In today’s reading from the gospel Jesus says or perhaps more accurately is reported to have said, “I am the bread of life.” What does he mean when he says, “I am the bread of life.” As I began to explore this idea there were two childhood memories that came rushing forward from my memory banks.

As many of you know I grew up on a farm. Just before I was born my mother shifted from teaching school to fulltime homemaker. One of my memories is that she baked bread weekly. The bread dough was mixed in a large blue granite coated pot. It began with starting the yeast in a separate bowl with warm but not hot water, a couple of teaspoons of sugar and yeast granules. Hot water, sometimes saved potato water reheated, was placed in the large pot along with salt and lard and mixed until the lard was melted, then some flour was added and once it was cool enough the yeast mixture and more flour, enough to create a soft firm dough. It was then covered and set in a warm place. Do any of you share this memory?

Once the dough had risen it was punched down and allowed to rise again perhaps several times. It was then shaped into four loaves place in bread pans and left to rise one last time before being baked in the oven of a wood stove. She almost always baked it long enough that the top turned a little black because that changed the flavor. She also, almost always reserved a little of the dough, rolled it out spread it with butter, sprinkled it with brown sugar and cinnamon and turned it into a pie plate of cinnamon buns. Can you remember the smell of the bread and the buns baking? Can you remember how good they tasted freshly out of the oven?

The second memory that came rushing forward was the memory of a story read in elementary school about a people who were experiencing a famine and an authors first name, Pearl. I could not come up with the last name but busy with other things I did not immediately turn to the internet for support and instead slept on it overnight. In the morning, I had a last name and a middle initial. Peal S. Buck. I think the piece I read in childhood might have been a portion of her book, “The Good Earth” but I haven’t taken the time to verify that. Rescue from the famine came through missionaries who provided bread made from North American wheat. I am reminded of the phrase that used to be used to describe Saskatchewan. Perhaps you remember it too, “the bread basket of the world”. In today’s world that phrase might have shifted to the oil can or oil cruet of the world given the large amount of canola we now grow in Saskatchewan.

Even in our everchanging world bread is the staple of many people’s diets. It is made in many different ways and from a great variety of grains and even without grain. It seems that over the years I have become gluten intolerant and yet grain free bread remains an important part of my diet.

So, what is Jesus saying when he says, “I am the bread of life”?

I believe that what he is telling us is that who he is, what he showed us as he lived his life, what he taught, is for those who follow him, a staple ingredient, essential to life full and abundant; that his love and the love of the Spirit, Holy Mystery channeled through him is what nourishes and sustains us heart, body, mind and soul. We celebrate this when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Communion and we experience it when we gather in community to worship or gather in community for other reasons.

We speak of the church, communities of faith, as the body of Christ. It is my experience and belief that as the body of Christ, the community of faith is what nourishes and sustains me as it welcomes and includes me and as it guides and directs me, as a disciple and follower.

In the months before I was married, I was working in ministry in an administrative position in the Conference of Manitoba and North Western Ontario. I was also an active member in a congregation, a community of faith. A friend who was a prison chaplain asked me if I would provide a home for a man so that he could be released from prison and I agreed to do that. Turned out it wasn’t perhaps my best choice because a couple of weeks into his stay he robbed me and fled. At the beginning of the week, he left a note saying that he had found work helping build a cottage and that he would see me the next week-end. Part way through the Friday of that week I received a phone call from a car dealership asking why the cheque I had written to purchase a car had bounced. I had not written a cheque to purchase a car. Needless to say, I felt betrayed and devastated. It was a miserable day as I discovered that more had been taken including money from my bank account. It was a sleepless night and a miserable Saturday.

On Sunday morning I had a choice. Was I going to continue to wallow in my misery or was I going to worship. I went to worship. There I was welcomed and when asked how I was I told my story of woe. People listened and they cared. I wouldn’t say they felt sorry for me but they reassured me that I still had a place of acceptance and caring, of love and support. My journey of recovery had begun. I have not forgotten that lesson and being part of a faith community remains an essential pat of my life. It is the bread of life that sustains me. It is the bread of life that sustains me!