

(John 6:25-35 NRSV)

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰ So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³² Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven." ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

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Give Us this Bread Always

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: John 6:25-35

In the C.S. Lewis children's story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* four siblings, Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy stumble upon a doorway into another world, the world of Narnia. Narnia, as they find it, is a world caught in perpetual winter, perpetual winter but with no Christmas, a state of affairs brought about by the land's evil queen, the white witch Jadis.

Jadis is a fearsome presence, on vigilant lookout for four humans, who, the ages old Narnia legend goes, will one day rule Narnia and restore it to its rightful sequence of seasons. The white witch knows that if the story comes to pass, it means the end of her rule, so learning that four human children may have found a way into Narnia is bad news, indeed. Bad news in need of sure remedy.

The white witch learns this information from Edmund, the grumpiest and the most selfish of the children. The witch discovers Edmund and begins to sharply interrogate him. But soon she realizes that she can get far more out of him by charming him than scaring him. So the witch asks Edmund into her sleigh. She fixes him a magically scrumptious hot drink. The queen then continues her evil seduction:

"It is dull, Son of Adam, to drink without eating," said the Queen presently. "What would you like best to eat?"

"Turkish Delight, please, your Majesty," said Edmund.

The Queen let another drop fall from her bottle on to the snow, and instantly there appeared a round box, tied with green silk ribbon, which, when opened, turned out to contain several pounds of the best Turkish Delight. Each piece was sweet and light to the very centre and Edmund had-never tasted anything more delicious. He was quite warm now, and very comfortable.

While he was eating the Queen kept asking him questions. At first Edmund tried to remember that it is rude to speak with one's mouth full, but soon he forgot about this and thought only of trying to shovel down as much Turkish Delight as he could, and the more he ate

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the more he wanted to eat, and he never asked himself why the Queen should be so inquisitive. She got him to tell her that he had one brother and two sisters, and that one of his sisters had already been in Narnia and had met a Faun there, and that no one except himself and his brother and his sisters knew anything about Narnia. She seemed especially interested in the fact that there were four of them, and kept on coming back to it. "You are sure there are just four of you?" she asked. "Two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve, neither more nor less?" and Edmund, with his mouth full of Turkish Delight, kept on saying, "Yes,,I told you that before,' and forgetting to call her "Your Majesty' but she didn't seem to mind now.

At last the Turkish Delight t was all finished and Edmund was looking very hard at the empty box and wishing that she would ask him whether he would like some more. Probably the Queen knew quite well what he was thinking; for she knew, though Edmund did not, that this was enchanted Turkish Delight and that anyone who had once tasted it would want more and more of it, and would even, if they were allowed, go on eating it till they killed themselves.

Jesus says to the crowd, which has been looking for him, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Those who followed Jesus, even those who had traveled as much as ten miles on foot around the western side of the Sea of Galilee to find him, seem to have been looking for him only because they wanted more Turkish delight. They had seen the miraculous feeding of the crowd, but it had simply set their hunger longing for more to eat.

On Thanksgiving Sunday there are a few cautions the preacher ought exercise around talking about the abundance of food. First of all, it is a day to be grateful for what we have, for what God has made possible for us, and for enough to eat. So, we should not dismiss physical food as some bad thing. Without it we perish. With it we may live, and not just live but relish living. I look forward to the wonderful and lavish spread of the traditional Thanksgiving dinner I will share with family next Thursday. And that leads to the second caution. We who have enough to eat on Thanksgiving and most every other day should be especially cautious of rendering physical food as unimportant. It's a lot easier to consider physical food insignificant when you're not worrying where your next meal is coming from, or whether there will be a meal when you are hungry next.

But there is another side to the story, too. Jesus is telling the crowd that there is more to life than bread alone, because it's true, and it's true for poor and

hungry folk as much as it is for wealthy and well-nourished folk. Sometimes in our rush to emphasize the need to feed the hungry, and to place it first on the agenda, we resist any thought of the need for spiritual food that the poor and famished have. We find it irresponsible to talk of spiritual food when people are starving to death. It's well intentioned enough. It's meant to make sure no one avoids the social requirement for real, down to earth justice by pretending that with spiritual food you don't need anything to eat. Given the willingness we've shown to cut social assistance, even to children and the elderly, the fear that people won't take physical hunger seriously is certainly understandable. Nonetheless, for rich or poor, physical food is not enough. So, even as we are sensitive to the need to address physical hunger, spiritual hunger, too, must be included.

What we find from the crowd in this morning's passage from John is the same thing we find from Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. If you look to physical food to satisfy you, whether it's turkey or Turkish Delight, it's not going to do the job. It's never enough for that. And if you try to satisfy yourself with such food, you will find yourself constantly craving more. It's an insidious trick, in a way, because physical comfort seems so promising. It's why it worked so much better for the white witch than fearsome interrogation.

And, of course, food is a metaphor here for all the things that we think will satisfy us. For the crowd in John it was bread. For Edmund it was Turkish delight. But the list of possibilities is long, indeed. The right and rewarding career, the right relationship, winning the lottery, alcohol or drugs, a new car, a bigger house, a better and more fit body, the fountain of youth or a long life, good health. It's not that any of these things in themselves are bad. Indeed, many of them, perhaps all of them, have the capacity to improve our lives. Some are even necessary. But none of them and no combination of them is sufficient. When we expect them to deliver all our satisfaction, they quite simply fail us. More than that, they leave us craving more and more.

Research done this year has found something I have long suspected. You have, no doubt, often heard those who find themselves too busy in their lives, especially in their jobs say, "What I want is more time, more time for my family and more time for recreation." No they don't. The research shows that almost all of them are lying. Left to their own devices they would keep right on working, just like they have been. And why? Because, for them, work has become Turkish Delight. They know it's unsatisfying. They acknowledge that. And yet, almost all of them will keep on doing just what they have been, because, like Edmund they have come up against something that they will continue to gulp down, even if it kills them.

Jesus tells us this morning that the real reason that people have this insatiable hunger that sets them grasping unto death is that they have no knowledge of the bread of life, no knowledge of the bread of life, which will satisfy

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them. In a sense people are right when they fail to turn to family and time off. These things won't work either. Remember, all these things are good. Work is good. A career is good. Time with your family is good. Time off is good. Exercise is good. Eating right is good. Balance in your life is good. But even if you have all of these things, and more, unless you have discovered the bread of life, you will come to the end of the day still feeling hungry.

This bread of life comes from God. This is the crucial point. Such a small point. One that is easy to miss. The crowd asks him, "What must we do to perform the work of God?" Well, there are surely many things that we can do to perform the work of God. But the bread of life is not one of them. For that we must simply open our arms and our hearts and receive it. Jesus tells them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Even here there is a Turkish Delight temptation. One can hear, and many have heard, this sentence to mean, Here is exactly what you must believe to receive the bread of life. Some will tell you that you must be saved to receive the bread of life. Some will tell you that you must confess Jesus Christ as Lord to receive the bread of life. Some will tell you that you must be against abortion and homosexuality to receive the bread of life. Some will tell you that if you believe in social justice and the preferential option for the poor, you will receive the bread of life. To be sure, some of these things are right and important, and I believe some of them are dead and dangerously wrong. But in either case, neither the right ones nor the wrong ones are the bread of life. Even where they are right, by themselves they are Turkish Delight.

The bread of life, which Jesus talks about and says that he is, is what you receive when you stop stuffing yourself and stop trying to get full and simply allow God, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit to enter, to pour itself into that vacant space in your soul that nothing else will penetrate. Prayer and meditation can quiet the grasping and prepare the soul for this bread of life. Humility, which lets our need to accomplish things get out of the way, that, too, prepares the way for the bread of life. All of these are spiritual practices which recommend themselves to anyone who wishes finally to cure the craving that burdens the soul. These are spiritual practices designed to help us get out of our own way, to let God take the lead. In this posture we may receive the bread of life.

"They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.' Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"

Thanks be to God. Amen.