

“The Gift of Gratitude”
November 23, 2025

Deuteronomy 8:12-18
Luke 6:17-26

More than any other holiday, Thanksgiving is associated with food.

Yes, there are the hot dogs and hamburgers of Memorial Day and Fourth of July cookouts. There is the red velvet cake of Juneteenth. There’s even the goose of a Dickens Christmas.

But our American Thanksgiving is all about food—and lots of it. Many take gratitude off the menu entirely, simply calling it “Turkey Day.” Stuffing *is* on the menu—a word both for what we are eating and what we are doing.

This year, food has been front and center throughout November in a different way. As a congregation, as a city, and as a nation, we have been more aware than we usually are of the reality that so many face hunger each day.

When our Mission Board met at the beginning of the month, our neighbors, along with people around this state and across our nation, were faced with the suspension of SNAP benefits. The food pantries we support in Iowa City, Coralville, and North Liberty, as well as those around the state and across the nation, were wondering how they would deal with more people and less food. We discussed how we might respond.

We heard that a local brew pub had donated \$12,000 to food banks. And it seemed that a congregation could do better than that—certainly, *this congregation* could.

Our board looked at funds available through giving by current and former members, and decided to give \$13,000 to the three local food pantries. The mission board asked all of us for food and further funds, which means that so far we’ve actually given over \$14,000 to the food pantries—along with a lot of food items.

In faith, we look at the world differently. We see suffering and we respond. Jesus once said to his followers: “*You* give them something to eat.” As we understand it, that is part of the life of faith.

Not everyone lives like this.

At the end of October, with the government shut down, with the SNAP benefits on the edge of suspension, a party was held a Mar-a-Lago. The “Great Gatsby” themed party featured scantily clad women rolling around in giant champagne glasses, others doing fan dances among the guests. It was the very definition of a degenerate display of excess in the face of looming hunger.

I realize that by using words such as “scantily-clad” and “degenerate” I risk sounding like a judgmental and censorious minister—but right now, that is a risk I’m willing to take. And I’ll go a step further: the scene immediately called to my mind the words of Jesus: “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.”

Those are strong words—and words we need to let into our hearts this Thanksgiving.

When Jesus begins to teach his follower, he starts on a positive no—although we are shocked and surprised to hear:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

We are good enough Christians to shout, “No, Jesus, you are all wrong!”

Even if you’ve never been hungry, we know hunger is no blessing, right?

Certainly, it is no blessing to be unable to concentrate in your classroom because you couldn’t eat breakfast.

Certainly, it is no blessing to be out on the street with no food.

Certainly, it is no blessing to wonder if the food pantry will have anything for your family when SNAP benefits are cut off.

Certainly, it is no blessing to learn that, because “America First,” the United States has ended the hunger relief efforts in your country that were making the difference between life and death.

We’re good enough Christians to feed the hungry, to work at the Crisis Center Food Pantry, to serve at the Free Lunch Program, to put pressure on our legislators, to do what we can to end the curse of hunger. We feed the hungry, not just out of basic human concern or civic goodness. We feed the hungry because it is part of the new thing that God is doing.

So what does Jesus mean with his talk of blessing?

Perhaps those who are hungry will hear the words of Jesus differently than we do. This is not a call to passive acceptance of a miserable situation.

Nor is it a call for us to stop eating.

Out of hunger comes hope—

the hope of being filled,

the hope that life might go on,

the hope that good might come from evil.

Those who are full—you and me—risk the loss of that hope, the danger of life without a vision of the future.

When Jesus speaks, the hungry hear good news of hope.

Sitting here in a Congregational Church in the heart of Iowa City, most of us might wonder, then, if these words of Jesus have any good news for us—as prosperous and well fed as we are. We face the frightening prospect that Jesus speaks to *us* when he says: “Woe to *you who are rich*, for you have received your consolation. Woe to *you who are full now*, for you will be hungry.”

As troubling as it might be, if we are going to listen to Jesus, we must begin to listen from where we are—with a sense of wealth and satiation, even in the midst of the uncertainty of these days.

Sometimes the words of Jesus remind us that happiness—*blessedness*—is still ahead, allowing us to be drawn toward what we cannot yet see but can certainly hope for. It takes a leap of faith to do this, of course. But it is also a leap of faith to assert that sorrow or hunger or poverty will continue unabated.

Sometimes the words of Jesus come as a terrify reminder not to be so absolutely certain about riches or fullness because they will not last. If we listen, we will look for something beyond our wealth, our fullness, for something that will truly give life.

Can we hear these words and give thanks, at least, for the warning?

Can we hear these words and let them lead us toward acts of compassion or sharing?

Can we hear these words and through them find the deep hunger within us?

The hungry and the full most both listen carefully and seek earnestly to find the blessing in these words of Jesus.

I would be less than honest to suggest that these words always make sense to me. Often when I try to understand them I can’t. The tears of those who cry because of hunger or poverty or emptiness are very real. So, too, are the tears of those who weep when they see the news.

We get some help for our understanding and for our living in the memory of the Exodus.

It might be—and along with all of you, I’m still trying to sort this out—it might be that what we *have* is not the problem. Remember that the Promised Land was described to the Hebrew people as “a good land, a land with flowing streams, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will *lack nothing*.”

It is right to receive all the good that God provides, to enjoy the fruits of our labor, and to be prosperous people.

There is a danger in prosperity, however—and you know this. The danger of prosperity is forgetfulness.

All too quickly, we can move from the position of faith in God that says “all I have, I have received from God” to the faith in ourselves that claims: “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.”

In 1863, at another time when people in this country were bitterly divided, Abraham Lincoln told the people: “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years . . . we have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has ever grown. *But*” he added, “*we have forgotten God*. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us.”

As I’ve said before, I’m from Illinois, so the words of Lincoln are close to scripture for me.

Forgetfulness always lurks amidst prosperity.

Our salvation is the gift of gratitude: “Remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you power to get wealth.” In our prosperity, let us look around. Let us begin by giving thanks, not for what we have—for that is always temporary, conditional—but let us give thanks to God who gives us the ability to get and to share the wealth we enjoy, the God who helps us be wise stewards of all that we have freely received.

Remember. Remember that what we have is a gift. It is, all of it, a gift.

Let us then, be grateful.

Thanksgiving is an acknowledgement that there is a Giver that calls forth our gratitude.

For those of us who are people of religious faith and religious doubt, each day is a day of thanksgiving, a time to humbly acknowledge that the creative power that brought forth the stars and space and our own watery planet, the creative power that gave life and sustained life for all generations is a loving power that we name God. And, more specifically, we in this place confess together that this God has been and is made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is not by the might of our own hand nor by our cleverness, nor our knowledge, nor our creativity but by the loving grace of God that we have this life in all its goodness and sorrow, all its challenge and strength, all its glory and dust. It is from God that all blessings do indeed flow.

Once again in these days, the words of Jesus come as a challenge—a challenge to move forward in hope.

If we can hear these words of blessing and woe in all their fullness, perhaps we will be a part of fulfilling the promise of blessing to those who are poor, those who are hungry, and others who weep. We took another step in that direction in our giving to alleviate hunger. Let us continue to walk with those to whom Jesus speaks words of blessing. With gratitude in our hearts let us walk together with refugees, immigrants, the homeless, and the hungry.

Wherever we find ourselves this week—and with whomever we find ourselves—let us come to those places and those people with gratitude for all the good that we have received. Let us recognize in one another our common humanity, for we all bear the image of our Creator. As we receive the gift of gratitude, may we rise from our tables as people with hearts more open to take on the challenges that are before us now.