

John 6:25-35

October 9, 2022

Thanksgiving Sunday

I'm sure that many of you are already thinking ahead to your Thanksgiving meal. I invite you to indulge your anticipation for a moment, and imagine the scene. Imagine the steaming, juicy, and seasoned turkey, sliced thick and ready to serve. Imagine the savoury stuffing; the sweet and sour cranberry sauce; the potatoes mashed or scalloped, served with butter or sour cream or cheese. Imagine your vegetable of choice: brussels sprouts, maybe, or squash, or corn. Imagine the pumpkin or apple pie warming in the oven, and the whipped or iced cream that you'll serve with it.

Imagine the people you'll gather with. Your parents, your spouse, your children, your siblings, or your friends.

Here's a question for you: Is there one thing I could take away, and make it *not Thanksgiving*?

Or, if you don't feel like you can celebrate Thanksgiving, is there one thing I could magically supply to make it a real Thanksgiving?

In other words: what *is* Thanksgiving, anyway? What's it all about? And what elements symbolize and constitute it?

While you're thinking about that, let's recap our Gospel reading for the day.

It's near the Passover festival, which commemorates Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt at God's direction. A large crowd has gathered, and Jesus has fed them with nothing more than a few loaves and fishes. That evening, his disciples cross the lake in a boat. Jesus comes to them at night, walking on the water. The next morning, the crowd is surprised to find Jesus gone, and they go looking for him. They find him near Capernaum and ask, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" As he often does, John's Jesus turns the question around: why are they seeking him? In the loaves and fishes, he says, the crowd saw merely the means to fill their bellies. Thus they seek him again in case he will feed them again.

When Jesus complains that they see the bread symbolizing only bread, instead of the hand of God at work, they respond by reminding him of the way their mutual ancestors were fed by Moses in the desert. In both the case of Jesus and the case of Moses, they are focused on the bread that was given daily. But Jesus is trying to draw their attention from the bread that was given, to the one who gave it. The gift symbolizes the giver, who was ultimately God, not Moses.

If I want to evoke Thanksgiving, I will probably show a picture of a cornucopia: the horn with good food spilling out of it. It is the most common sign of Thanksgiving. But really, Thanksgiving is about family, isn't it? If I wanted to ruin your Thanksgiving,

the best way to do that would be to remove those gathered around the table. Or poison the atmosphere by talking about politics.

Conversely, if I wanted to give you a wonderful Thanksgiving, I'd find a way to fill those empty chairs. The turkey may be good or just mediocre, but it is family that makes Thanksgiving. Food may be a sign of Thanksgiving, but Thanksgiving itself, though in theory a religious holiday, is in fact a sign of family. Many of you will go from here to a home and a table, or possibly a restaurant, filled with family members. Some of, hopefully very few of you, may not.

I think that, regardless of whatever other gifts you may be thankful for, it's easier to appreciate them—or deal with their lack—if you are among family.

The crowd is focused on bread for today - either the bread and fishes that Jesus provided or the manna from heaven that Moses delivered. But this is bread only for today. In fact, that was the whole point of the manna episode: it was *daily* bread, that spoiled if you tried to keep it for tomorrow.

As the old saying goes, "Give someone a fish, and you feed them for a day. Teach someone to fish, and you feed them for a lifetime." Jesus wants to teach them to fish. He wants to give them "the bread that endures for eternal life." He wants to give them "the bread that has come down from heaven." To acquire this bread, or work for this bread as they put it, they must believe in the one whom God has sent. They must believe in Jesus.

This Greek work, *pisteuo*, [*peeSTEEwo*] means to believe in the sense of trusting.

Believe, in other words, that Jesus is the Word of God active in the world, and that Jesus can be trusted.

Trusted to do what, exactly? To sustain us, to be bread for our souls. This is the truth we proclaim whenever we celebrate Communion. We proclaim through the symbol of bread that we consume, that Jesus is our sustenance.

I do wonder, then, if Jesus is the bread that sustains eternally, and not like the physical bread that will not sustain you tomorrow, why do celebrate Communion more than once? Are we afraid that we'll forget what we proclaim: that Jesus is the bread of life?

I think the reason is this: when we celebrate Communion, who are we in Communion with? God, yes; Jesus, yes; but also with our siblings in faith, around the table. Once again, the gifts of God are appreciated among family. Each of you, taking Communion with me, are reminders that I am not alone. Each of you are reminders that I am part of a God-gathered community that makes my blessings and my losses, my joys and my sorrows, my *life*, meaningful; holy.

It is easier to know that you are not alone when you are not alone.

And if you *are* alone on Thanksgiving, or if you are with people who make you feel like you are alone, then remember that in Catholic Europe the church bells would

ring whenever Communion was celebrated, even if the priest was alone performing the rite: because Christ was shown to be present whenever the bread was broken and wine was poured, and this was true for the merchant walking down the street outside and the peasant far off in the fields.¹ Whoever could hear the bells, Christ had died for them; Christ had risen for them; Christ had come again to them.

Remember, as you eat and drink today or tomorrow, that you are with a God that sustains you and a family that loves you. Wherever you are.

¹ MacCulloch, Diarmid, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin, 2004).