

Psalm 78:23-29
John 6:25-35

Christ the King Sunday
Midway Presbyterian Church
November 21, 2021

Thanksgiving Blessings

Introduction to the Psalm

In our Psalm this morning we hear in poem form of the provision of quail and manna to the hungry Israelites following their exodus from Egypt. Listen to these words from Psalm 78:23-29...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson follows very closely the miracle of the feeding of the multitudes of people who had followed Jesus to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the meal being provided through the offering of a boy's five loaves and two fish. Now Jesus proclaims that the feeding has more than one meaning. Listen to these words from John 6:25-35...

Sermon

I hope all of you are looking forward to Thanksgiving as much as I am. I read of a pastor who said Thanksgiving is his favorite holiday, because it is not as encumbered by all the material and social demands of Christmas. It's an opportunity for family, often extended family, to get together to share food and memories, and to give thanks for the blessings of our lives. Our middle son, Carey, along with wife Violet and 6-year-old son Oliver, will be making the trip this week to Greenville from Staunton, Virginia.

Because giving thanks is the purpose of the day, the holiday has a deeply religious feel to it. Which is odd, because Thanksgiving is a federal holiday and not one of the high holy days of the church year. It honors the Plymouth colonists and a group of Indians known as the Wam'pa'NO'ag, sharing an autumn harvest feast in 1621. For more than two centuries, days of

thanksgiving were celebrated by individual colonies and states. It wasn't until 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, that President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a national Thanksgiving Day to be held each November.

I can't help but notice how little attention is given today to Thanksgiving decorations in the malls and department stores, in spite of the Annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York. There's quite a bit on Halloween. Then they pretty much skip to Christmas. However, every year Hazel gets out our cornucopia with its decorative fruit, and our miniature Mr. and Mrs. Pilgrim with their little ceramic pumpkins.

Theologically speaking, Thanksgiving doesn't carry nearly the weight of Christmas which celebrates the Incarnation, or Easter which celebrates the Resurrection, or Pentecost which celebrates the Holy Spirit. In fact, our traditional season of stewardship in the church has more to say about giving thanks as Christians, and Thanksgiving comes at the end of the season of stewardship. And the stewardship season makes it clear that thanksgiving should be a way of life in response to the grace of God.

Because we share Thanksgiving with all Americans of any faith—or no faith at all—it is wide open as to what we should be thankful about. Because it is a federal holiday, it would be appropriate to begin with thanksgiving for democracy, freedom, our standard of living, and all the other aspects of community life we enjoy in America. For our police and those who serve in the military.

An appropriate symbol for all that we should be thankful for would be bread. The world over, bread is recognized as a primary staple. Bread can represent all that adorns our table as well—vegetables, fruits, meats, drinks, and desserts. It can also represent the roof over our heads, the clothes we have to wear, the vehicles that enable us to go places. The glasses that

enable us to see. The healthcare providers who help keep us well. It can represent the sources of income we have to pay for the home and the food and the transportation. Bread can stand for the good health of those who can make it to the table to sit down to eat. So, the bread calls us to count the many blessings of life that are ours. And we can include them all when we pray the prayer, “Thank you Lord for our daily bread.”

It also naturally follows that Thanksgiving is not only a time to give thanks for the blessings we have but also to show compassion for those who have not. And so we remember the children at Thornwell Home, as Roz spoke of so well this morning. The Salvation Army Boys and Girls Clubs. The St. John’s Methodist Clothes Closet. Not all have a peaceful, loving home. Not all are healthy enough to come to the table. Not all can afford well-rounded meals to put on their table on a daily basis. And sadly, some in our major cities like Chicago will hear gunfire outside their windows as they celebrate Thanksgiving Day.

So, who cares if Thanksgiving is a national holiday that is not meant for any particular religion? If it causes Americans across the country to notice their blessings, give thanks, and show compassion for those less fortunate, it is a great day—a day worth celebrating.

I do want to suggest how we Christians can know extra meaning in this wonderful occasion. For when we gather around our tables come Thursday and count our many blessings, we can recognize and give thanks for the greatest blessing of all—not just our daily bread, but another kind of bread as well.

Our passage from John 6 tells us all about that other kind of bread. In it, Jesus reminds his disciples that they have more to be thankful for than having bread to fill their stomachs. Material blessings are very much upon the disciples’ minds. Jesus had just performed a miracle in feeding the 5,000. Jesus had demonstrated the true spirit of Thanksgiving. He had taken

loaves and fish, had given thanks to God, and then he showed compassion on the crowd by feeding all who were there.

But ironically, this miracle created a problem. Those who had been so materially blessed had followed Jesus expecting more. Jesus told them that they were seeking after the wrong kind of bread. “Do not labor for the food which perishes....” Yes, their being fed was a miracle. It was the same kind of miracle the Hebrews had experienced in the wilderness so many centuries ago when they would awake each morning to find the bread of manna on the ground. God indeed has blessed us with our daily bread. He has blessed this country and so many of our families. And we are right to be grateful for our countless blessings.

But life, Jesus wants people to know, ought not to stop there. “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life....” This sounds good to the listeners, and they ask Jesus to give them this bread that will feed them eternally. They make the typical mistake of others in John’s gospel. They take what Jesus says at face value and miss the deeper meaning.

Recently I read of a strange 1990’s TV series called “Cop Rock.” It was a musical police drama. Every once in a while, both cops and criminals would break out in song and sometimes even dance, and it wasn’t meant to be funny. But the series didn’t work with the critics or the audience and only lasted eleven episodes.

But there was one non-musical scene that illustrated the people’s misunderstanding over bread in John 6. A policeman is fed up with the city’s practice of moving the homeless from one precinct to another to give the appearance of doing something about their plight. This particular officer decides to do something positive. He takes a homeless man to a diner. The hungry man is very nervous about the whole situation, but very willing to be fed.

The cop encourages him to order anything he wants on the menu. The man orders two dinners. The officer tries to talk to the man while they wait. “Do you want to know what I would do if I were in your situation? Do you? Do you want me to tell you?”

The man is nervous enough to shake his head, “Yes.” Then the officer begins to give some practical, simple advice as to achievable steps the man can take to get off the streets. He wants the man to understand how he can live in such a way where he wouldn’t have to worry about that day’s bread. Well, the food is served, and the man interrupts the officer, asking a waitress for his bread. The waitress says she will get it. The officer begins to talk again, but again he is interrupted:

“When are they going to bring my bread?”

“She said she’s going to bring it. Will you quit worrying about your bread and listen to me?”

“But she said she would bring my bread.”

The cop looks at him baffled. Then in exasperation he pulls out all the money he has, stuffs it into the man’s shirt pocket, and leaves the table with his own dinner uneaten.

The homeless man couldn’t get past the bread he would eat.

That’s what Jesus faces with the multitudes. They have been fed once. And they want to be fed again. And when Jesus says that he has bread to offer eternally, they are still thinking with their stomachs. “What can we eat that would satisfy our bellies for all time?”

Jesus responds with one of the famous “I Am” passages in John’s gospel:

“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. (v. 35)

Jesus is saying that he is, in himself, the satisfaction of the deepest hunger we have. He offers himself to people who have had their physical hunger quenched, but who still have souls

that hunger for the bread of life. He offers himself as a bread of such substance that they will never need, or want, another.

We Christians who have learned that there is absolutely no material blessing that can substitute for being truly and richly loved or for having an abiding peace, know something of what Jesus means. Naturally, we have to have enough material bread to get by: income, food, clothing, and shelter. But we understand that we do not live by bread alone. The real point is that God has given himself in Jesus Christ and, in Christ we are loved beyond our imagination.

Rose Kennedy, mother of President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, once said that if she could have just one thing in life, it would be faith. Having real faith, she could lose everything else that meant anything to her, and she could still go on, because she knew she was in God's hands. That's quite an observation from a mother who lost two children in the 1940's and had two sons, John and Robert, assassinated in in the 1960's.

Faith in Jesus Christ is that bread of life that will sustain us forever. It is the greatest blessing of all. And that is something for us to truly celebrate and be thankful for.

So, as we gather around our tables this Thanksgiving and bow our heads to give thanks, let us remember to express our gratitude to God, who gives us our daily bread, but who also gives us the bread of life—that living bread that will sustain us in all our trials and tribulations. That living bread It will carry us beyond the day when all the material blessings of our lives are gone, and we are there in that eternal home that Christ has prepared for us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.