

“Counting Our Blessings” – John 6:25-35 – Oct 9/16 (Thanksgiving Sunday)

I think it was last Wednesday that I first sensed it. As I stepped out of the house to head to Thurlow Street for the monthly consultants meeting at the construction site, I felt that first tinge of crisp air that signals both that Summer is ending and that Fall has officially started. The sky was mostly clear with a few clearly-defined ultra-white clouds that signal freezing conditions to a pilot; the dropped leaves were making those brittle sounds as they blew across the lawn; and it was all good! By early Saturday morning of course those joyful signs had turned to the harsh, almost sleet-like sound of heavy rain dropping on the porch in the pre-dawn darkness, a harbinger of the need-to-shovel stuff that lies in the not-too-distant future.

But for the moment I will enjoy what could be my favourite season – Fall, with its wondrous smells of turkey and mashed potatoes and gravy and apple and pumpkin pies. This truly is a time of year to enjoy and to reflect on the many blessings I enjoy ... a warm and loving home, lots of good food, a wonderful congregation, some family joining for Thanksgiving dinner later this afternoon. The thought comes naturally and often to me that “I am truly blessed – thank you, Lord!” Of course, being thankful for so many good things in life seems particularly natural this week, especially with today being Thanksgiving Sunday.

And yet as natural as it is, there’s a subtle but dangerous problem with being overly thankful for such things, a problem that is revealed or highlighted in today’s reading from John’s Gospel. That problem is pointed out by Jesus right at the beginning of the reading, when the crowd chased after him and discovered him on the other side of the sea. We need to explore and discover a little background first in order that we may hear the problem more clearly.

To begin, we recognize that Chapter Six in John’s Gospel is a complex collection of events, beginning with the feeding of the five thousand with a few loaves of bread and several fish. Appropriately enough, before distributing the bread Jesus gave thanks. The crowd, thankful that their hunger was satisfied, tried to make this man king – who wouldn’t want a king who could make the economy yield all sorts of good things as if by magic?! Jesus would have none of being made king by the crowd, and withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (Do you ever wonder like I do whether Jesus had some second thoughts about this miracle while he was alone on the mountain – “Oh God, was it a mistake to feed them?”) Then, when darkness fell, the disciples got into a boat and headed for the other shore. They ran into a storm, and Jesus came to them walking across the water and calming the storm.

The next day, the crowd tried to figure out what had happened. How had he given them the slip? After all, they saw he didn’t get into the boat and yet he was nowhere to be seen, not even where he had given thanks and they had eaten the bread. Can’t you see the growing frustration of the people? “He was right here, and now it’s time to eat again and we’re hungry – where’d he go?!”

And that’s where we enter into our reading – as the people discover Jesus on the other side of the Sea of Tiberias. “Rabbi, when did you come here?” is the way the question was recorded, but from Jesus’ answer I’m sure it was a whole lot more petulant than that – more like “how did you get away from us?” or “why did you abandon us?” I’m sure their question was more whiney and petulant because Jesus chastised them – “you’re looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” “You’re chasing after the wrong things” was Jesus’ rebuke to the crowd ... “you’re looking for food for your belly and not for food for your soul.” We can rephrase that – “are you here to eat or to worship?” Indeed, several times he issues the same challenge to them, but they keep coming back to wanting food to eat while Jesus keeps trying to point out to them that they really need to be looking for a different

kind of sustenance. Time and again they don't get the message and keep missing the point that Jesus is trying to make. Time and again they miss the signs that point to the unique relationship between Jesus and God and focus instead merely on the bread for their stomachs.

Sadly, not much has changed in the past two thousand years, has it? The masses are still often lured by a theology of curses and blessings – still drawn by promises of “believe in Jesus and your every want will be fulfilled.” Advertising messages are pumped from pulpits and over the airwaves proclaiming that your faith is the key to a happy marriage, to a new car, to a nice home in the suburbs, to the job of your dreams, to health, wealth and above all, oh above everything else: happiness. Bumper-sticker slogans abound as the crowd still chases Jesus looking for bread – some bizarre ideas for slogans keep coming to mind such as “Keep smiling in your faith and your faith will keep you smiling” and “This [resource-hogging] SUV powered by Jesus-love.” Of course in addition to the Consumerist Christianity bumper stickers there are a few that are both poignant and insightful ... for example, “Eve was framed!” and one of my favourites, “Jesus is coming – look busy!” Sadly we don't have to look very far even today to see examples of the crowd chasing Jesus eager to be showered with more blessings of bread.

Even more sadly there is a terrible downside to such a superficial theology of blessings and curses – an understanding that “your faith will result in blessing upon blessing.” – that downside is the discouragement when such a misunderstanding meets real life. Real life is full of good and even great times, but real life also has bumps and hollows and dark places and rough spots – and those who see blessings as a guaranteed product of faith also tend to see these rough spots as curses or at least as absences of blessings, which in turn produces in them a crisis of faith. The flip side of “just believe and Jesus will give you all the bread – the blessings, the good things of life – you ask for” is that when these things don't appear then belief turns to doubt. “Gee, I don't have any blessings, so my faith must be no good” is the trap laid by that theology.

That's why it's important to hear Jesus' message to the crowd that they are chasing after the wrong kind of blessing – that they are missing the point of the signs, the miracles, the blessings. They kept asking for a sign, and missed the big sign – Jesus himself. We need to hear the irony that in their quest for tangible blessings they missed noticing that they were within touching distance of God.

That message still applies to the crowds – and to us – today. Does it mean that we are not to give thanks for the blessings we enjoy? Of course not – give thanks in everything and for every good thing you enjoy, says Paul. Join in the harvest festivals and thanksgivings – respond to God with joyful thanksgiving for every blessing that you enjoy! Rejoice and give thanks for the bread – and turkey and dressing and pumpkin pie. Rejoice and give thanks for the wine – and the Starbuck's and the good pure water in flowing abundance.

But Jesus' message stills drums a foundational beat under all of this rejoicing and thanksgiving. Above all, and in all, and at all times give thanks for the bread of life – for Jesus himself, the ultimate gift of love and reconciliation from God. That wondrous Cob's bread will soon go stale, and even moldy; wine will quickly oxidize and go sour; the tangible blessings of life can all too easily disappear in the blink of an eye. Only a generation ago when the stock market crashed millionaires overnight became street vendors, selling apples at a nickel apiece. Over the past few years opulent homes in the United States became repossessed empty shells in ghost towns. Jobs and retirement savings have evaporated around the world. Tangible blessings are fragile and transient, so by all means say “thanks” to God for such blessings whenever they exist.

But – and this is the point Jesus was trying to make to the hungry crowd – above all, say “thank you” to God for the blessing that is Jesus himself. Rejoice in the love, the reconciliation, the grace, the forgiveness that are the gifts from God in Jesus Christ – these are the true blessings. The life eternal that is the covenant in Christ sealed in his body, his blood is the true bread of life, the blessing that does not ever tarnish or spoil. It is the one blessing that will not ever be lost, or taken away, or wither and die. That gift of life itself, life secure within the loving embrace of God signed in Christ’s arms is the blessing and gift for which we offer our deepest and most heartfelt thanks – not just the superficial, even if truly meant, “thanks” of daily living – but the from-the-heart, “no, really – thank you” appreciation that reveals that we finally get, we finally understand the magnificence of the gift of life that God has given us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

And apart from the life that we have, the second most powerful blessing given to us in Christ is that of community, of the companionship of faithful friends. We are part of a community of faith that not only stretches across Canada and around the world, and we are part of a faith community that stretches back to the time of Christ and forward into unknown and uncountable centuries. Each one of us here shares in this extended family of faith, and that sharing and mutual support are true blessings for which to rejoice and give thanks.

What better time than this Thanksgiving Sunday, a time of year when we pause to consider all for which we are thankful – and we do have so much for which to be thankful – what better time than this to stop and reflect on that for which we should be the most thankful of all. As we gather at tables groaning with the weight of turkey and cranberries and mashed potatoes and other harvest veggies let us give thanks not only for the food but also for the company of family, loved ones, friends, friends in faith, and most of all for the oneness in Christ that we share.