# To Bless and Sanctify: Three Meditations on the Sacrament

## Baking a Sacrament Prayer

*Kris Wright*

The wheel of the week has turned to Saturday once again. Inevitably, during the course of the day, my mind is drawn toward Julina Lambson Smith. On Sunday, January 3, 1886, she recorded in her diary: "Fast day. No breakfast to get. Prepaired bread for sacrament. Cooked a good dinner. Did not go to meeting. Can hardly get up and down I am so lame. Jos. brought Kahaana home with him to dinner. I got supper with the help of the girls. Feel some little better this evening."[1] I have read this one little paragraph many times, trying to tease meaning out of this brief entry. Did Julina see her sacred baking as a female contribution to the sacrament ordinance, or was this merely another food preparation task for her?

Since reading about Julina Lambson Smith, the idea of making the sacrament bread won't leave me alone. I am similarly intrigued by an obituary in the *Woman's Exponent* for Frances Ann Adams, who made the sacrament bread for her ward for twenty-five years.[2] Could sacramental bread baking be a form of female ritual?[3]

For most of its history, bread has been made at home. Perhaps early Mormon women like Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy in Kirtland transformed their kitchens into sacred space. She recalls, "Blessings were poured out. Solemn assemblies were called.

Endowments were given. The elders went from house to house, blessing the Saints and administering the sacrament. Feasts were given. Three families joined together and held one at our house. We baked a lot of bread."[4] I wonder who brought the bread to the early meetings of the School of the Prophets. Zebedee Coltrin paints a vivid picture where bread is central to their worship: "The sacrament was also administered at times when Joseph appointed, after the ancient order that is, warm bread to break easy was provided and broken into pieces as large as my fist and each person had a glass of wine and sat and ate the bread and drank the wine; and Joseph said that was the way that Jesus and his disciples partook of bread and wine."[5]

I contemplate the possibility of entering the realm of an ordinance that is traditionally performed by men by baking the bread. Such a horizontal expansion along the "x-axis" of where the sacred and profane intersect allows women to experience and recover religious rituals from the "bonds of verticality." Scholar Lesley Northup asserts that such "creative ritualizing has allowed women in a variety of cultures to more fully articulate and re-envision their religious experience. In many instances, it has also provided a mechanism for social critique and renovation."[6] The idea of women seeking to claim religious ritual space has been problematic in many faiths. Northup describes a cartoon which pictures an ancient sacrificial rite. A young woman lies waiting on a stone altar, a large knife raised over her by a priest in elaborate ritual clothing. A spectator who is watching the scene, comments to another, "Serves her right. She was always whining about women not being allowed to participate in the services."[7]

Notwithstanding, I make arrangements to bake the sacrament bread for a month, hoping in my own way to claim horizontal space. Baking bread has always been a curious alchemy of art and science. Early in my homemaking career, I took on the task of making my own bread. With my copy of *Laurel's Kitchen*[8] propped up on the counter, I would fret about the right water temperature, proofing the yeast, and finding the perfect place for the dough to rise. I gained confidence and soon perfected a couple of recipes and baked bread a couple of times a week. Then I graduated to owning a Bosch mixer, to keep up with the demands of a growing family.

It is early on Saturday morning when I begin the process of making the bread. After working with whole grains for many years, I can't bring myself to use white flour but think there could be a possible rebellion if I present a dense, 100 percent whole wheat loaf to my ward. I settle on spelt, which will still yield a loaf light in color and texture. I grind the spelt berries—embracing the teachings of a whole history of Homemaking classes. Yet this is no superficial exercise in Molly Mormonism—I find great pleasure and meaning in my task. I measure out water, yeast, olive oil, honey, and salt and begin to mix the ingredients. I watch the transformation of these simple yet symbolic elements.

This time I am not using my bread mixer. I want this to be the work of my own hands—and I realize at this moment that, by separating myself from the task through technology, in some ways, I haven't really made bread in several years. Bread is a living process, and kneading the dough brings its own rewards. The repetition and rhythm free the mind for contemplation. My hands are sticky, but I feel the familiar sensation of the dough beginning to spring to life beneath my fingers—the leaven in the lump. It is here that the transcendent nature of this holy food begins—the symbol of the body of Christ.

As I rhythmically knead the floury mass, I feel the power of this newly born, embodied ritual. The familiar words spring to my mind: "O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son . . ."

My little daughter pulls up a chair beside me. "What are you doing?"

"Making the sacrament bread," I reply.

"Oooh, nice," she sighs, slipping her arm through mine.

A feeling of holiness envelops my kitchen. Food by its very nature readily lends itself to symbolic use, and a home where people share meals together easily becomes ritual space. Since the publication of Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* in 1957, academics have debated the nature of the function of ritual and how it moves the believer out of time and space into an alternative sacred reality.[9] Yet female ritualizing often occurs in place and time; it is rooted in the here and now, in everyday materials and in ordi-

nary locations where women live and work. This ritualizing and the attendant horizontal expansion of sacred space can be described as "the activity of incubating ritual; it is the act of constructing ritual either self-consciously and deliberately or incrementally and editorially."[10]

The dough has been transformed into a smooth ball, and set it in a protected place, then sheltered with a red tea towel. Covering the sacrament bread with colored cloth doesn't resonate with my Mormon sensibilities. I search for a large white napkin. Mirroring the ritual preparation of thousands of sacrament meetings, I gently drape the bread in white. I go through the typical bread-baking process—punching down the dough and allowing for a second rise, shaping the loaf, waiting for a third rise, and then into the oven. Once it has cooled, I cover the bread again with the white cloth.

I take the bread to church the next morning, and I'm completely unprepared for my own reaction. We sing, "O God, th' Eternal Father" and all of sudden I am too emotional to sing as I watch two priests, both of whom I have known since they were three, carefully breaking up my bread. I know that my sacrifice is a broken heart and a contrite spirit, but it feels very meaningful to lay something tangible on the altar as well. There is "a difference between doing something yourself and observing someone else doing it[. It is] a matter of great significance."[11] In a small way, I am a partner in feeding my ward this sacramental meal. The deacons approach our row. Gandhi's words spring to my mind, "There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread." I approach my God through bread—the morsel of bread that I eat now, the bread that I have fed His sheep today, the bread I have baked.

## Notes

1. Julina Lambson Smith, quoted in Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds., *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 346.

2. "Obituaries: Frances Ann Adams," *Woman's Exponent* 31 (March 1903): 78.

3. Tony Begonja, *Eucharistic Bread-Baking as Ministry* (San Jose, Calif.:

Resource Publications, 1991); H. E. Jacob, *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2007).

4. Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy, 1816–1902, "Life History of Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy Written by Herself," typescript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/NTracy.html (accessed May 14, 2011).

5. Salt Lake School of the Prophets Minutes, October 3, 1883, in Merle H. Graffam, ed., *Salt Lake School of the Prophets Minutes, 1883* (Palm Deseret, Calif.: ULC Press, 1981), 38.

6. Lesley Northup, *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 85. Lesley Northup has written extensively on the topic of ritualizing women and the horizontality of these rituals. Her scholarship has deeply influenced my thinking on this topic. See also her "Expanding the X-Axis: Women, Religious Ritual, and Culture," in her anthology, *Women and Religious Ritual* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1993), and her "Claiming Horizontal Space: Women's Religious Rituals," *Studia Liturgica* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 86–102.

7. Lesley A. Northup, "Emerging Patterns of Women's Ritualizing in the West," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 109.

8. Laurel Robertson, Carol Flinders, and Bronwen Godfrey, *The Laurel's Kitchen Bread Book: A Guide to Whole-Grain Breadmaking* (New York: Random House, 1984).

9. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 1987). For a critique of Eliade, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and his "No Need to Travel to the Indies: Judaism and the Study of Religion" in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Take Judaism, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2d ed. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986). For a discussion of the usefulness of Eliade in Mormon studies, see Richard L. Bushman, "'Eliade's Return,'" *The Mormon Review* 1, no. 3 (2009): 1–4, http://timesandseasons.org/mormonreview/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/MormonReviewV1N3.pdf as well as "MR: 'Eliade's Return,'" http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2009/09/mr-eliades-return/ (accessed May 14, 2011).

10. Ron Grimes, *Reading, Writing and Ritualizing: Ritual in Fictive, Liturgical and Public Places* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1993), 5.

11. Ann Braude, ed., "Blu Greenberg," in *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 243.