

I want to talk a bit about two kinds of food today: earthly food—which is to say the kind of food we eat to keep us alive but can't eat when we are dying—and heavenly food, the kind that carries us beyond death.

And what better day to talk about food than Thanksgiving Day? The Calorie Control Council says Americans eat between 3,000 and 4,500 calories in a typical Thanksgiving Dinner. I mentioned this at our staff meeting this week, when one person said, “Heck, yes, just in my dessert alone!”

Maybe our Thanksgiving Day feasts are why the gospel lesson appointed for today is about food. In today's lesson, many of the people who Jesus had fed the day before with only five loaves of bread and two fish had caught up with him. Scripture tells us they had initially come to Jesus on the east side of the Sea of Galilee because they had heard he was healing sick people. But after he had fed them, they had been pursuing him because they had wanted, scripture says, “to take him by force and make him king.”

Jesus had eluded those who were following him, though. He had gone up a mountain by himself to pray after sending his disciples by boat back across the sea—John says to Capernaum, where Jesus lived.

While the disciples were at sea, a storm had come up and they had rowed against the wind for most of the night. Jesus had caught up with them by walking on the water. (I wonder how many calories THAT took?) When Jesus had entered the boat, the storm ended, and they had arrived safely ashore.

John's gospel tells us that those who were pursuing Jesus had seen the disciples leave and knew that Jesus hadn't been aboard their boat when it left. So naturally their first question of Jesus was, basically, “How did you GET here?”

Did you notice that Jesus didn't answer THAT question? He didn't say, “I strolled across the lake at night in a storm.” Instead, Jesus observed that they were only there because they wanted more free bread. Then Jesus told them they were pursuing the wrong things in life; he said they were after ordinary bread when they should be seeking heavenly bread. Put another way, as a theologian named Bultmann



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said, the bread they were seeking, ordinary bread, is “unable to sustain life in the presence of death.” By extension, therefore, “heavenly bread” sustains life, both in the here and now and beyond the grave.

You heard the rest of the events that followed. The people asked what they had to do to get “heavenly bread.” Jesus’ answer was that they had to believe ON him. He didn’t say, believe IN him, meaning believe that I am who I say that I am, the one who God had sent. Instead, he said, “believe ON me,” in other words, have faith and trust in me by living the way I am showing you.”

And now we finally arrive at the meat of today’s gospel lesson. Jesus instructed his audience, “Do not work for the food that perishes.” (John 6:27)

We have heard something like this from Jesus before. A biblical scholar named Raymond E. Brown noticed that in an earlier conversation, Jesus had told a Samaritan woman at a well, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again.” (John 4:13) And, just like the woman at the well who asked for an unlimited supply of the water Jesus had offered (John 4:15), THESE people asked Jesus to “... give us this bread always.” (John 6:34)

The message is clear: Jesus is the only real sustenance of life, Jesus IS life, and the way we can have a true life is to participate in Jesus’ life.

Like the people who pursued Jesus, we, too, often seek the wrong kind of bread. We think that literal bread—food—will stave off death. A loaf of bread might keep us alive for a short while if we were healthy and starving. However, one of the ways that medical personnel can tell if someone is actively dying is when they refuse to eat. The body of dying people cannot process food; force-feeding someone who is dying will cause them pain.

On the other hand, one of the ways that pastoral personnel can tell if someone is “breathing while dead” is when they seek the wrong kind of spiritual food. The message is again clear and remains the same: Jesus is the only real sustenance of life, Jesus IS life, and the way we can have a true life is to participate in Jesus’ life.

You’ll notice the prescribed action is “to participate in Jesus’ life. Because I love the Eucharist so much, I was tempted to say that the way we can have a true life is to partake of the Eucharist. But receiving the Body and Blood of Christ Jesus through our Eucharistic meal needs completion out there in the world. The spiritual food we will soon receive gives us true life when we let it move us into participating in Christ Jesus’ life by sharing his love with the world. We *say* a post-Communion

prayer of thanksgiving each time we receive Jesus in this way. However, we *live* our thanksgiving when we “become what we receive” and “go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

This very day, Thanksgiving Day 2022, we undoubtedly will go from this place and eat too much earthly food. I trust and pray that the heavenly food you receive here will keep you unto everlasting life when you share Christ’s love with others.