

John 6:25-35 (NRSV)

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very 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 for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many people have wonderful, warm memories of Thanksgiving, joyous family gatherings, sitting around the fire telling edifying tales of bygone days, simple truths and homely virtues. I envy them, I really do. Actually, my memories of Thanksgiving with my family are really very nice. Unfortunately, intervening in time are my memories of years of having my in-laws over for several hours of guerilla warfare, no less bloody for hostilities not being openly declared. These were, actually, my ex-in-laws – Linda's family is absolutely wonderful.

Many young families, if truth be told, will admit that Thanksgiving, the annual rite of feeding the extended family dishes that you only cook once a year and never really master, that Thanksgiving is actually a pretty stressful introduction to what is really a very stressful season. My own special Thanksgiving burden was the carving of the turkey. My ex-father-in-law would stand at my elbow, offering caustic comment and blunt correction over the seemingly endless task of getting as much dark meat as possible off the legs while the rest of the food got cold and everyone else shifted from foot to foot, unwilling to sit, but uncomfortable standing and watching the spectacle. Ah, family holidays.

As I began to prepare this sermon, I realized, too, that it was hard for me to get into an appropriately grateful frame of mind for Thanksgiving. The deaths of Alyson and Ryan Purvis have hit this community hard, and reawakened our own congregation's tragic losses of young people to traffic accidents. This has been a hard autumn for us, with the loss of our dear friend and long-time member Earl Westphal, with many deaths and serious illnesses.

Imagine, then, how small I felt when I read from Paul's letter to the church at Phillippi. Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Don't worry about anything, but in everything, "by prayer with supplication and thanksgiving let your request be known to God."

As Paul wrote this, he was imprisoned on a capital charge. We don't know whether, when he wrote this he was imprisoned in Rome or elsewhere, but we know that Paul could have been executed based on whatever he was accused of. We don't know whether this is Paul's final imprisonment, because Paul was often in prison.

I felt small that I couldn't get into an appropriately thankful frame of mind, while Paul, imprisoned and under threat of

execution, had no trouble at all rejoicing. And I couldn't help but wonder just what he was so thankful for.

One could, I suppose, make the case that Paul was grateful for the gifts he *had* received. The Phillippian church had sent along some money that Paul wanted to give to the poor in Jerusalem. He could give thanks that he wasn't dead yet, that Timothy was with him. But that isn't the sense we get from the letter, that he was sifting through his life to find the good bits that he could give thanks for.

No, Paul seems to be giving thanks for the whole mess, the happy and the sad, his enemies and his friends, the good days and the bad days, days of freedom and days of imprisonment. Paul was grateful that God had given him these churches that were full of bickering and dissension, argument and controversy. Paul was giving thanks for the presence of God in his life, even though that presence was causing him to be in arguments with fellow believers with whom he disagreed, kicked out of one city after another – what does he say in 2 Corinthians, chapter 11 – being whipped, beaten with rods, stoned and shipwrecked. It's hard to believe that Paul can rejoice in this kind of a life.

And yet, in a short while, we will celebrate the Eucharist, and Eucharist means, "Thanksgiving." And what we will be giving thanks for is the life, and the death, and the continuing life of Jesus Christ. We don't sort out the parts of that story that we're happy about from the parts that make us sad. It is all one story and none of it makes any sense if we edit out the parts that we don't like.

Our lives are just the same – they are all one story. We are prone to look at our stories and edit out the parts that we don't like to remember – the illnesses, the deaths, the accidents, my ex-father-in-law standing at my elbow and giving me turkey-carving lessons. We want to make the story one that we can tell with pride, a story of one success after another. If there are rough spots,

we want to skate over them. We zip past the months of depression and despair and tell our stories so that they are full of painless victories.

There is a danger in this and it is that our stories, retold this way, are not really our stories anymore. They are stories of someone else, someone who doesn't need forgiveness or transformation, someone who doesn't need God the way we self-evidently do.

And there is a further danger and it is this: I don't think we can know what parts of our lives are the good parts and which parts are the bad parts. Left to our own devices, we would choose the less painful paths, the less bruising experiences, the roads more traveled. Left to our own preferences, I can't imagine that we would choose even moments, much less long periods of disappointment, abandonment and despair. And yet, when we look back at our lives, when we look back at the times where we learned and grew and changed the most – shoot, when we look back at when we learned to carve a turkey – those times were frequently painful and humiliating – yes, and very precious.

To be sure, we continue to look, with Paul, for what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and excellent, but don't be surprised if what teaches and transforms us aren't things that aren't quite so attractive at first blush, things that at the time we would give a lot to avoid.

So, as we celebrate the annual feast of Thanksgiving, the safe route is to look back on the things for which we are grateful, the things we remember fondly, the good times and good things and good people. And there's no reason not to do that. But if you want to do something really exceptional, something really Christian, if you want to choose the road *less* traveled, see if you can't give thanks for the whole year and *all* that God has packed into it. The laughter and the tears, good times and bad, when you were graceful and when you were awkward, for the things you mended and the things you broke, for when you had just the right thing to say and when you said the absolutely wrong thing, the things that you think went right and the things that you think went wrong, because in the end as the hymn tells us the Lord God made them all.

Amen.