Reign of Christ/Thanksgiving Sunday

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Let Us Be Bread”* John 6:24-35

*Let us be bread,* says one of the Communion songs we love in this church.

*Let us be bread, blessed by the Lord,*

*broken and shared, life for the world.*

*Let us be wine, love freely poured,*

*let us be one in the Lord.*

Paula usually sings this for us. This song is a songwriter’s understanding of what Jesus said to us so many centuries ago. It is what he is saying to us, today, too. Let us be bread just as he was the bread who came down from heaven from God, to feed a hungry world.

Of course, Jesus offers this message to us in his own unique and arresting manner: *Do not work for the food that perishes”* [27] he says. On the Sunday before Thanksgiving, Jesus’ words may seem a bit pointed, perhaps even a little deflating since most of us are excited and looking forward to a big turkey meal with all the trimmings.

It is helpful to remember that he was talking to people who had been looking for him because he had, just the day before, fed 5,000 people with a few fish and a couple of small loaves of bread. Everyone—all 5,000—had been more than fed. Each had eaten until they were completely satisfied. They were impressed and they wanted more.

A group from these same people waited and watched for Jesus all night. (Today we might say they were stalking him.) They had already tried to take him away by force, to make him their king. However, he had withdrawn from them before they could do it.

They had seen the disciples leave in boats for the other side of the sea to Capernaum, but they had not seen him leave. When they were not able to find him on the side of the water they were on, they figured-out where the disciples had gone, and they got into boats and went looking for him there.

The passage we just heard were the first words he had for them. He admonished them. He knew they were thankful for having been given a meal they did not work for. He was also very much aware of how hard they had to work to provide for themselves and their families. He was aware of the constant inequities inherent in their society that kept them from building enough wealth to keep their families safe from hunger and homelessness—for example, there was the constant threat posed by the Roman occupation of the country, but also there were the crushing taxes that were usually unfairly assessed. Added to these challenges were weather events or the daily dangers of illness and injury or pestilence that could destroy a whole year’s worth of crops or other materials and tools with which they plied a trade. Should any of these things happen, they could be homeless beggars without too much hope.

So, when Jesus says these words to them, he is not negating, nor making light of their circumstances. Nor is he diminishing the importance of their gratitude. There is nothing wrong with giving thanks for the perishable things in our lives. In fact, giving thanks acknowledges the mutuality of our lives. It recognizes that we are not “lone wolves” eking-out a living without help or support.

One writer, the Rev. Bruce Epperly, writes about gratitude in this way:

*Thanksgiving is the virtue of interdependence, the recognition that our achievements are not fully our own, but emerge from a network of relationships that sustain and shape us, giving us the materials from which we create our experiences moment by moment. Thanksgiving as a spiritual practice reminds us that all our gifts are communal as well as individual. Our creativity and freedom, our ability to choose the good and noble, have their origins in forces larger than ourselves — God, this good earth, and persons who have guided, protected, inspired, and nurtured us.*

So, rather than diminishing their thanks and gladness at having recognized his powerful generosity, what Jesus was doing was asking his followers to think more about where they and we have placed our faith. When Jesus says to us, *“I am the bread of life,”* [35] he is asking us to reflect on our faith and to receive the *true* bread, which does more than fill a stomach for a day. This is the bread that gives life to the world.

He is asking us to be made strong and whole by this bread which is the whole of who he is—by the way his words, and our reception of them, our certainty about the truth of them—*this is the bread of life*. *This* is the food that energizes and gives life to each of us individually, but also to all of us, together, as a community of believers.

Having said that, I also want to acknowledge and speak to something that was brought up at our Wednesday evening Bible Study. One of us wondered how someone who was truly, *physically* hungry would hear these words. How would someone who had nothing to give their children to eat, how would they hear these words? And that is a really good point because there is always the temptation to abstract or spiritualize Jesus’ words, to remove them from action and a genuine transformation in the way we live together, and this will not do in a world that is still filled with hungry, hurting people.

What our faith asks us to do is to allow Jesus’ compassion and generosity to make a real impression on how we live our lives, on how we receive each other and respond to each other’s needs.

Once again: when Jesus says *“I am the bread of life”* [35]—he is doing nothing less than offering himself to us as food, but his is a food that feeds more than our bodies. When he offers himself to us as food, what is being fed is our certainty that we are loved by God and are meant to love God in return, *and* to love one another. In fact, believing in God’s love for us and loving God is what makes us *able to love one another*.

Jesus as food fortifies that reality. By believing him and believing *in* him—which is how we “consume” him—we are strengthened in our ability to welcome others. When we believe in Jesus, we are so enriched by the certainty that we are loved that we are able to turn and love others without the usual fears that human living causes in us—most especially, the fear of scarcity. We are constantly afraid that there will not be enough—that we do not *have* enough, or that we are not strong enough or wealthy enough to acquire what we need, or that we are not loveable enough to have or to be given what we need.

When we eat this bread, this meal that is Christ—when we believe in him—we also become like him. We are shaped by what we have ingested or internalized. When that happens, we, too, become bread…bread for others. When we truly believe that we are loved, we become unafraid to share with and nurture others because it becomes natural to reflect this kind of strength and courage. This is the way communities of strength and courage are created.

When we eat the bread that is the body of Christ, we are nourished as the community that is the body of Christ in the world today because the bread that Christ offers us is not meant primarily to feed us as individuals. It is meant to sustain an entire community.

“Because there is one bread,” said the apostle Paul to the Corinthians, “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” [1 Corinthians 10:17]

In such a world, or even in one community, when we believe and become bread, we see the hungry and will not rest until we have ministered to them. And so, we minister to the hungry by filling-up food pantries, but we also minister to the hungry by advocating for living wages and affordable housing, and all of the other things that cause people to be hungry and without resources in the first place.

We also minister to those who are hungry for justice, and so we acknowledge realities like the casual and institutionalized racism and the way it continues to disrupt and destroy lives. And which, by the way, is also a tragic part of the history of this national holiday that we are moving towards. And so, we are called to remember with grief, the wrong that was visited on the native peoples who saved the pilgrims from starvation with that first thanksgiving feast. The Wampanoags were the Native People whose compassion toward the pilgrims was unfortunately followed by years of a slow, unfolding genocide of their people and the taking of their land.

We need to remember things like this with grief, even *deep* grief. However, when we are nourished by Jesus—when he is our food—then the grief we bear will not cause us to feel hopeless or guilty. Instead, it will instill in us the equally deep desire to allow God’s strength and love to flow through our lives in ways that work for change, in ways that cause *us* to change, in ways that enlarge our understanding, and our commitment to Jesus’ desire and his mission to give life to the world.

When Jesus is our food, and when we, ourselves become bread, then we find we are also adaptable and unafraid in new situations. We will go among hungry, hurting people and we will not be afraid of them. Rather, we will be courageous enough to see who they are as people, and we will be able to sit with them and show them our humanity.

Indeed, we will even find ourselves meeting people where they are, by knocking on doors or chatting in laundromats, and finding out what people want and need. The best ministry adaptations may still be out there, waiting for us to discover.

True belief in Jesus requires acting as the body of Christ in the world. This means being adaptable, durable and nutritious, always looking for ways to nourish a hungry world. So, when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” he is saying that he certainly does want to feed us, but he also desires that we become like him and let ourselves become bread.

Friends, as we break bread this Thanksgiving around our tables, may we who follow in the way of Jesus be moved beyond thankfulness for a meal. May we be moved to believe in Jesus and his words, and to receive and share, and *be* the bread of heaven, the body of Christ, which gives life to the world.

Let us be bread. Amen.