



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Thanksgiving always catches me by surprise. I'm always consumed with many, many activities that pull me hither and yon, and pull me like taffy. And I am trying to accomplish a lot and I always seem to miss out on the moment that Thanksgiving actually begins. It begins around me. And this has happened for decades for me. It happened when I was a professor, when I was trying to go to conferences and give papers and grade papers. It happens to me now. Over the past two weeks, we have been inundated with so many people who have died in this congregation or who are experiencing deep crisis and change. And that has been one of those things that keeps you engrossed in the moment.

But last night, after we did our final funeral before Thanksgiving at 3:00 PM, which was beautiful and glorious and such a privilege to be with that family, after that I saw the face of one of our parishioners describe the incredible joy and gratitude and delight she had when her child was returning for Thanksgiving. And I suddenly realized that Thanksgiving was upon us and that that joy and that love was real. And we have a moment today to enter into that space together.

It doesn't matter if you're experiencing, right at this moment, a great deal of plenty, if you are celebrating a new house or a new beginning. It doesn't matter if you are like so many of our parishioners and staff are right at this moment, sitting by a loved one in a hospital bed and going through agony. It doesn't matter if you are worried about the next paycheck. It doesn't matter because Thanksgiving and gratitude is not about the things we have or the things that happen to us. Gratitude and Thanksgiving is about joy, connection, and grace. And it is about claiming that joy, connection, and grace that you and I have as a birthright given to us by Jesus Christ.

And that joy and connection and grace was something that caught me by surprise in my own life. My family struggled with Thanksgiving. It was a holiday that we probably tried to do too much on. And part of the reason why we did is my father had spent a Thanksgiving in jail in Morocco because of his drinking. He had gotten drunk and hit a policeman. And in Morocco, that's a bad thing to do. And so he was placed in jail. And in the French system that they inherited, that meant he was guilty until proven innocent. And so he was placed in a cell that had

concrete on the wall that had embedded in it glass so that the inmates could not rest against the wall.

And while he was in that cell, his guards brought him a cold piece of turkey on Thanksgiving. And I, looking back on this through the decades, realized that the guards were probably trying to engage in some kind of religious accommodation. He was an American, he was imprisoned on Thanksgiving. They have some kind of weird religious rite where they eat Turkey on this day, and so they brought it to him. They were just trying to be humane. But that story and that trauma was something that haunted him for decades afterwards.

And my mother was Italian, which meant that you tried to solve most of the problems of life with food. It's not a bad strategy, for those of you who are wondering. And so she would serve plate after plate after plate of beautiful food, and we would listen to my father's story and we would try to find our way to joy, connection, and grace. But it was difficult because of all the anxiety that my mom experienced and the family experienced, and because of all the trauma.

And perhaps you have similar observances in your own lives in families. My mom was Italian, as I said, and this meant that we always gathered whether we liked each other or not. It was a kind of ritual that we would do. We would build a table in the living room and 30 of us would get alongside each other and eat and drink until we couldn't anymore. And yet, in the midst of that, what was really important was the thing that often was hidden in plain sight. It was the joy and grace and connection that seemed to elude us sometimes.

So my greatest prayer for you today, whether you're hearing this sermon as you're about to go and experience this incredible, beautiful meal of plenty, whether or not you are facing incredible difficulties and grieving because of the sudden onset of a loved one dying, whether you are experiencing insecurity in your job, whether you are sitting by a loved one in the hospital, as so many are, my greatest hope and prayer for you today is that you would know that joy and that grace and that connection. Because if you have those things, and if you know those things, you will be celebrating Thanksgiving. You'll be claiming the birthright that Jesus has given you to joy and connection and grace.

Now all of this goes with the grain of the season. And I am so grateful for that parishioner who lit up like a light last night because she was a reminder to me that the season is here, whether you're ready or not, and the time is now for us to claim these things. But it's also involved in all of our readings today that we've had to celebrate this day. In our reading from Deuteronomy, it's known as a kind of prayer for the sacrifice of wellbeing. When the people of God receive the command to remember their history and to say, a wandering Aramean was my father, that is an invitation to someone to recollect their past in a redemptive way

and to offer, as had been instructed in the book of Leviticus, a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God, a sacrifice of wellbeing to God.

And that sacrifice was meant to be shared. The sacrifice of the animal was meant to not only feed God, as it were, as one does when you burn up things before God, but the food from that animal was shared by the immediate family and the priests and anybody who was hungry that was there. That was the original Thanksgiving. And that prayer is our prayer. So as you go through your own family observances, no matter the rituals, no matter the trauma, no matter the challenges, and I know when I say this that many of you are going to be negotiating a complex terrain of topics to discuss this Thanksgiving. Whatever is going on in your own family's life, hold on to those people and claim that birthright to joy, grace, and connection. It goes with the grain of our scriptures.

And this message also is found in our epistle for today, where Paul speaks about the peace of God, which passes all understanding. That peace is yours. No one can take that away. That peace has been given to you because Jesus is, as we read elsewhere, our peace. Our Lord has broken down the divisions between us. He has broken down the walls that separate humanity, for He is our peace. And we see it particularly also in our gospel for today, which is one of the most beautiful and interesting and mysterious gospels we have.

In our gospel today, we have met Jesus right after He has fed 5,000 people, and then He has walked on water. And He goes to get some space and He finds himself surrounded by a crowd because they want more of the food that He seemed to bring out of nothing. The ability to show this incredible messianic abundance out of nothing, they want. They want to see someone who could walk on water and walk through a storm to save people. They want that kind of magic in their lives. And Jesus instead invites them into relationship to see Him as the bread of life. And to invite them into recognizing that that bread of His presence, that relationship with Jesus is their joy, their connection, and their grace. And it doesn't matter what else you can claim or have. If you miss that, you miss everything.

The art I have for you today is from Corita Kent, one of my favorite, most wonderful pop artists of the 1960s. The title for this piece is That They May Have Life. And Corita Kent, who was a nun, who was an incredible artist as well, did this in 1964. Kent was deeply influenced by Andy Warhol. And when Warhol showed up in Los Angeles where she was teaching college art at a college, she saw the tomato soup exhibit and she thought, well, that's not so hard. I can do that. But where Warhol takes consumer culture and wants to communicate to us that everything is superficial, that there is no higher canopy around us except for the surface, Kent wants us to see in the culture around us the deeper spiritual meaning hidden in plain sight, the connectivity and grace and joy that is there

when we recognize that connection with others. And we see with new eyes the deeper dimensions of our lives.

And this painting that she did, *That They May Have Life*, it's from John chapter 10, where Jesus says, "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly," but it's meant to be a kind of telescope to see today's gospel where Jesus says that He is the bread of life. And what happens in this painting is she takes this new beautiful product that is on all the shelves, that it's bread that never seems to go stale, called Wonder Bread. And she takes it and she pulls from it some of the images of Wonder Bread and in particular, the kind of subtext or the tagline of Wonder Bread, which was at the time "enriched bread," and she invites the viewer to think about what is the bread that truly enriches you, because she wants them to see that the Wonder Bread that's being sold on the shelves is nothing in comparison to the bread of wonder who is Jesus.

And you see that in today's gospel. It's hard to know – when Jesus says, I am the bread of life, He is for some people pulling from the moment where Jesus takes bread and breaks it and blesses it and shares it with the disciples and says, "This is my body," because there is no moment in John where Jesus institutes the Eucharist. And so some have thought that John moved that Eucharist into today's gospel so that people would see that it was connected with feeding people who needed literal bread.

And it also picks up on another facet of that bread of life in today's gospel. Because when John says, I am the bread of life, it's an echo of an earlier conversation that he has in chapter four with the Samaritan woman in which he says that he is living water. It is a kind of title of Jesus as the source of abundance, Jesus as the source of grace and joy and connection.

And so in this painting, she has on the lower left, a moment in which she is taking a script from the wife of a Kentucky miner who is struggling to hold things together. And this is what she writes in there. It's a quote from an interview that this miner's wife said about the struggle to feed five kids. And it's little, so I'll read it for you. "It's bad. You don't know what to do when you've got five children standing around crying for something to eat and you don't know where to get it. And you don't know which way to start to get it. I just get nervous or something." And then on the right. She has this movement from the need for physical bread to something that is added, a dimension of spiritual meaning. She quotes Mahatma Gandhi, who says, "There are so many hungry people that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread."

Jesus is the bread of life. And that means that we have a source of abundance. That means that we have the ability to share the bread we have, and we have done that so brilliantly as a congregation these last six weeks. I have watched as

we have celebrated that bread of Christ together. When we fed 90 people for a solid week in a static shelter for people experiencing acute homelessness, I watched as team after team of volunteers helped and worked together and experienced that abundance of joy as they were feeding others.

And I have seen what you all have done today in terms of the bags that we got for people that we doubled the number of, because we knew people needed some holiday bags to get them through this difficult time. When the SNAP benefits were cut, when people were struggling to eat 250 of you took a bag and you went and you filled it up at the grocery store. And you added a bunch of stuff that we never expected you would do. There were games there so people could have games. My favorite was, I think I found a chocolate babka, and I just wonder about that. I wonder about what place the babka had in that person's life that that was the thing they wanted to share. And I wonder about what the family is going to make of this chocolate babka when they get it out of the plastic wrapper. This mysterious, beautiful sweet bread, cake-like thing that's chocolatey, but you might put peanut butter on it. I don't know.

All of this is to say you all entered into that with empathy and connection because you all saw the deeper meaning in feeding another. There is nothing so elemental, as someone said to me before this service, as helping someone get a meal. And there's nothing so beautiful as establishing some kind of joy and connection with this.

Over the past few weeks, we've asked you to think about three questions as you make your pledge today to support this church. We've asked you to name your spiritual hunger because if we have one way of describing the world we live in right now, it is certainly spiritually hungry. We've asked you to think about and reflect and also name the ways that you have been fed in this church. The way this church, the people in the pews, the people beside you, have helped you find your way and have fed you emotionally and spiritually, and sometimes physically as you've struggled. And we've asked you to think, what might I give so that everyone eats? And that you have done beautifully and we are so grateful that you have come forward.

And we are so grateful for the ritual we'll do right now in a bit to celebrate the consecration of your pledge here. And for those of you who are new, just bring in a welcome card because you have given us the gift of yourself. And we are honored by that. And for those of you who are giving your pledge for the first time, I thank you for stepping into this community. I promise you this community will save your life. It has saved mine.

And I want to lift up two people who I am grateful for this day. Both of them were government workers who were furloughed. One, Nancy came to me after being

furloughed and said she still decided to fulfill her pledge because she knew that this church was everything to her and that God would take care of her. And the other, Jason, who worked every single day when we were feeding those 90 people through Lighthouse, he was furloughed and he knew if he just sat at home he would be disconnected. And so there was no job too small and no job too difficult for him. He worked day in, day out every day alongside some magnificent volunteers.

I can only imagine the difficulty facing people who had their economic security in question, stepping into that kind of giving. And I am so honored by them. And I know that they know that joy and connection and grace. May it be yours this Thanksgiving. May you reclaim that birthright that Jesus has given you. May you be sustained by it as you go through this week. And don't let Thanksgiving catch you unawares. And don't let yourself be surprised by it. Lean into it.

Amen.