

This Thanksgiving Day stuff is complicated business. We all have traditions around the day. For those of us with in-laws, we have to decide who to spend the day with, or how to divide it between two families, or how we might all share together without bloodshed. For those of us whose families have been touched by divorce, there are the same questions of who to spend time with, and how much, and when. For those of us who live away from our families, there are the delicate travel negotiations. There's the question of who cooks the turkey, and is it roasted, fried, smoked, or BBQ? What should we bring? Which football game will we watch?

This is a delicate business! Ben and I will drive to Virginia for Thanksgiving and either share the day with my aunt's family at my mother's house with my father in attendance, or we will split our time between Virginia Beach and Hampton, so that neither parent is slighted. We will call my sister, his mother, and his brother on the way, so that no one is left out and we can all feel a part of one another's day. Some of us will stick to special diets and others will eat themselves sick. We make a lot of demands on the day, not to mention the necessity of mapping out the Christmas shopping plan for Friday. I'm not going.

There's a lot to this Thanksgiving business. To begin with, it's not unique to the US, nor to Christians. Thanksgiving and harvest festivals have been held throughout the world about as long as people have had an opportunity to be grateful to survive a storm or have food to eat. It only became a national celebration in our country during the Civil War, when President Lincoln signed into law a declaration ordering a National Day of Thanksgiving after the Union victory at Gettysburg. Canada and Brazil also have Thanksgiving Day celebrations, as do many other cultures.

Another little known fact: The Pilgrims' feast in 1621 was not the first American Thanksgiving. Feasts of thanksgiving were likely celebrated in la Florida in the 1500s, as well as in Newfoundland in 1573, as well as in Jamestown VA and the British Popham colony in Maine, both in 1607, and it was a celebration on June 30, 1623 by the Puritans that seems to have set the precedent for our Thanksgiving Day: they were celebrating the arrival of a ship loaded with supplies, more so than the generosity of the Native Americans. But regardless of how it got started, or where, or by whom, Thanksgiving Day is an important day for us as Americans to appreciate the freedom and abundance we have, and as Christians to acknowledge that God has blessed us, is blessing us, and will bless us again. It's a part of who God is: in the words of the old Doxology, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. And a huge part of our celebrating Thanksgiving Day is the food.

Someone told me this past weekend that I always preach about food. As I think about it, he was pretty much right, but there's a good reason: so did Jesus. So many of the parables he told were about food, and so many stories about him center around meals: the Last Supper, feasts with Levi and Zacchaeus, breaking bread with Clopas and his friends on the way to Emmaus, one last breakfast with the disciples by the Sea of Galilee.

Food. Such a simple word for such an essential part of our lives. We can't survive on bread alone...see, more food talk from Jesus! We literally can't live without it. And this time of year our thoughts sometimes center on food...holiday baking, Thanksgiving meals, pies, cakes, Christmas cookies. Come Thursday most, if not all, of

us will be sitting around a table, eating and talking...enjoying one another's company even as we enjoy turkey and dressing, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie.

Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays... A time to gather around the table and spend time with people we care about. A time to celebrate all the blessings in our lives, and to enjoy wonderful food. A time to remember what God has done for us, who God has put into our lives, and how God has reached out to us. Many of us have a tradition of sharing, as part of our mealtime blessing, what we are thankful for: Family. Food. Home. God's grace in our lives in hard times and in easy ones.

We need to be careful, though, about saying thank you. We tend to treat "Thank you" as if it were a conclusion...the end of a transaction. You give me something, or do something for me, and I respond with "thank you," and we're done. The transaction is finished. But in doing so, we lose some of what is most beautiful about gratitude for Christians: the knowledge that when we say "Thank you" to God, we are not only thanking God for something God has done for us, but also making a statement of faith: our God is the kind of God that promises to continue reaching out to us, continue doing good for us, continue to be present in our lives.

For Christians, "Thanksgiving" is not simply the name of a holiday. It's not only a noun...something static and unchanging that marks an end to a transaction between us. Thanksgiving is a verb, alive and active, a statement of faith: we believe in giving thanks that God is good, that his mercy endures forever, that Jesus Christ is living bread and water for the nourishment of our spirits, and so our Thanksgiving meal nourishes not only our bodies but our souls when we thank God for it. Thanksgiving cultivates in us an attitude that continues to be grateful, to remember that not only has God been with

us in the past, God's presence is always with us. We are reminded of that promise through another special holiday as we remember that Jesus' name is also Emmanuel: God with us. But that's for another day, another sermon...and more special food.

Jesus was not dealing with a grateful people in today's gospel lesson...at least not a people with a sense of God's abiding grace. Before today's reading, Jesus had fed 5000 men, plus women and children, with five loaves of bread and two fishes. He had taught for hours, and finally made his escape at night, when the disciples found him walking on the water in peace and solitude. It wasn't long before the crowds found him again, though...with more demands than gratitude, needing more than they had to offer. They want bread, again. They want a sign that Jesus is from God. They want miracles and the power to perform miracles, and they want them now (sort of like wanting control of the remote during the football game. Especially if your team's playing on another channel). As Jesus explains that the true bread of heaven endures and gives life to the world, they respond not with wonder, but with a request: "Sir, give us this bread always."

These were a people who had perhaps said thank you for the meals of the past: manna in the wilderness and bread and fish just before...but that was the end. They really don't seem to have a sense that God has more in store, that God's grace and presence was with them always, that it is God who provided manna and meat, bread and fish in a time of need: they credit Moses, and the rabbi Jesus. To be fair, they are also a people who have been displaced, conquered repeatedly, who are often what we call "food-insecure", who are economically challenged, who are...how do I put this...not the most successful or the cream of the social crop. They are challenged in ways most of us are not, and so perhaps they have a right to wonder, to fear, to not take God's

grace for granted. They are full of the unending need that characterizes all of us. We are a needy people, and made to be so. We need: sustenance, shelter, housing, personal freedom, clothing, friendship and family, health care. The list never ends: we always need something...we are a people of unending need.

Food is just one example of an unending need in our lives. We can't get away from it: it is necessary for life. In the words of a commercial for Ben's favorite fast food restaurant: You gotta eat. And once you've eaten, it's not too very long before you need to eat again. We cannot survive without food. Our bodies just aren't made to do without it. This is the real reason for harvest festivals, such as Pentecost for Jesus, and Thanksgiving for us: we're thankful we have been blessed with a good harvest, because that means there will be plenty of food to get us through the winter, and our need will be closer to met for a time.

We also are not made to survive apart from one another: human beings are made with an unending need for companionship, to not be alone. It is okay for us to be alone, on our own, for a short time; it's even therapeutic every now and then to get away from it all, including (gasp) our cell phones and computers. But part of the attraction of our cell phones, computers, coffee shops, and Thanksgiving tables is that they all feed our need to be in touch, for some kind of human contact in our lives. This is another reason for Jesus' teaching about food and parties, for his desire to teach and enjoy one another's company over a meal, another purpose for his human existence: his own unending need for us, and ours for him.

We have an unending need, too, for some kind of meaning in our lives, for a sense that there is something beyond ourselves, beyond our friends, beyond our

Thanksgiving table, beyond our lives and our deaths. Perhaps “thank you” is that meaning, that power, that connection to something beyond ourselves. We tend to think of thanking someone as an end, as kind of closure. Saying thank you feels like a conclusion, a way of acknowledging something in the past. It’s not an ending for Christians. It’s a beginning.

We don’t gather today to only thank God for the blessings we have received in the past, but to remember that our gratitude extends into the future, for God’s goodness and grace is not limited. We gather today, and at our Thanksgiving table, and in our Sunday school classes and with our friends to find our needs met, not only in turkey and dressing and time spend with one another, but in living bread and water, the refreshment that comes as an inexhaustible gift from God in Christ.

With Thanksgiving just ahead and Christmas soon to come, there’s something we have to remember in the middle of our celebration, our gratitude, our rejoicing: not everyone has the reasons for giving thanks that we have. Not everyone has the reasons we have to celebrate...and not everyone has a holiday called Thanksgiving. Afghanistan. Bangladesh. Iraq. Darfur. Out of our gratitude, out of our certainty that God is good, and means good for us, and out of the knowledge that “because we have been given much, we too must give,” God’s people (that would be us) are called both to celebrate our blessings and share them with others...to reach out to those who perhaps are more aware of their own unending and immediate need than they are of Jesus’ inexhaustible gift, and to give them a reason to give thanks, and remember God’s goodness...to share the living bread we have been given...the inexhaustible gift of our loving God.

Thanksgiving Day is a special grace moment for us, a time set aside for us to see how our faith is the intersection of our unending need for food, for attention, for a sign from God, with the inexhaustible gift that is the love of God in Jesus Christ. We can lose the opportunity to reflect a little, to think about what God and family and friends and food mean to us, in football and pecan/peecan pies and who forgot to bring the rolls and where the best sales will be. It's perhaps easier for us to get bogged down in the merits of homemade versus canned cranberry sauce (no berries for me) and who makes the better green bean casserole. There's no simple answer to the old question from "Hee Haw": "Grandpa, what's for supper?" in our Thanksgiving kitchens.

We have our own traditions and expectations of the day: Ben's looking forward to my cousin's sweet potatoes (made with a pound each of butter and sugar), I'm craving my mother's dressing, and my aunt Anne will have corn light bread ready. We can narrow our world down to how much food we can fit on a plate and how many trips we can make. That's simple enough...but it denies the power our time together has.

At this year's Thanksgiving meal at my mother's house in Virginia Beach, we'll be remembering the ones who aren't there: my grandparents, 3 of whom have gone on to give thanks eternally in heaven and one of whom doesn't know what day it is; my uncle Bill, who loved pumpkin pie and my cheesecake; Jamie, my beautiful niece, who will be at her own home with her parents, who have to work on Friday; Ben's family, who haven't seen him at Thanksgiving in a dozen years, at least. We will indulge in our own tradition of intentionally giving thanks for the good in our lives, for what we've learned and grown through in the past year...and unlike a simple "thank you", there's always an

expectation that we will gather again next year, that there will be more to be grateful for, and more we have to share.

Jesus knew that something special happens when we gather together at table, and invite him to take his place among us. Our ordinary bread and meat, or not so ordinary turkey and dressing, become something more in Jesus' presence than mere sustenance; they become spiritual food, living bread that satisfies the needs of our souls as well as the needs of our bellies. And in a world where people still go hungry, where as we feast others suffer, we remember that in our thanksgiving, we can also make a difference for someone else...we have a need to share the blessings we count, to do our part at the intersection of Unending Need and Inexhaustible Gift.