

“SEEKING THE GIVER”

Psalm 100 John 6:25-35 November 24, 2019

Good morning, friends, on this Thanksgiving Sunday! I am going to begin with a few Thanksgiving jokes just to grab your attention this morning.

What girl is always asked to say the blessing at Thanksgiving? **Grace**

What's black and white and red all over? **An embarrassed Pilgrim**

Which hand should you butter a roll with at Thanksgiving dinner? **Neither, you should use a knife**

What is a football player's favorite state? **New Jersey!**

What's bigger, a football or a baseball? **Neither! They both have eight letters!**

What does a Turkey pick out of his nose? **A gobble-goober!**

Which Thanksgiving food has grandchildren? **The Gran-berry sauce!**

What did the Pilgrims tell at the first Thanksgiving? **Corn-y jokes!**

And I think that with that one I should stop! I just couldn't help myself once I got started?!?!?!?

As we listened to the gospel reading, it's like stepping into the middle of an argument. A lot has happened to get to this point. Jesus has performed a miracle for the hungry Galilean crowd. He took a little boy's lunch of five rolls and two sardines and fed 5,000 people—with some left over. Yet when the people responded to his miracle by trying to make him king, Jesus withdrew, and later that evening, though the crowds didn't know it, Jesus walked on the lake to his disciples' boat, and they landed in Capernaum on the north side of Lake Galilee.

So now it's the next day and the crowds have caught up with Jesus, and our reading is the discussion between the crowds and Jesus. Here's a way to look at it: Consider Jesus' miracle of multiplying the food as a sacrament and then his discussion about it as his sermon. First Jesus performed the miracle as a sacrament, feeding the crowds with food from heaven. Then he does a sermon explaining it.

These people have received a free meal, a lavish meal. They, however, want more and why shouldn't they expect more from Jesus? He does a lot of miracles. Yet Jesus won't spend much time dealing with what they want. He directs them to what they need. Yes, he'll do dramatic signs, but his signs are symbolic of the good news about God's love. Jesus wants the crowds to grasp the meaning of what he does. A sacrament can't go unexplained. Jesus won't accept people on their terms. He won't let them juggle hope of his magically solving problems for them.

In verse 26 he tells them, “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” They're fixating on the by-product of the faith. They're missing the fact that they're created to live with God.

Some things really are more important than our next meal. That's why in the Lord's Prayer Jesus taught us to pray first: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Only then do we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.”

We're created to live with God, and Jesus brings us into relationship with God by giving us himself. Jesus is the giver—of love, mercy, forgiveness, miracles—but he is also the gift. So when these folk come begging to Jesus for another free meal, he says to them in effect, “I don't want just to give you wonder bread. I want to give you a life with God.”

People don't always want a life with God. They want the things God can give. They want the positive side-effects of the faith. They want to sneak in and swipe a little blessing from God. Jesus won't allow this basically because you can't steal or extort something from God. We can't march into the church and say,

“Baptize me!” We can’t sidle up to the Lord’s Supper. Oh, we can try; but when we do, Jesus does some spiritual judo on us. He grabs us by our desires and tosses us into God’s grace. He says, “You can’t demand it. It’s a gift. You can’t order God to love you, have mercy on you, or forgive you. It’s a gift.”

We come to the loaves Jesus hands out on the hillside and the bread he offers at his Table. The bread is a sign of God’s love. We don’t have faith in the bread. Jesus says it’s a sign. We have faith in God’s love. So also we don’t have faith in the baptismal font. It’s a sign of God’s grace. We don’t fixate on the gift.

We turn to the giver. Jesus tells us that *he* is the nourishment for us. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” And it happens; for those who look beyond the sign they find the person. To those who search the meaning of symbols, they are given a presence. Those who contemplate the giver actually receive the giver. And you don’t have to be scurrying from one side of Galilee Lake to the other. God is here.

The Rev. Jacob E. Pierce tells a Thanksgiving story that will probably bring back many memories for us. He writes: Thanksgiving was my favorite holiday when I was a kid. Thanksgiving also meant spending the day with family and playing with my cousins in my grandmother’s backyard. But most importantly Thanksgiving meant food!! I can still remember the smells of my grandmother’s turkey and ham, the crunch of my aunt’s sweet potato casserole, and the delicious weirdness of my father’s oyster stuffing. What I remember most, however, are my grandmother’s angel biscuits.

My grandmother’s angel biscuits came from an old Appalachian recipe in our church cookbook. Angel biscuits are difficult to explain: they have the texture of a traditional southern biscuit but the taste of a yeast roll, deliciously perfect for soaking up gravy and bits of turkey. When I think of Thanksgiving, I remember those angel biscuits. Grandma doesn’t cook much these days, and I’ve unsuccessfully attempted to make them myself three or four times. Perhaps it’s best they remain a memory.

Thanksgiving brings up a lot of those memories, doesn’t it? Of days past with family and friends gathered around the table which is covered with our families’ favorite dishes. Now we are making memories with our current families but celebrating our heritage from the past as well. We keep some of those old favorites—like the turkey and dressing/stuffing and pumpkin pie—but we also add new dishes, new places to gather, and a changing, extended family. We are truly blessed, aren’t we?!?!?

In last week’s Pine Bluffs Post there was an article by Bill Sniffin titled “A cold night in Wales helped me recall the Best Part of America.” He is telling some people in Wales about Wyoming: As I recalled telling them about Yellowstone, the thought of the heat emanating from the Yellowstone geysers slightly warmed me up as I stood there in the cold Welsh wind and rain. But then I thought some more about what I had told them about where I came from.

I reminded them that America has 50 states and Wyoming is one of them. Our state is one of the largest in land area with 97,000 square miles but only about 450,000 living there (in 1986)—just five people per square mile...I told them that Wyoming is a pretty windy place but that the wind doesn’t blow much in my hometown of Lander. And how the sun shines 300 days per year in the Cowboy State. And how bright the sun can shine at a mile about sea level. And how you can’t count all the stars in the sky at night.

And the wildlife. And the fishing. And the Red Desert. And the wild horses. And South Pass. The vast coal and uranium mines. And Red Canyon....

I told them about our clean air and clean water. And how wide our streets are. And the condition of our roads and highways....And hiking and camping and mountain climbing. And hot springs. And petroglyphs. and winter activities like snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, downhill skiing in Jackson and the state Winter Fair.

And a diverse population. How Americans are friendly and Wyoming people are the most friendly of all. And how Americans always believe they will come out on top. How they never give up. How they believe the best in people and in situations. How optimism is a national disease in this country.”

He concludes with realizing that he lives in the Best Part of America. We all have so much to be thankful for and as we count out blessings, we can be staggered by how many there are!!

The gospel appointed for Thanksgiving Day is an interesting choice. When our minds are most focused on food, what we might soon be cooking, or which dish we most look forward to, John’s words strike us: “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal... Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’”

It should be obvious to most that our civic and religious Thanksgiving holiday is not about food. Even the non-religious among us admit that Thanksgiving is at the very least a day in which we acknowledge what we have and what is important in our lives. For Christians, Thanksgiving Day is about giving thanks to God, the creator of all. The fact is, however, that when we give thanks to God for all we have, we are most often thankful for the “food that perishes,” as Jesus puts it. We might be thankful for our new car, for our home, for food, for clothing, for our job, and for money to pay our bills, things that are important, but things that perish.

There is certainly nothing wrong with giving thanks for the perishables in our lives, but that’s not the question Jesus is prompting. Jesus is asking where we place our faith. The gospel lesson doesn’t ask us to list the things for which we are thankful, the gospel lesson asks us to reflect on our faith and to receive the true bread, which gives life to the world.

We can certainly be thankful for our material wealth, for our homes and families, for our jobs, and for the food on our tables this Thanksgiving, but let’s not mistake thankfulness for faith. Thankfulness for turkey and biscuits won’t feed the hungry. Thankfulness for a closet full of clothing won’t clothe the naked.

Thankfulness for a good home and a good job and living in a great state won’t house the homeless or right the economic injustice in our society. Only our faith in Jesus and our participation in God’s mission will do that.

As we break bread this Thanksgiving around our tables, may we who follow in the way of Jesus be moved beyond thankfulness for turkey and gravy; may we be moved to receive and share the bread of heaven, which gives life to the world. With God’s help, may it be so. Amen.