

“The True Bread from Heaven”
John 6:25-35; Psalm 100
Odell Community Thanksgiving Service

Psalm 100

{1} Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. {2} Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. {3} Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. {4} Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. {5} For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

John 6:25-35

{25} When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” {26} Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. {27} 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.” {28} Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” {29} Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” {30} So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? {31} Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” {32} Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. {33} For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” {34} They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” {35} 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.

The Sermon

The gospel writer John indicates that it was not the sign that impressed the people, but the fact that a few minutes ago their bellies were empty, and now they are full.

What’s the significance of bread? Of eating? Of a meal? Too many possible answers, especially among a people of faith for whom eating has both physical and spiritual importance. And in the gospels—where we find Jesus dining with sinners, going over to Zacchaeus’ place for dinner—who you eat with carries as much importance as what you’re eating, or even the fact that you are eating.

My brother is the executive chef at the official governor's residence in Minnesota. I don't mind bragging to you about that; I'm very proud of him, a once-hopeless high school dropout. There may still be some sibling rivalry there, though, and maybe I didn't handle this real well. They're filming the sequel to the movie *Grumpy Old Men* in Minneapolis, and so the cast keeps dropping in at the governor's mansion. A lot of huge Hollywood stars are involved—Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Ann-Margaret, and the beautiful Italian actress Sophia Loren.

One day last month my brother calls me up and says, "Guess what! I went on a picnic yesterday that was just me, the governor, and Jack Lemmon." I said, "Wow, Jack Lemmon! That's really something; Jack Lemmon is a great, great actor, and he's been involved with human rights issues all over the world; I'm really very pleased for you."

A week or so later we're on the phone and he sort of casually mentions that he had just had dinner the night before with Walter Matthau. "Hey, that's neat," I said; "That's really good for you."

A few days later I'm home alone eating a chicken pot pie, and my brother calls and says, "I just had dinner with Sophia Loren." I said, "Shut up."

According to John's gospel—that had nothing to do with the sermon, by the way—the first of Jesus' signs is the turning of water into wine at the wedding at Cana. The second sign was the miraculous healing of an official's son in Capernaum. On being approached by the official, Jesus had said, "Unless you [the Greek is plural: "you all"] see signs and wonders, you will not believe." And later came the feeding of the five thousand, with only five barley loaves and two fish.

After that event, the crowd seeks out Jesus and finds him. And he doesn't seem to be in such a great mood, as I guess they expected him to be in. God has just fed them on a miracle—and they took it as a meal. "You're working for perishable food, but I've got something even more important for you to be working for."

At first, they seem pretty game; they want to know what work it is they have to do. In the original Greek, there's a play on words, so what they're really asking is, "What do we have to do to 'work' this work?"ⁱ They seem to half-understand, but they're not all the way there yet. The work is not the work of doing certain things, or observing certain rules, "but of accepting and entrusting yourself to Jesus."ⁱⁱ

That turns out to be harder than perhaps they realize. They can believe that Jesus pulled off a miracle and multiplied the fish and the bread. They can believe that he healed a child many miles away just by saying the words. They can believe he turned water into wine.

But that's the easy part. The hard part is that they have to go from simply *believing* Jesus to *believing in* Jesus.

You can see the miracles. But do you see the signs?

But they still don't get it; even after having had this miraculous feeding of 5,000 families, they say, "OK, but could you give us some kind of *sign*..."

They simply weren't seeing "spirit-food" any differently than regular food, still asking for a sign as "proof," as if what he had just done were some ordinary buffet. Even if they saw it as a miracle, they seemed to have missed the point: that this is yet another sign.

I submit to you the idea that they simply weren't used to the notion of being given a tangible sign of God's presence, a sign as tangible as putting food on the picnic blanket.

Or if they were used to the notion, they weren't comfortable with it.

Or if they were comfortable with it, maybe they were *too* comfortable with it.

Maybe that continues to be the problem.

Perhaps they mistook the miracle of the loaves and fishes for a pat on the back for a job well done, which would make it an event that said more about them than it said about God. Here's an interesting statistic: 70% of Americans polled recently believed their financial situation is "at least somewhat" reflective of "God's regard" for them.ⁱⁱⁱ

So now we come to the annual tradition of Thanksgiving, getting ready once again to go through the ritual. Thanksgiving is, in a way, one of the strangest holidays we have—listen to that word, "holiday," holy-day. As a matter of fact, this one is kind of a national day, kind of a holy day. It's a secular observance set aside for a holy purpose.

Of course, we all know the story. The Pilgrims fled religious persecution in England. Actually, we don't picture them fleeing so much as waving their hands in disgust—it's a peculiarly American characteristic, I think—and saying, "If this is all you can give me, I'll practice my religion somewhere else. I'd rather get in this rickety boat and get seasick for half a year than put up with this situation." I say it lightly, but if there is a spirit of "rugged individualism" in this country—whether that's a good thing or a bad thing—it's reflected in this story.

Many weeks later, they landed on Plymouth Rock, got off the boat, made peace with the local Natives, gave thanks to God, and had turkey, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and my Mom's oyster stuffing.

Maybe you saw the cartoon recently that showed some Native Americans at the first Thanksgiving, and one of them is quietly whispering to another, "If you ask me, we shouldn't be sharing our wealth with a bunch of illegal aliens!"

Some parts of the Thanksgiving story are legend. There was certainly religious persecution in England, but after leaving there, the Pilgrims spent twelve happy years in Holland, where they enjoyed tremendous freedom of religion, and only left there—this is true—because they thought their kids were becoming too Dutch.

The Plymouth Rock story wasn't told publicly until 1740, by an old man who had heard it as a boy—from an old man who had heard the story when *he* was a young boy. It was the Victorians of the late 1800's who made Thanksgiving what it is today, by turning "a Pilgrim secular festival" into "a religious and family event."^{iv}

But if the story we commemorate stretches the truth a little, the *way* we celebrate is as real as it gets. The roots of our Thanksgiving are in our faith story and our own experience. Just the fact that it's called Thanksgiving acknowledges a higher being than ourselves. What are people getting together every November to thank—their lucky stars? And if the *content* of the original Thanksgiving is up for debate, the tradition is not. Faith, family, food, warmth—I don't have a problem with any of that.

My wife used to teach English as a Second Language to international refugees when we lived in Louisville. Most of them were from Viet Nam, and one Thanksgiving week, we decided to invite them over on Wednesday for a genuine, American Thanksgiving dinner.

Since she was the breadwinner and I was the househusband, it was my privilege to be in charge of cooking the turkey.

There is a type of person who resists being told the extremely obvious, even if that person doesn't have a clue—and I may or may not have fit neatly into that category. So when she said, “Don't forget to periodically baste the turkey while it bakes,” it fell on deaf ears.

As it turned out, the class hadn't met for several weeks before Thanksgiving, and none of them could afford a telephone, so the last time anyone in the class had mentioned the invitation to come to our apartment the day before Thanksgiving had been in early October. When you work in a sweat shop for twelve hours a day, for a boss who won't allow Vietnamese to be spoken in his factory, and you're straight off the boat and speak little English—there are other things on your mind.

So it was that when Vivian came home from work at about 5:00, we waited anxiously for the Thanksgiving throng to arrive, and around 6:00, it showed up. The throng consisted of exactly two wire-thin young men.

If you've ever cooked for a full household plus grandparents, aunts, uncles, and perhaps a friend of the family, you know that an 18-pound turkey does pretty well for that crowd. The quantity of meat we had on the table dwarfed the four of us gathered around it; it looked like scale models of Mount Everest.

I tried in that I-don't-speak-your-language way to say, “*White* meat; *dark* meat.”

One of the men paused with an embarrassed look and, motioning to himself and the other guy, said, in excellent English, “vegetarian.”

As I reflect on those enormous plates of mainly useless and rather dry turkey, I think about how easy it is to miss the *signs* that God gives us, even when we can appreciate the miracle.

The miracles were there to see—we had food. We had family. At this table, people from cultures who could barely understand each other were breaking bread together.

But I had been imagining that this meal of turkey, stuffing, and pumpkin pie was going to satisfy a laundry list of requirements for “Thanksgiving”—without realizing that what I was pursuing was some vague, traditional ritual that had little to do with giving thanks to my Creator.

You see the miracle. Are you still looking for a sign?

John reminds us that the true bread from heaven is not the temporary fix that God gives the people—neither the manna, in the Wilderness times, nor the multiplied food of the feeding the 5,000 in Jesus’ time.^v

The true bread from heaven—*Immanuel*, God-with-us—is a permanent, ongoing miracle for which we need to give permanent, ongoing thanks. Perhaps the crowd around Jesus began to realize this when they finally said, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Hear John’s message. God is life; God is light; God is the Word. God is the true Bread from Heaven.

Are you looking for a sign? Look no further.

Jesus’ words, mysterious as they sound, are simple but not ordinary; it is simplicity on the far side of complexity.

The complexity is the great mystery of our faith—Who is this man?

But at the end of the day, all we can do is give thanks for the simple truth that God, who is now given to us, is the true bread from heaven.

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ⁱ Brown, 1966, 262.

ⁱⁱ Lindars, 255-256.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Harper’s Index” in *Funny Times* (Nov. 1995), 15.

^{iv} Information on the factual origins of Thanksgiving comes from Richard Shenkman, “*I Love Paul Revere, Whether He Rode or Not*” (New York: HarperCollins, 1992; 18-21). Further info is available in Shenkman, *Legends, Lies and Cherished Myths of American History*.

^v Sloyan, 69.