

“And a slice of George Washington cake, please.”

Do you know what a George Washington cake is? Have you ever bitten into one? I remember it from my Philadelphia childhood. Never heard of it since – outside Philadelphia. It's a cake that was annually baked at neighborhood German bakeries especially during February each year in honor of George Washington's birthday - dating from the early 1800's. It was basically a flat cake baked in a wide pan, a chocolate cake with a touch of ginger – and in my neighborhood it was covered with a simple white icing. I recently checked the Internet about it and found there are recipes (if not bakeries) still available.

So also are tweets from older Philadelphians who also grew up with the pastry. Like: *I also remember this cake! We used to get it from a “Unity Frankford” corner grocery store at 11th and Cambria in North Philly. Would love to have the recipe . . . ; Oh how I love this cake. . . As far as I know, only Lochel's in Hatboro and Shenck's Family Bakery still make it . . . ; I have passionately fond memories of George Washington Squares I used to get at a bakery in Castor Gardens, where I grew up . . . it was on the 6500 block of Castor Avenue . . . In 1983 they were a quarter a piece, five for a dollar . . . I don't think I've seen them since that bakery closed.*

All of which is a lead in to my own bakery story. Back in 1936 or thereabouts – in the midst of the Great Depression that left my father unemployed most of the time, I was given a whole dollar by my parents one Sunday to buy some cakes at the bakery after Mass. The bakery was crowded but my sister and I were noticed by the lady behind the counter and asked what we wanted. I said, “Six cinnamon buns.” (The sticky kind) Six cost 12 cents. She handed me my order only to hear me say, “Also six jelly donuts and six Danishes and some of those Lemon Drop Cookies and that Coffee Cake . . .” Actually, not being well versed at that age in the names of things, I probably just went along the show case pointing and saying “One of those and two of those . . .” Arriving home, I carrying two large white bags of pastry in my arms and looking joyful, my father was stunned. A dollar's worth of cakes, when a construction worker's weekly wage – if he had a job – was something like \$17.00 dollars! “That's what you're going to eat for the rest of the week!” he said.

I have never forgotten that day, amid so many other lost memories. What's probably worse, I have never regretted it! And I wonder why it lingers with me still. Maybe it was God's way of introducing me to a peculiar thing about himself, my ultimate Father, the model for the father of the prodigal son: the lesson of extravagance. I think of the abundance of manna falling in the desert, of the overabundance of the loaves and fishes distributed by Jesus that fed more than five thousand people, the extravagance encouraged by Jesus of going the extra mile, giving up the shirt off your back, spending all that a merchant had to acquire a pearl – of great price, access to the world as the graceful, generous kingdom of God.

There I was in a depressed economy, my parents pinching pennies, the world out of work – and God after church confronts me with an chance to buy a whole dollar's worth of cakes – without any guilt, alerting me to trust against all thrifty cautions the promise of Jesus: “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”