

The Giver

John 6:25-35

Jesus is on the run, trying to hide from his adoring fans. Just before the passage that was read, there is an account of the feeding of the five thousand. Thousands of people following Jesus, hoping to see signs and miracles. And that day they got a big one. The Lord took a boys lunch and made it a feast; he blessed it and broke it, and distributed it to everyone who was there. Now our Thanksgiving dinners are just the opposite – it's the feeding of the dozen. It looks like we have enough to feed five thousand, and then it turns out that we managed to polish it off! But this was the miracle, one lunch fed five thousand. And after that miracle, Jesus and the disciples needed to get away. The disciples got in the boat and headed across the sea to Capernaum, and Jesus decided to withdraw to the mountain by himself. There was only one boat, but he figured he didn't need a boat – he'd just walk across the lake when he was ready.

And that brings us to reading we just heard. It's the next day, and the crowds are looking for their miracle worker. They went back to the spot where they ate the bread – and there was no one there. But they had seen the disciples leave in the boat, so they got into their own boats and headed across looking for Jesus. It says, "When they found him on the other side, they said, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'" They had not seen him get into the boat – and there had only been one boat. Maybe there had been another miracle. A buzz went through the crowd – can you imagine how this would have played out today, with Facebook updates and Twitter tweets. They were breathless, waiting for the answer. And then it came.

A friend of mine, a minister in a church in our area, has an expression; he says some things are "rudely truthful." It is the truth, bluntly spoken, nothing to make you feel better, no sugar coating, just the unvarnished truth. Jesus' answer to this crowd is "rudely truthful." "Rabbi, when did you come here – we were looking for you." Jesus answers, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." You're not looking for me – you're looking for a free meal. That is rudely truthful. Yet it is the truth. They were seeking the gift, and ignoring the giver. They were seeking what the Son of Man could do for them, not the Son of Man.

Now I wonder if we too might find ourselves in their position here at Thanksgiving... when we're counting our blessings? I was at a preschool thanksgiving presentation this morning with my children, and they had been talking about what they are thankful for in their class, and the teachers shared their lists with us. It was exactly what you'd expect and completely and thoroughly cute: for mom and dad, for chicken nuggets, for my brother and sister, for school, for playing outside, for my Uncle Gary who cracks me up. One little boy was thankful for the potty – "from the mouths of babes." Last week I asked a room full of adults the same question, what are you thankful for this Thanksgiving? The answers were a little more mature: for my health, for new grandchildren, for a home where I am accepted and loved, that everyone around the table last year will be there this year – we didn't lose anyone; for making memories with my children, for gathering with family and friends. These are our gifts, these are the blessings that we're most thankful for. As the old hymn says, "Count your blessings name them one by one..." And it is said that in tough times, we need count our blessings twice to make they outnumber the burdens.

These are our gifts... But if we are only thankful for the gifts, are we in the same position as the crowd Jesus is talking to? When give our thanks, in this service, or on Facebook as many have done this month, or around the table at dinner on Thursday, might Jesus say to us, "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."? Or to make it simpler, would Jesus say you're more focused on the gift than on the giver. We're thankful for our health, and that's a gift, but who gave it? We're thankful for children and grandchildren, and they are gifts, but who gave them? We're thankful for the friends that will surround us on Thanksgiving. But who placed these wonderful people, these treasures, in our lives? I believe the friends we have are sheer gifts from God. I don't know how other people make friends, but for me it is such a miracle to make a good friend. You meet someone at a party or a school event, and make small talk, and then someone says let's have dinner, then you spend a month trying to make that work, and you're hoping it does work. Not just the dinner, but the relationship; that you'll click, that everybody will click, husbands and wives and children. And what are the odds of that happening? It's a miracle to find a good friend. So I am thankful for our good friends this Thanksgiving; and *who gave those friends*, who brought them into our lives? If you and I miss that question, then Jesus might well say to us, "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." If we count our blessings and name them one by one, but then miss the one who gave them – then Jesus might well say to us, you've sought the gift, and missed the giver.

This is what Jesus means when he talks about signs, and says this crowd did not see signs. The blessings of life that we count at Thanksgiving are signs that point to the presence of God – to *God's* blessing, to *God's* goodness, to *God's* mercy. The blessings are not ends in themselves, but signs that lead us to the great GIVER of Gifts.

After a long day of work, being gone from home, when my car pulls up outside the house my kids see it, and it is a sign. "Daddy's home!" When the door opens, the kids hear it and it's a sign, "Daddy's home!" When they see my coat hanging on the rack by the door, when they see the briefcase sitting in the corner, when they hear the footsteps coming down the hallway – these are signs, "Daddy's home!" And they run to see me. Now can you imagine if they saw the signs but missed me? If my kids treated these signs like the crowd treated the bread. They saw the car, but never wondered who was in it? They heard the door open, but never asked who had come in? They saw the coat and the briefcase and heard the footsteps, but went about their business without realizing that Daddy was home. That's seeing the signs and missing the meaning.

This, Jesus says, is the problem. We have the meal, but miss the meaning. We get the gift, but forget the giver. So Jesus tries to *grow* us a little bit; to bring us closer to a spiritual maturity that **can appreciate the gift and go beyond it to the giver**. The crowds that day were looking for bread, and the Bread of Life was in their midst. They were looking for miracles, and the greatest miracle – the incarnate God – was standing before them. They were missing the Giver among the gifts, and often so do we.

Seeing the gift and the giver really is about spiritual maturity, about growing in faith and wisdom. Think back to when you were a child. When I was a child, most Christmases my grandmother would come to visit. She would bring presents and desserts; her presents were never that great – my grandmother was fond of socks and sweaters – but her desserts were out of sight. She would bring a great box of seven layer cookies that would melt in your mouth with coconut and chocolate chips and graham crackers. She would bring two cakes, a chocolate pound cake that was unbelievably dense and

an Italian Cream Cake, stuffed with pecans and coconut and cream cheese frosting. When I was little, it barely mattered to me that Granny was there – what mattered were those desserts. “Granny, if you can’t come for Christmas that’s okay – just send the desserts. Mail them!” To this day, when my Granny – who is now 93 – comes to visit, she brings cookies and cakes. But today is different; I’ve grown. Now, I’m glad for the cakes, but I’m mostly glad for her. I’m glad that she is there, visiting with us; I want to absorb every moment I can with her. When I come into the kitchen on a morning of her visit, and see the cake tin sitting on the counter – it is a *sign*. It is a sign that tells me my grandmother is there.

Now that is the kind of thing that comes with maturity; you appreciate the gift and go beyond it to the giver. And eventually, the importance of the gift begins to fade and all you really want is the presence of the giver. How many times have we said to our family or friends, “Don’t bring me anything; I just want _____.” You.

I believe this brings us to the heart of what Jesus is saying. Maturing in faith means seeking our daily bread *and* the Bread of Life; it means giving thanks for the gift, and relishing the presence of the Giver. The hymn that I sang earlier, I didn’t finish the line – but it’s important. “Count your blessings, name them one by one; count your blessings *see what God has done.*” Maturing in faith means moving through the first part of that line, and resting in the last.

My prayer for us this Thanksgiving, as we gather around our tables and count our many blessings, is that are blessings will inspire more than gratitude. My prayer is that our blessings will inspire faith – faith in what God has done. That these blessings will become signs that lead us to the eternal God whose very presence is ultimately our greatest blessing in this life and the next.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Rev. Dr. Patrick W. T. Johnson

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