desert.
Forgetting what lies behind,
and straining forward to what lies ahead,
we press on toward the goal,
for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.
God calls each of us to be fearless,
to ignore the critics and naysayers,
and to do that crazy thing
that just might work.
And that is good news,
any way you slice it.
Amen.