I’ll begin with the turkeys. Last year South Church gave 120 turkeys for the Horace Bushnell Children’s Food Pantry in Hartford. This year we hope to be able to give more. You know that a turkey feeds more than one person. It feeds a family, and for many of us, a turkey lasts for more than one meal. The goal of the Horace Bushnell Children’s Food Pantry is to help families bridge gaps in their food budgets; with an eye to reduce the occurrence of nutrition related conditions associated with food insecurity. That’s a great goal. But what do turkeys have to do with it? Why not send rice and beans, or chicken, beef bourguignon, or canned ravioli? Because those dishes do not resonate with this holiday. It's about the food; but it's not about the food.

A lot of us will be eating turkey this week. There’s even a vegetarian dish called “tofurkey” which was introduced decades ago, to maintain the symbolism of eating turkey, but not actually involving any loss of life to turkeys. You may have people gathering in your home who are interrogating the origin story of this meal – the native Americans sitting down with the
pilgrims. A great story to remember if you identify with the pilgrims, more problematic if you identify as native american, or as someone who was enslaved by the early settlers\textsuperscript{1}.

But that only proves my point. The meal has significant symbolism. If you are preparing the meal, you can cook it anyway you want to, you can invite anyone you want to, you can be sick that day, in the hospital, sweating out your studies before final exams in December, whoever you are, you will likely be eating food on Thursday, and you may recall other Thanksgivings with other people, you may be reminded by the way the stuffing tastes, or how the pies smell when they’re baking, the turnip or the green beans, or the gravy.

And you can also be reminded of all that by not eating it. I lived in England with my family for a year. The day that would have been Thanksgiving day in England was just another day on the calendar there. We did not try to have a thanksgiving meal because it was impossible with our work and school schedules, no one was selling whole turkeys at the butchers, new world foods were costly and they were not fresh, but all 4 of us thought about Thanksgiving all day. I remembered meals I’d had before, the people I had shared them with, my grandparents, our friends and neighbors, the taste of fresh cranberries, and a walk after the meal on November day.

It’s just one meal, among the 1,095 meals you have in a year – if you eat 3 meals a day for 365 days. Thanksgiving stands out from those other meals, for good reasons. It’s the people you gather with, the opportunity to be together, passing on the tradition of gathering, preparing a meal, sharing what you have, giving thanks. And it’s also opting out of that symbolism and narrative, if that’s important.

Which is what brings me to the scriptures. In her commentary “\textit{The Sermon on the Mount: A Beginner’s Guide to the Kingdom of Heaven}” Amy Jill Levine says that there is so much bread imagery in the gospel of Matthew that it “smells like a bakery.” The New Testament, and Jesus in particular uses bread symbolically, a lot. Bread is mentioned 77 times in the New Testament, 20 times just in the Gospel of John.

- “Command these stones to become bread.” The devil says to tempt Jesus when he is fasting. He replies “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- Jesus asks the Pharisees: “What one of you if your child asks for bread would give her a stone?
- After he had fed the 5000 they took up 12 basketfuls of leftover bread
- After his resurrection he cooks breakfast for his disciples on the beach, fish and bread, he gives it to them. And that’s when their eyes were opened and they recognized him.
- The bread of life, the bread of heaven, this bread is my body, broken for you…”

\textsuperscript{1} United American Indians of New England are holding the 53rd annual National Day of Mourning at noon in Plymouth, MA this year. It’s a fast, not a feast, they request that no one plan to eat there.

http://www.uaine.org/?fbclid=IwAR0iIZqR6OoqU253xFQqdZn3PpTqNyql0nQGX_p1PYRCJoimCvf-XprE

Uk
In Jesus’ day the primary food that people ate with their meals was bread. And bread making is a community project. You need to cultivate the wheat, harvest it, grind it at a mill to make it into flour, most people in that time would likely be sharing ovens and baking “their daily bread” collectively. It is fuel efficient, plus it’s more fun to see people regularly when you are all getting the same chores done.

But there’s a back story to bread. The children of Israel ate manna in the wilderness, manna literally can be translated as “what is this?” The manna came down from heaven, sustaining them on their journey. And Jesus compares himself to that kind of sustenance: “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” They said to him, “sir, give us this bread always.” And he answers them: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

In John’s gospel, before we get into the bread of life discourses, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well and he asks her for a drink of water and then he offers her the water of life. She is amazed. Suddenly the conversation is not about water at all, only it is of course. Living water, the water of life. She wants that water.

Bread means so much more than a piece of bread. But the symbolic meaning wouldn’t really work at all if we didn’t know what it is to be hungry, to be thirsty.

In the year 1621, what we retroactively identify as the First Thanksgiving, when they gathered, they had just buried 47 out of 103 settlers, and lost their entire crop of peas. Every family was mourning someone as they prepared their meal. You can imagine their gratitude to the Wampanoag who showed them the food in the new world and how to prepare it. We know some of their story, but we can’t know all of it – what they said to each other, how the food tasted to them the first time they tried it, who they were missing, whether they were courageous and brave that day, or missing friends and family back in England. The native Americans did not know where this new relationship would go from then on. This is the tradition which has washed up on us this week. It’s a tradition laden with symbolism, and the struggle of real lives.

As Jesus did when he broke bread with his disciples, interpreting a tradition to bless the future, wherever you go, whomever you are spending time with, use the symbolism of this week to bless the people you gather with, so that they may bless future generations. We are not sustained by bread alone, or turkey alone, or stuffing alone, we are sustained by the living word. May this word nourish your soul this week, and may you share it generously.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- In your experience, what effect, if any, does expressing gratitude out loud have on your mood and outlook?
- All of us work for food which perishes, how do you know when you have tasted the
bread of heaven? What does it taste like?