

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Food is an important part of our family’s celebration of Thanksgiving, as it is for many people. We always have a group chat a few weeks in advance, deciding who is hosting the important meal and what we should all bring to contribute. It’s a big event for us, as we don’t get together very often. And it’s not so much about the food in the end, but the connection and conversations we have with each other. That feeds us in other ways.

Food was also on the minds of the crowd in our gospel reading. They had just experienced an enormous feast – the feeding of 5,000 people that at first seemed like it was going to be a disaster. Too many people and not enough food. But by a miracle, all were fed and there was food left over. Now it’s the day after. The crowd has been looking for Jesus, as they saw the disciples leave in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. They had not seen Jesus leave, and were puzzled, because there had only been one boat on the shore. What they didn’t know, was that Jesus had walked on water, following the disciples who were in that boat.

Some of the crowd then decided to use more boats that had shown up on the shore that morning, to cross the Sea of Galilee, and go to Capernaum, where they hoped to find Jesus.

Our story begins when the people had found Jesus.

They said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” There wasn’t any ‘thank you’ for the meal the day before, or questions about how Jesus managed to feed such a large crowd. Just ‘where the heck were you, and when did you come here.’ It appears that some people from the crowd are hungry, and show up thinking they may have missed the next meal. Jesus says to them, ‘I know you are not looking for me because of the miracle of the loaves that happened yesterday. You just showed up because you’re hungry again.’

But instead of providing food, Jesus teaches them about eternal food. Food that satisfies in another way. The people are concerned for their stomachs, but Jesus is concerned for their lives. The people want to feed themselves with bread, but Jesus wants to feed them with God. “Do not work for the food that perishes,” he tells them, “but for the food that endures for eternal life. The Son of Man will give you that kind of food. And God has given to the Son, the mark and seal of his authority.”

The crowd is clearly interested in this new idea, and they don’t question what Jesus said, nor how he came to have that seal of authority from God. Perhaps that sealing happened at his baptism, when the Spirit descended on him and a voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). The crowd then say to Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God so we can have the food that never perishes?”

We must return to the basic Jewish belief system, to understand why the crowd asks this. Ever since the Commandments were given to the people on Mount Sinai, they became people of the Law. They accepted obedience to the Law as the approved way of serving God. So naturally they ask Jesus ‘what sort of law must we obey now, what must we do, to please God and have food that never perishes.’ And because Torah law is so complex, they ask Jesus to tell them what is the most important part of the many laws, or works of God, so they can focus on those. Rabbis were of course the temple leaders who would instruct the people about these important laws.

But Jesus is a very different kind of Rabbi, and his answer to their question must have puzzled them. After all, even the disciples were puzzled when Jesus tried to explain things. Jesus replies to the crowd, “The law you must obey now, that is, the work of God, is that you believe in him whom he has sent.” That’s all, and simple

enough. They don't have to do anything, but simply believe in the Son who has been sent from God. He is the food that they need. The food that never perishes, Jesus himself, because Jesus is the bread that is broken and given to all for the life of the world. Jesus is the bread who will make all our lives sacred.

The crowd though, are skeptical and need proof of Jesus' claim. They ask, “What miracle are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What works do you do?” They point out that Moses had given their ancestors manna in the wilderness; bread for them to eat, so that they would believe.

Jesus replies, “I'm telling you truthfully that it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. Because the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”<sup>34</sup> They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Then Jesus shares with the crowd who he really is. He says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

This is the first of a series of “I AM” sayings in this gospel that remind us of the burning bush story. When Moses asked God his name, God replied, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). “I am,” of course, can be simple self-identification, but in John's gospel it clearly means more. The people would remember the Moses story and then connect Jesus to God as being the “I AM.”

Jesus makes many other “I AM” statements in this gospel – the ‘living bread,’ the ‘light of the world,’ the ‘way, the truth, and the life.’ It's these kinds of statements that the Jews complained about – they said Jesus was making false claims about himself.

“I AM the bread of life” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” He is offering us the gift of himself. He is the imperishable bread that feeds and sustains imperishable life. Or to put it more simply, Jesus says, “I am all you will ever need.” Jesus will be right at the very core of who we are, meeting our deepest needs for wholeness. And just as in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, there'll be plenty of leftovers, flowing out of hearts that are truly loved. For once we know that we are loved, we can really begin to love others.

Our thankfulness to God will overflow in love towards others. This is ultimately what Thanksgiving is all about. We express our gratitude to God for God's love and in his providing for us. And as we do, we also want to make a difference in the lives of others. We give, because we ourselves have been given so much.

AMEN