

“Don’t Worry, Be Grateful”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Thanksgiving Day – 28 November 2019
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35

Yesterday, Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Today, he is on the other side of sea, pursued by those he so generously fed not long ago. It makes sense that they would follow him. What a remarkable feat! If only Thanksgiving dinner could be conjured up with a few basics and a prayer.

The crowd seems surprised, perhaps even a bit offended, that Jesus crossed the sea without inviting them along. Jesus, understandably unamused by their attitude, responds that they only followed him because of the free supper. They ask for instruction about how to live with God faithfully. Jesus told them to believe in him.

And then the most astonishing thing happened. They asked for a sign. Can you believe it? People who were still digesting the meal from last night felt like they needed just a little more proof that Jesus was the real deal. Even more outrageous, they quoted from Exodus about how God had provided their ancestors with food in the wilderness of Sinai.

Maybe they didn’t realize that a miracle that had happened the night before, but it’s hard to see how. Enough fish and bread to feed 5,000 people might not fill this place to the rafters, but it would definitely bury us. Surely, somebody must have noticed that before the feast began, there was no mountain of bread and fish. Surely, somebody must have wondered where all that food suddenly came from.

Maybe it just seemed too good to be true. A feast fashioned from next to nothing had to be some kind of trick. They would need a further demonstration from Jesus before they would embrace the truth of who he was. Nobody likes to be gullible.

Jesus answered them that just as the manna Moses had given their ancestors had come from God, so had he. But the crowd didn't get it, so Jesus made it plain: "I am the bread of life." Thus ends the gospel reading from John for today, but only a few verses onward, we learn their reply. They complained that Jesus was getting too big for his britches.

It's amazing how people, when confronted with the obvious, will refuse to see what's right before their eyes. Of course, we can cut the crowd some slack. Finding a fast way to feed 5,000 people is one thing, but the claim made Jesus about being the Son of God was quite another. No doubt there were good, faithful people in the crowd who were concerned or offended by that claim. And we ought to cut the crowd some slack, because we often aren't much different from them.

When we encounter an obvious truth that doesn't fit into our preconceived categories of what truth is, we tend to deny that truth, facts be damned, and the everyday obvious truth we're frequently tempted to ignore is that we have cause for great thanksgiving.

Naturally, we feel that way today, because it's federally mandated that we be thankful. But were we thankful yesterday, when the rush of last minute preparations for the great feast left us tired and apprehensive? We will be grateful tomorrow, when turkey and all the trimmings weigh heavy in our stomachs, and the sight those leftovers in the fridge make us wonder how long it might be before there's a meal that doesn't include turkey?

It's easy to forget to be thankful, when we have so much to worry about. A casual glance at the news provides plenty to hike up anxiety. Venturing out on Black Friday, for most people, is a huge stressor with the crowds jostling, the fear of the store running out, of being a little too late for the big deal.

Yet Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, who had plenty more to worry about than we do, encouraged them: “Do not worry about anything.” His cure for the common worry: be thankful. And so it comes full circle. There are two ways to live: with faith or fear; with gratitude or grumbling. Fear and frustration leave us empty, but faith makes us full of thanksgiving: for the wonder of life, the mystery of love, and small things we just assume will happen, like the car waiting for us in the lot will start, or that there’s no arsenic in the communion wine. Don’t worry. I’ll be the first one to take a sip, and if I smell bitter almonds, the Altar Guild and I will have a little talk.

When we remember to be grateful for the many graces, great and small, that God showers upon us, we enter a state of mind that enables us to be faithful, to enter into a relationship of love and hope and joy with a God who supplies us with everything we really need. And on a day when the ads trumpet amazing deals, nothing beats God’s deal.

God gives us every breath, every bite, every moment; each stitch in the fabric of reality was woven by a God who gives it all away for free, so that we may be free to give. Maybe that just seems too good to be true. Like the crowd by the sea wanting a sign after they’d seen a miracle, the more God amazes us, the more confused and concerned and wary we become. It’s ironic but natural, because the power of God is so overwhelming. But when our gratitude kindles our faith, and our faith inspires gratitude, we realize that it is both good and true.

So tomorrow, when you wake, before your feet hit the floor, be mindful that the only thing keeping the molecules of your body from flying apart is the creative power of God. Remind yourself that you are a sinner, just like me and everybody else, and that God forgives you. Take a moment in silence to become aware of what a great blessing it is simply to be alive,

because the bread of life has chosen to dwell within you, because the faith that comes through gratitude has made a home for Jesus in your heart there forever. Amen.