

Thanksgiving Eve Reflection: John 6:25-35
November 22, 2007, at Custer Lutheran Fellowship

food and Food

I was talking to someone the other day who said Thanksgiving was his favorite holiday. "It's so uncomplicated," he said. "No gifts to buy, no big events to attend. Just hang out with family and give thanks to God." Lots in truth in that!

Still, in terms of the **menu**, Thanksgiving is the **most** complicated of holidays. It **matters** on Thanksgiving what you eat. It seems somehow countercultural if not actually un-American to suggest, as Ronda Snyder did in the Rapid City Journal this morning, that we switch from turkey to pork. Pork? On Thanksgiving? She should have her head examined!

The menu for Thanksgiving begins with turkey. Case closed.

And what else will we consume tomorrow? Potatoes. Salad. Broccoli with cheese. Cranberries. Hot rolls. Yams or my personal favorite, rutabaga loaf. Let's see: carrots, corn? Am I missing something? A bottle of wine, perhaps? Certainly pie: pumpkin or apple or blueberry or pecan. And don't forget the Cool Whip when you go to the grocery store! Especially if you're headed to my house!

It makes us smile even to hear the menu recited, doesn't it? Thanksgiving is all about the food. Comfort food. The kind of food that seems to go perfectly with sitting in the living room, catching up with family, watching the Lions play the Packers or going out in the woods together to find that not-so-perfect Black Hills Christmas tree.

For Arlene and I, as well as several other families from our congregation, our Thanksgiving menu will contrast sharply with the menu for last week. As you may or may not know, for one week, we lived on the average amount of food you can buy with food stamps in the United States--\$1 per person per meal, \$21 per week. It has been quite an experience. Toast and jam for breakfast, toast and peanut butter for lunch. A banana here, a small apple there. Lentils and rice, scrambled eggs, or chicken legs for supper. No snacks. No milk. Few vegetables. We both ate up all the food we were allotted and still lost 5 pounds each during the week.

Of course, this diet was **more** generous than what many people eat. The homeless in our cities pick through dumpsters to scrounge supper. The rural poor of Nicaragua suffer malnutrition on diets of rice and beans, rice and beans, rice and beans. The people of our partner congregation in Bogotá, Colombia, pool their meager resources for a Sunday meal at church. There are a lot of people who eat less than we ate last week.

Still, we're grateful to be off the food stamp diet in time for our Thanksgiving

feast. After all, Thanksgiving **is** all about the food. Or is it?

In tonight's gospel, Jesus seems a little hard on the hungry. He says to the crowds, "Truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life." He was speaking to the people who'd eaten their share of the loaves he multiplied on a Galilean hillside after preaching to them all afternoon only the day before. Who can blame them for wanting more? About midway through last week, when it seemed like we would run out of bread altogether, I would have been first in line.

I'm sure it's not that Jesus didn't want people to eat, but that he didn't want them to misunderstand. Those multiplied loaves were **signs** of the kingdom. But there was something greater than those signs, namely, **the Kingdom itself**. That dream, that vision, that reality of life in which there is justice for all, bread for all, and in which people live in compassionate community. That dream, that vision, that reality in which we come to see every morsel of food, every drop of rain, every dollar in the wallet as a gift from God to be shared. In which we come to recognize God in the One who came down from heaven, Jesus Christ.

Remember the story in the other three gospels of a hungry Jesus in the wilderness? When the devil tempts him to turn stone into bread, he says, "Humans do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." And of all God's words, the living Word is Jesus himself. The bread of life. Food to pilgrims given. Manna from above.

If, in John's eyes, Thanksgiving **is** all about the food, it is less about food with a **small** "f" than about food with a **capital** "F." The food which satisfies our deepest hunger. Which cannot be bought with money or earned by the sweat of our brow, but which **can** be received freely, as a gift, by faith.

And this gift can free us from misunderstanding the role of food, with a small "f:" it cannot save. It's not that Thanksgiving feasting is wrong—not at all! But that, on most days, "we could live more simply so that others might simply live." What if, during Advent, we would all shave \$10 off of our food budgets and share our extra \$40 with world hunger or the food pantry? Or what if, all year round, we would eat very simply one day each week, both to remind ourselves of the poor and to share the money we would have spent with them? What if we would all plant gardens and eat the potatoes and carrots God's soil produces? What if we would eat foods that are less processed as a way of preserving the environment for generations to come? Then, perhaps, like the loaves Jesus multiplied, we, too, would become signs of the Kingdom of God.

I love theologian David Jacobson's comment on this text: "This is a strange Word

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of grace and truth, and performs the one thing our frenetic, market-based, supersized economy cannot commodify: undying, trusting faith.” Amen.