

Pastor's Message – 11/20/22

John 6:25-35

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Last weekend, the Waupun United Methodist Church celebrated a resurrected fall Craft Fair. It was wonderful to witness the fruits of all the people who did so much in preparation of that successful event, all the people who came together on the Sunday before to prepare the rooms and set up tables, and then all the people who stayed or came back on the day of the Craft Fair to take tables down and put things away so we could have worship in the Sanctuary.

There were so many wonderful things that happened that it is impossible to list them all. The people of the Church came together, worked together, and had fun together. The vendors seemed to have a good day; people were buying things. I even heard that someone wanted to buy one of the quilts hanging on the wall in the Wesley Center.

Those quilts – there are three of them – are a memorial to the faithful people who were or maybe still are part of this Waupun United Methodist Church. Those quilts are a reminder, as is this banner that hangs in the Fireplace Room, that “OUT OF THE PAST OUR FUTURE IS BUILT.”

You may have noticed that, over the past few months, there are new people who are part of our Sunday worshipping congregation. As they have asked me about the Church, their questions inspired me to go back to the history books about this Waupun United Methodist Church.

With the 1st Methodist Class being organized in 1844, this Church is, arguably, the oldest organized Church in Waupun. This Sanctuary in which we worship, built in 1889, is not the first church building, which was built in 1855. The Fellowship Room, off to my left which, unfortunately, those worshipping off-site, can't see, was then built in 1894. The Wesley Center came next, in 1973 and then the “new addition,” built in 2000. The Parsonage in which I am privileged to live was purchased by the Church in 1970. All of these things are a reminder of where we have come from, but should also be a reminder of what, or Who, we are built on, and where we are going.

This reminds me of a story I read as I was preparing for this sermon today. As they had on every May 1 for a long time, they gathered around the oak tree in the back field. The entire family was there. Grandparents, great-grandma, parents, kids, and grandchildren; 40 people circled the old tree. The patriarch moved to the center of the circle. Every conversation stopped as he cleared his throat. He said a few words, and then the entire family bowed their heads. What is this strange ceremony? Years before, when the family was still

back east, an old man decided that what was best for his family was to move them west. There they would have opportunities and chances for wealth. It was not going to be easy. Moving westward in those days was done at considerable cost. Along the way, somewhere in central Missouri, the old man became ill. The traveling party stopped. They waited three days for his health to improve, but it didn't. Everyone knew he was dying. As he lay on his deathbed, he implored his son to carry on with the journey. He asked him that when they arrived, that they remember him. Just take a few moments to remember an old man. His son promised he would. The man died and was buried under an oak in Missouri. His son led the family on. They arrived on a bright, sunny May 1st. As he had promised, the son gathered the entire family under an oak to pray and remember the one who'd started the journey. That's what was being celebrated.

That's what our Bible reading from the Book of Deuteronomy does for us today. It reminds the people of God that when they find themselves in the promised land they are to offer thanks to God **and** to recite their history -- which includes the fact that their lineage goes back to wanderers and nomads who owned very little. They experienced the miracle of God's providence and blessings.

The Bible reading from John today also reminds us of the miracle of God's blessings. In this passage the people, having experienced the miracle of the loaves and fishes, come wanting more miraculous food.

Already some have gathered together, some will gather during this week or after, but many will gather on Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, to feast, many on more than enough food. Some will gorge intentionally and irresponsibly and not even give any thought to having more than enough. I remember, once upon a time, when I had more than enough. It was during my grade school days, and I was provided with "hot lunch." That day for lunch we had mashed potatoes, probably not real mashed potatoes, but I just couldn't eat them. But I had to. And I couldn't go out for recess until I did. So, 45 or 50 minutes later, I was still trying to force down those mashed potatoes. I'm not sure if I ever got to recess. I can't say I was grateful for the feast that day, of having more than enough. Maybe Thanksgiving Day isn't really about eating too much?

Buoyed by the Union victory at Gettysburg, the 16th president of the United States acknowledged that one's attention in a time of national turmoil must be directed heavenward, with a thankful and contrite spirit. Thus, on October 3, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued a "Proclamation of Thanksgiving" in which he summoned the nation to prayer with these words:

"No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while

dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the imposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union."

It is good to remember. As we heard in the reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, Israel was also to remember and be thankful. God had delivered them and brought them to the Promised Land. He had done great things for them. God has done great things for us too. Do we take time to be thankful? Do we remember?

The Old Testament reading sets up ways to express personal gratitude within the context of the gathered community. The reading from the Gospel of John adds another dimension to our thinking:

- * what we take into our bodies sustains us physically,
- * what we take into our minds shapes our thoughts and attitudes,
- * what we take into our psyches shapes our personalities, and
- * our ability to appreciate others and our response to the universe.

What nourishes our psyche/souls?

- * Not television, not video games or TikTok or YouTube or Instagram, not sports, not cars, not clothes, not houses.
- * Not rules, not a specific vocabulary, not a particular church.
- * Bread from heaven is available; elixir of life is at hand.
- * Abundant living is an attitude, which is a result of a relationship with the Holy One.

Nourishment for the psyche comes from awareness of beauty and truth that are experienced in the Great Mystery we call God/Christ/Holy Spirit. Jesus shows the way.

Jesus' proclamation, "I am the Bread of Life." This will lead us back to the thanksgiving theme, as we acknowledge that true life comes as a gift from God through Jesus the Christ. Jesus, the bread of Life, is the food that endures

to eternal life that we should work for? The Bible is full of things we can do to earn the bread from heaven, but the main one is faith in the one who is the bread of heaven, Jesus Christ.

The Wadi Quelt, perhaps the "valley of the shadow of death" of which Psalm 23 refers, is a dry ravine running from Jerusalem toward Jericho. For hundreds of years, St. George's Monastery has been located there. Though the wadi occasionally is blessed with a flow of water following heavy rains, the supply is not dependable. Early monastics first attempted to supplement the order's needs from an artesian well, but that supply, too, proved undependable. An ancient Roman aqueduct also runs through the area and it provided a much more reliable water source. The original abbot observing the Roman structure stated that our faith lives needed to be more like the aqueduct than the reservoir. The reservoir eventually would be depleted of its supply unless there was some way to refill it. The life lived like an aqueduct perpetually in connection with God would never be depleted.

"In [Christ]," writes Paul to the Colossians, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." The Greek word used for "fullness" here, *pleroma*, is a rich one. It's often used to refer to merchant ships heavily laden with cargo. It's also the same word Mark uses as Jesus feeds the 5,000. When the miracle was all over, Mark tells us they had twelve baskets of leftover fragments of bread and fish. Those baskets were full -- *pleroma*.

The proper response to all this fullness -- and to the powerful experience of being rescued from darkness, and allowed to emigrate to the kingdom of the beloved Son -- is thanksgiving. That's the way the Pilgrims felt about it anyway, as they set foot in that new land their Native American neighbors called "Massachusetts." They had little in the way of material goods to be thankful for; but they considered themselves richly blessed with spiritual treasures. Most of all, they were thankful for the gift of Jesus Christ, who had given his life so they might live eternally.

As we pause this week for Thanksgiving and observe today in worship, it is good for us to remember that out of God's blessings of the past, the blessings of today, will come the future. That future has not yet come and is still a mystery, but the God who has been faithful has promised to continue to be with us. Whether in the land that is plentiful and where streams of abundance flow or whether we walk through the wilderness, whether sun's shining down on me or on the road to suffering, we have been, are and will be blest and so we give thanks and bless the name of the Lord.