

Gluttony and gratitude

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John 6:25-35

I am still full. Thank God! What a feast! My favorites are mashed potatoes and gravy and stuffing. I go for the traditional. I scoff at lentils and tofu-turkey. I eat the real thing. I eat until I am ready to burst. I sack out for a bit, allow things to settle as much as possible, and then dive into the pie.

Now, some of you might be feeling a bit ashamed — of me, or maybe even yourselves. You might be thinking that I am a glutton or a pig. (They are smart animals, so I don't find the comparison all that offensive!)

Our social conscience has that little nagging voice that reminds us of all the good things that we have that so many other people don't have. Consider that the average Thanksgiving meal is about 3,000 calories. That is more than the average person really needs to eat in an entire day. Three thousand calories, if they were bundled up and sent to a famine stricken country, could do a lot of good.

Our social conscience is quite right to remind us that our over-consumption contributes to the hunger of others. If we allow it to, our nagging conscience reminds us of a few other things as well. The obesity epidemic here in the U.S., the environmental impact of factory farming, the cruel treatment of the people displaced by European encroachment into North America ...

Mennonites can be quite good at this game. I learned it early on in college. Most young people arrive at college in a stage of development in which the world

can be categorized into black and white. Being surrounded by many other earnest young Mennonites and being in an environment where we learned about the injustice of the world made it difficult to have much fun. Everything had to be boycotted, protested, persuaded or at least harassed. It was incredibly irritating to realize that there was no way to completely keep our hands clean. We still had to eat, pay taxes, work for our money and participate in unjust systems. Even our Mennonite college had to behave as an institution, as much as that annoyed us.

Fortunately, that stage of development passes in the early-20s and we could slide into a comfortable apathy. That active sense of righteous indignation slides into the back of our brains and becomes that nagging voice. María and I still avoid Wal-Mart (or as I like to call it, VoldeMart). Sometimes we buy organic or locally grown food. But, even though I know I'm supposed to be boycotting the company, I still keep up my Coke-a-day habit.

So what do we do with our nagging conscience on Thanksgiving? Perhaps next to the secular version of Christmas, this is the epitome of American holidays. We watch football and gorge ourselves on fattening foods. And we nap. What could be more American than that?

How can we as Christians, and in particular a breed of Christians who take humble pride in being non-typical Americans, give thanks when we see all that is wrong and unjust about the holiday?

I think it all comes down to appropriate gratitude. Looking at today's Gospel lesson, I see a representation of the typical American attitude about Thanksgiving. The people followed Jesus because they had full bellies. I think we

do this too often. We thank God for providing us with abundant harvests, rich resources and mountains of food. We associate God with our gluttony.

We give thanks for our own ingenuity – for our ability to acquire the mountains of food that fill our tables. For the geneticists who plump the turkey's breast beyond what God intends. For the pest and disease resistant corn. Some of you (though not me) might even give thanks for ToFurkey.

Our temptation might be to totally give up on the holiday. We could sit in our corner and eat bean curds and lentils and relish our pride in our Mennonite simplicity. Sometimes it is easier to be grumpy than grateful.

I am quite grateful to say, however, that Jesus does not call us to such extremes. In fact, he is much more likely to condemn the self-righteous attitude that lies beneath the surface.

In the narrative from John, we see Jesus “cleaning up” from quite a Thanksgiving feast. The day before, Jesus had hosted unexpected guests — 5,000 men, plus probably many more women and children. With the meager offerings of five loaves of bread and two fish, he whipped up a spectacular meal. Note here that in verse 11, Jesus gives thanks before serving the food.

Everyone had their fill. There were even leftovers. All the guests were so thrilled by the miracle that they planned to make Jesus their king. He hiked up a mountain to find some time to himself. That night he walked across the water to meet up with his disciples.

What a spectacular day! Thousands were convinced of Jesus' divinity. Jesus capped it all that night when his disciples called to him from the boat. He

responded by saying, “Fear not! I AM!” I AM is an identification reserved for God alone.

The next morning — the day after this Thanksgiving feast — the crowd caught up with Jesus. At first reading it looks as though Jesus scolds the crowd for misplaced faith. He says, “you are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

I think, however, that rather than necessarily scolding them, Jesus is offering a new way for the people to contextualize their experience. He gives them a new way of understanding what had taken place the day before. Yesterday, Jesus explains, was not just about bread and fish. Yesterday was about something greater than that.

The food the people ate served its practical purpose, and that was good. It satisfied their hunger. But it also served as a visceral experience of something *even more real*. Jesus explains to the crowd that the bread of God is “that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” And he says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

The feast shared by 5,000 and our Thanksgiving feasts are a foretaste of the bread of life. The gift of food, the joy of celebration and the pleasure of satisfaction are all good things that God has given us. Like communion, each meal we eat can become an act of participation in God’s Kingdom.

Just like the bread of life, our earthly food is “for the world,” not just for “us.” We shouldn’t take it as a special blessing that we have plenty while others

go hungry — rather, we should see it as a call to “food evangelism.” We don’t feed others by starving ourselves.

Like many children, my brothers and I were often reminded of the hungry people in China when we wouldn’t finish our green beans. Like many children, we suggested sending the green beans to China. A much more locally viable option is that of sharing our food. The Kingdom meal is one that we can invite everyone to, so that they too can “taste and see that God is good!”

Note that in the narrative from John, Jesus prepared the people for his spiritual food by meeting their physical needs first. The metaphor of “bread of life” makes the most sense to someone who has had their hunger satisfied.

Kingdom food is satisfying and delightful. And, perhaps unlike our earthly Thanksgiving feast, it is thoroughly good for you. Yes, our conscience gives us plenty of reasons to be suspect of American Thanksgiving. But there is grace for the table. Even as we work for a more just world in which there is plenty for everyone and where humans strive for a humble position in nature’s web, we can give thanks and taste the coming Kingdom.