

Rev. Lauren Baske Davis
First UCC Northfield
Thanksgiving Worship – Sunday November 24, 2024
Matthew 14:13-21

Scripture

¹³ Now when Jesus heard [the news that John had been murdered by Herod], he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides/[in addition to the] women and children.

Sermon

Dear First UCC, first things first. Our ancestral history tells us that if we are to talk about Thanksgiving, as we have planned for worship today, there must be a bit of a reckoning. You can read the statement on the back of your bulletin from the Beyond Land Acknowledgement Team. I am grateful for their words.

The reason there must be a reckoning is because the truth of our Congregationalist history is that we have long been seen as unobtrusive pilgrims with the funny looking hats and shoes, when in fact those puritans and pilgrims, while earnest, if not zealous, in their faith, also acted as oppressive colonizers. With thanks to Rev. David McMahill, former pastor here, who was also my UCC History/Polity professor at seminary, the pilgrims were by all accounts a small religious sect who were—I’m sorry to say—unrepentantly violent towards the Wampanoag and First Nations people who were already in the northeastern part of this continent when the Pilgrims and Puritans arrived.

The Thanksgiving holiday then, is understandably a Day of Mourning for First Nations people. To further complicate things, there’s historical question of whether the first Thanksgiving was actually in “present-day Massachusetts...in 1621? Or was it an English celebration...on the shores of Virginia, in 1619? Or how about a Spanish gathering in what became Texas, in 1598 — or Florida, in 1565?” Scholars tells us that “The reasons for those celebrations varied.... The English colonists in Virginia, for example, declared the day a commemoration of their arrival, thanking God for safe

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passage across a forbidding ocean; likewise, the Spanish explorers thanked God for survival. On the other hand, after a 1637 massacre of Native Americans, the governor of Plymouth wrote that Thanksgiving Days would be “in honor of the bloody victory.” In 1789, President George Washington declared a national Day of Thanksgiving to thank God for the birth of a new nation. And the current annual date in late November ...wasn't established until Abraham Lincoln's declaration in 1863, explicitly giving thanks for the Union's military efforts in the Civil War.”¹ Whew. Isn't history fun?

This holiday has had moral ambiguity and complexity since its inception, whenever that was. Maybe in response to the violent conflict and oppression of our denomination's ancestors, we spend time we lift up indigenous Native American people and communities who are still here. There are indigenous folks living boldly and thriving: making art, singing and drumming ancestral songs and stories, making medicine from long-held wisdom, reviving language, and teaching desperately-needed worldviews about our relationship with the earth.² Despite our nation's efforts to suppress or extinguish entire cultures and communities, let us lift these up.

Perhaps the reality of this holiday's historical and moral ambiguity leads us to work together in Jesus' name in solidarity and justice, or to feed people facing chronic food insecurity. Perhaps it compels us to work for just-peace-making. If we are to reckon truly with the truth of this holiday's history, it must be more than simply abundant harvest and gratitude (though gratitude is powerful!). As people of faith today, with eyes open to our own history, let it be about redoubling our efforts in compassion, service, solidarity, and just-peace-making as we give thanks.

Now, in parallel to our Thanksgiving holiday acknowledgement today, we have a scripture about a different kind of big meal from the Gospel of Matthew. It's commonly called “The Feeding of the 5,000,” but the last line in this story, which is more of a footnote, mentions that there were 5,000 men, in addition to the women and children there. To give you an idea, we're talking about a crowd nearly the size of Northfield. Did it really happen that way? As I tell our children and youth, it may not have exactly happened that way, but there's truth in it.

Let's get to some context around this scripture passage first, though. If we just looked before and after the story we have today, right before this miracle of a meal, Jesus was trying to get away. You see, he needed a break, a moment of escape, a moment with himself, apart from the crowds. He had just learned that the prophet, the

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/11/14/a-brief-theology-of-thanksgiving>

² See the Native art collective [Eighth Generation](#), or more local [Heart Berry](#), [past exhibits at the MIA](#), as well as [Linda Black Elk](#), [James Vukelich](#), [Anton Treuer](#), [Kaitlin Curtice](#), [Robin Wall Kimmer](#) for a start.

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baptizer, the witness, Elizabeth and Zachariah's son, his cousin, John, had been murdered by King Herod. Jesus had just heard the news, and was overcome with grief.

But he doesn't get a moment away, because the crowds see him, and they follow him. In truth, they have needs too, many of them are ill and in need of healing. We know that Jesus is grieving, with needs of his own; and eventually, after this meal, he would go up the mountain alone to pray and to grieve.

In this moment, after Jesus hears the news, there are crowds following him. And it is a grieving Jesus who, rather than running away, turns with compassion toward the crowds. In Greek, the word compassion literally means he felt for them, he had a gut-feeling that he needed to stay with the people.

It leads me to wonder, if the reason that Jesus and the story of the feeding of the crowds exists at all because Jesus was coming from a place of lack, of loneliness, of need, himself. That when the disciples said, "this is a deserted place (sometimes translated a lonely place)" he deeply, viscerally understood others' sense of need. This means that the feeding of the crowds, this moment of abundance, doesn't start as a story of abundance. It's a story of wonder and thanks, surely! But first it is a story of shared grief, exhaustion, and lack. A story of a grieving Jesus, who needs a moment; staying out of his own compassion to help others in whom he sees similar need.

I can only imagine—exhausted Jesus hitting his human limits and saying to the disciples, "Now the people are hungry? Well, they needn't go away. Your turn. You feed them." UCC Minister Martin Copenhaver wrote in *The Christian Century* a few years ago, that it is in our lack that we can truly be grateful. "In fact," he says, "every Thanksgiving holiday we confront an irony: the more we have, the less likely we are to thank God. Continuous bounty doesn't always create thankfulness; sometimes it actually seems to stamp out thankfulness." I think its theological thin ice—and I am not at all a glutton for punishment or suffering (I believe we should eat when we are hungry and sleep when we are tired) but I also think it's true— that really tough experiences can sharpen our vision, bringing what's most important into sight more clearly.

I mentioned in our newsletter *The Chronicle* that I've been keeping a list. You could call it a joy or gratitude list, where anytime I come into contact with something that is goodness in the day, I write it down, and then I revisit it to savor the good things. Savoring these small goodness's is everything to me. As another pastor said, "I don't quite know how to take it all in, these gifts that appear like manna, like living bread. There is so much abundance....I am certain I will be trailing crumbs behind me. At least twelve baskets full. Sustenance enough for the path ahead."³

³ Jan Richardson, <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/07/30/a-gracious-plenty/>

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You see, when the world feels heavy, it has made me appreciate things I would have glossed over before. The other day I ran into a friend at the co-op I haven't seen for a while. We were both zoned out in the same aisle, and it was only when we were a few feet away from each other that we recognized one another. We talked about zoning out while the world felt hard. We talked about consciously deciding to be joyful together, amid the grief of the world. And then we laughed together about how we each had no idea what was for dinner that night, and somehow everything felt lighter. Not because we knew what was for dinner yet, or because something in the world had changed, but because we had faced our sense of lack together. People have said in many ways over the years that its only in the darkness of the sky that we can see the stars. And that can feel trite.

But in our gospels (“gospel” literally meaning good news) they call it a miracle. Where there is lack of food, where there is exhaustion, where there is violent empire looming—there is bread, and there are fish—and somehow it is enough. I am not talking about some metaphysical miracle. Whatever and however it happened, in the midst of all of that gloom and madness, something glorious happened. Hungry people got fed; thousands of them.

For too long, we have celebrated the feeding of the crowds as a miracle, without understanding why it is so: I think it's true that the more we have the less we are likely to thank God. I believe that we all do better when we all do better. But I am also coming to learn that in continued abundance, like eating too much turkey, it's easier to fall asleep.

The feeding of the 5,000, or 15,000 is in each of the four of the gospels, a total of six times, which means two gospels tell it twice. That's how big of a deal this story is. I don't know how it happened—did Jesus really make something out of nothing? Did everyone have something in their pockets to share, and when they shared, it was enough? Scholars don't know.

I don't know how it happened, either, but I believe it is central to our faith. I believe it is a story of Jesus' compassion, which was laser focused because of his own state of grief. I believe it's a miracle, because the gospel writers all write about it, because there was something too true, too important, in that story to leave it out. It's a miracle finding a way through the lack, finding a way through, together, and not leaving anyone out. About the disciples, taking it into their own hands when Jesus says “they're hungry? you feed them.”

It was about feeding hungry people, yes, attending to their needs, but even more, it's about 15,000ish people looking into each other's faces passing the food baskets,

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and saying, “I am deserving and worthy of nourishment, and you’re deserving and worthy of nourishment,” and to the next, “you’re deserving and worthy of nourishment,” and to the next, and to the next. It had nothing to do with knowing one another, liking one another, or thinking the person next to you has the right or wrong beliefs, it was about finding a way through a tough time, about believing in humanity, and about enacting hope and care.

It was about feeling like things were too heavy, feeling like nothing would ever be quite right, and doing exactly what we did two Sundays ago—gathering around tables in the church, graciously covered with small graces like tablecloths and bud vases of flowers to eat soup, prepared by a few and shared by many. To be truly grateful and to find power and nourishment together in community. To reach out knowing that each of us are grieving, or carrying burdens, or living complex lives, or living with illness, then to go through it imperfectly and uncertainly, but to do it together.

If we are going to be Jesus’ people in the world *now*, if we are going to work in love and peace and justice—which God calls us to—let us be grateful for here and now and being together. Let us have our senses sharpened by the heaviness of the world toward compassion. Let us be grounded in community, find ways to have enough to share together, to trust that we are enough and beloved, as we go out into working for the things that really matter. We must do it with stories of loaves and fishes and trust, we must do it with songs of gratitude, and tablecloths and soup, we must do it centered in the values that we hold dear—the values that Jesus lived—and just imagine what life and nourishment and abundance there can be. We get to act, to bless and be blessed as we walk in Jesus’ ways. Thanks be to God. Amen.