

“Two Kinds of Food for Two Kinds of Hunger”

Thanksgiving Sermon based on Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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On this Sunday before the Thanksgiving holiday, it is fitting for us to reflect upon the importance of gratitude. After all, that’s what “Thanksgiving” means: to give thanks or to be grateful. At the center of this holiday there is food coupled with a memory. We all look forward to eating a delicious meal. And we remember the Pilgrims who braved the treacherous ocean as they sailed to Massachusetts in pursuit of religious freedom and, after having survived a first horrendous winter, celebrated a meal with the native inhabitants of the land in gratitude for their good fortune. Unlike Christmas and Easter, Thanksgiving is not a specifically Christian holiday. It is a national holiday that, like the Fourth of July, commemorates a founding event in the history of our American nation. For this reason, we turn to the Old Testament instead of to the New Testament for our scripture lesson this morning, since the Old Testament tells the story of the founding of a particular nation, Israel, and its subsequent history, whereas the New Testament tells the story of the founding of the church, a particular religious community within Israel. Since Thanksgiving is a national holiday, even we who are Christians celebrate it as Americans along with all of our fellow American citizens, whether they be Christians or not.

As I reflected upon Thanksgiving in preparation for today’s sermon, I realized that the meaning of this holiday concerns not one kind of food but two, not one kind of hunger but two. Accordingly, we should speak of both physical food to satisfy physical hunger and spiritual food to satisfy spiritual hunger. Gratitude for two kinds of food to meet two kinds of hunger is central to the memory of the first Thanksgiving celebrated by the Pilgrims. It was also central to the

self-understanding of ancient Israelites as they recalled with gratitude how God had brought the nation of Israel into being.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, we hear of a ritual that involved offering the first fruits of the harvest. Upon presentation of these gifts to the priest, the devout Israelite would recite these words that recount the story of Israel's founding as a nation. Some biblical scholars refer to this liturgical formula as Israel's basic "creed," similar to the Apostles Creed recited by Christians in church.<sup>1</sup> The creed narrates Israel's history of salvation for which thanks is given.

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, has given me. (Deut. 26:5-10)

The story is well known to those of us who grew up in Sunday School. "A wandering Aramean" refers to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) who were landless immigrants. Abraham was called by God to leave his homeland in Mesopotamia (ancient Aram) so that he might become a nation destined to bless all the families of the earth. In late old age, Abraham and his wife Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac. Isaac and Rebecca gave birth to Jacob who was the father of twelve sons from whom descended the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's son, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his brothers. Although Joseph later rose to a position of great influence in Pharaoh's court, his descendants became slaves in Egypt until God called Moses to deliver them from their bondage. Under Joshua's leadership the former slaves entered the promised land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. And so, in perpetual remembrance of God's

deliverance of the slaves and the consequent founding of the nation, the devout Israelite offered the first fruits of the harvest and recited the national history in gratitude to God for bringing the children of Israel into the land, thus providing them with a fertile soil to till yielding an abundant harvest as well as a place of their own to live in freedom: nourishment for the body and dignity for the soul!

The Pilgrims saw themselves in this story of ancient Israel. Fleeing religious persecution in England, they sought a land in which they could worship God in accordance with their own interpretation of the Bible. Perhaps we would be surprised by other similarities between these Pilgrims and the Israelites of old. Both of them came to a land that was already occupied by previous inhabitants and their arrival created tensions, even severe conflict between them and these native, indigenous peoples. In America there were the peoples we used to call “Indians” but now call “Native Americans.” In Israel there were the Canaanites. Although the Pilgrims and the Israelites sought a new land where they could worship God as they saw fit, neither the Pilgrims nor the Israelites had any intention of defending the religious liberty of people whose religions differed from their own. For centuries, the Hebrew prophets waged a religious war against the worship of the Canaanite deities. And the Massachusetts colony saw its own share of religious persecution. It took another founding event in the history of our nation, commemorated on the Fourth of July, for the principle of the separation of church and state to be enshrined, thereby guaranteeing genuine religious liberty for all people. In this respect the United States was unique among the nations of the world since ours was the first government in history ever to create a national identity independent of any particular religious affiliation. Henceforth, people of all religious faiths, including the Jews who descend from ancient Israel, would flee to these shores in pursuit of the same religious liberty the Pilgrims sought for themselves. Today, as a

result, America is the most religiously diverse nation in the world. We can be proud of this fact that as Americans we stand for the principle of religious freedom. Against fundamentalist Christians who falsely claim that America is a Christian nation, the truth is that ours is a secular, pluralistic nation that makes it possible for all religions to thrive apart from religious persecution. Like Israel of old that God intended to be a blessing for all the families of the earth, America too has become a blessing to followers of all the religions of the world insofar as our historic experiment in separating church and state has enabled various kinds of Christians to live in harmony with one another as well as Christians and non-Christians to live together in peace.

My grandparents came from Eastern Europe, and they were extremely proud to be Americans for two reasons: first, here we had enough food to eat; and second, we had religious freedom. I remember my grandmother telling me that as a child her greatest aspiration in life upon growing up was to be the owner of a grocery store so that she would always have enough food on her table. And after World War II, Eastern Europe from which my ancestors came was under communist rule and being a Christian there was not easy. Although I grew up with these memories that were passed down from generation to generation in our family, I was born and raised in this country. I've never gone a single day in my life without enough food to eat. And I've always taken for granted that I have the religious freedom to attend any church or synagogue I choose. In fact, the street on which I lived as a boy had various kinds of Protestant families (Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc.) as well as Catholics and Jews. All of us kids played together and our parents were good friends. This was the situation into which I was born, but a cursory glance at today's headlines suffices to show that this is hardly the situation in which many people on this planet find themselves even now. Large numbers of people today lack sufficient food to eat or a secure place to live. Just consider the many desperate people who are

seeking to immigrate to this country. These immigrants want the same things for themselves and their children that motivated my grandparents to risk everything to come to these shores and to become Americans. They seek the two kinds of food to satisfy the two kinds of hunger: enough bread to eat so that their bodies are not malnourished and the freedom from oppression that secures their right to live in dignity as befits human beings.

Of course, ours is not a perfect nation, just as ancient Israel was far from perfect. African Americans do not look back upon the history of this nation through the same lens with which my grandparents looked upon it. My ancestors came here willingly, but the ancestors of our African American brothers and sisters did not. Oddly from our modern perspective, the ancient Israelites who had once been slaves themselves did not draw the conclusion that slavery as such is always and everywhere wrong. There were slaves in Israel as well as in the early church, so the Old Testament contains laws regulating the institution of slavery and the New Testament contains exhortations regarding the relations of masters and slaves. Tragically, many Americans of European descent saw no contradiction between their Jewish or Christian faith and owning other human beings as slaves. No nation, whether ancient Israel or America, is free from sin; and when we as Americans recall God's blessings upon us a nation, we should not forget to ask for God's forgiveness for our national sins. All of us, whether black or white, are still living with the horrible consequences of this history of oppression that involved nothing less than the denial of the dignity of our fellow human beings. In recent years overt racism has reared its ugly head again and all Americans are morally obligated to protest against it since racism is opposed to everything humane and civilized. When the Declaration of Independence states that all people are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, this is more than rhetorical flourish. It is a moral and legal ideal to which our nation aspires, but an ideal that

properly stands in judgment upon our failures to realize an equal society for all human beings.

Throughout the long centuries of Christian Europe, Jews were subjected to official legal oppression by Christians and sometimes they were victims of violent persecution. In America, at long last, Jews found a respite from the history of anti-Semitism that had dogged them ever since Christianity, which was originally a Jewish offshoot, became the official religion of medieval civilization. For the most part, Jews have been very well integrated into American life. Recall what I said about growing up in a neighborhood composed of Christians and Jews. But within the past year Jews have been massacred in their synagogues in Pittsburgh and San Diego. Anti-Semitism, too, is alive and well, even though it threatens the fabric of our nation that is held together by respect for religious difference. And we Christians have a special reason for protesting against anti-Semitism since Judaism is the spiritual foundation upon which our faith is built; not only was Jesus a Jew but all of his earliest followers were Jews. Our Old Testament is the Bible of Judaism and, though we differ in our respective estimates of Jesus, Christians cannot hate Jews or despise Judaism except at the risk of self-contradiction, for how can we hate or despise the very ground on which we stand, the heritage that has been bequeathed to us by the Jews. Although some Jews object to being lumped together with Christians who speak of a common "Judeo-Christian" tradition, I think the phrase rightly points to a shared inheritance that has come down to us historically in two major forms, Judaism and Christianity. Just as white Americans owe a sincere apology to black Americans as well as to Native Americans for the many injustices perpetrated against them over the centuries, so too Christians owe Jews a sincere apology for religiously sanctioned anti-Semitism. Yet repentance for past sins is precisely what opens up the possibility of a new relationship in the present moment leading to a new future, in which the distinctive contributions of all people can be appreciated in this great nation of ours.

So far, I have been talking primarily about spiritual food that satisfies spiritual hunger: freedom of religion, freedom from persecution and oppression, freedom from racism, and we should add to the list freedom from sexism and homophobia and all the other dehumanizing distortions of various groups of people designed to render them less than fully human so that we can rationalize to ourselves our inhumane treatment of them. But, in conclusion, I want to say a bit more about the physical food that satisfies physical hunger. When Jesus was hungry after forty days and forty nights of fasting, the devil tempted him to perform a miracle whereby he would command stones to become loaves of bread. In response, Jesus cited Deuteronomy, the same book from which our reading today is drawn: “The human being does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:3-4; cf. Deut. 8:3). What Jesus was saying is that there are two kinds of food, physical and spiritual. Moreover, he correctly pointed out that there is more to a genuine human life than mere physical survival; but let’s face it: even Jesus knew that without physical food, the human being cannot not live at all! That’s why all four gospels report that when the crowds who heard him were hungry, Jesus fed them even though he had only five loaves of bread and two fish at his disposal, and yet there was plenty of food left over after all had eaten their fill (Matt. 14:15-21 and par.). We who anticipate feasting next week dare not forget those who are hungry because they lack sufficient food to eat.

I have said before that there is too much bad Christian theology in our country these days and I believe that it is our responsibility to remedy this failing by preaching and teaching the gospel correctly whenever we have the opportunity to do so. I want to illustrate this point by telling you about a memorable experience I once had in a Chinese restaurant in Chicago. Since I was alone and the restaurant was full of eager customers waiting to be seated, I agreed to share a table with another person who was by herself. As the conversation over egg rolls and chow mein

unfolded, it turned out that she was the wife of a Baptist minister who was attending a Baptist ministers' convention in Chicago. She was touring the city while her husband was at the conference. At this time, I was a graduate student preparing to become an ordained minister and so I thought we'd have much in common to talk about over our Chinese lunch. But quite abruptly and unexpectedly the conversation stopped dead in its tracks when she told me it was her belief that people who could not afford to buy food had no right to eat. (I think an egg roll fell out of my mouth and dropped onto my lap when I heard her say these words.) I don't recall by what route the conversation had meandered until it found its way to this dramatic revelation of her scale of moral values, but I was about as shocked and repulsed by what she said as by almost anything else I can remember ever having heard in my life. I asked her how a Christian could possibly hold such a view, yet she saw no contradiction whatsoever between her Christian faith and her willingness to let others starve to death if they didn't have the money to buy food. This is a vivid, repugnant example of the kind of bad Christian theology to which I pointed in my previous sermon. How is it possible to be a disciple of Jesus who, speaking on behalf of those without food to eat, said "I was hungry and you gave me food" or "I was hungry and you gave me no food" (Matt. 25:35, 42). Had I known Martin Luther's theology back then as well as I do now, I could have cited his remark that the law against stealing does not apply in the case of a hungry person who steals food in order to survive, since it is wrong to hoard food when others are starving. *That* is good theology!

Now here is a telling contrast to this incident with the Baptist minister's wife, but one which is equally memorable. Last year when I was a member of a Methodist Church in San Diego, I was asked to bring dessert to a pot luck lunch we were going to have after worship. So, I brought two big boxes of donuts from the bakery. Since there was an abundance of treats to



eat, we had an entire box of donuts left over and did not know what to do with them. But then I remembered a street where I was used to seeing homeless people asking for money. So, after church I drove down there and stopped my car by the side of the road; a tired, haggard-looking woman came up to my window and I asked her if she liked donuts. Beaming with a grin from ear to ear, she exclaimed: "Of course! Who doesn't like donuts?" When I gave her the box, she said, pointing to a group of other homeless people standing nearby, "I'm going to share this with my friends." Imagine that! A poor homeless person, grateful for a handout of donuts left over from church, couldn't wait to share her good fortune with other unfortunates. How poignant her generosity! How utterly lacking in selfishness! How completely different in spirit from the Baptist minister's wife! This is the authentic spirit of Jesus, who distributed five loaves of bread and two fish among five thousand hungry people and everyone had more than enough to eat: "I was hungry and you gave me food."

As Christians and Americans, we have a responsibility to work toward a just and fair society, in which the American ideals of "liberty and justice for all" become a reality and do not remain mere words. As those who enjoy freedom of religion, we need to ensure that this country remains free for people of all religions. As those who have enough to eat, we have a moral obligation to see to it that others have enough to eat as well. On this Thanksgiving holiday, therefore, let us remember that there are two kinds of food for two kinds of hunger. Let those of us who abound in both kinds of food be mindful of those who lack either kind of food. As Americans and Christians, let us be grateful for food that nourishes the body and food that nourishes the soul. And let this be our prayer not only on Thanksgiving Day but every day of our lives: "God is great. God is good. Let us thank God for this food."

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<sup>1</sup> “The whole might be called a confession of faith.” Gerhard von Rad, “The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch,” in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (London: SCM Press, 1984), p. 4.