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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee,
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Thanksgiving Eve

In college, I found myself without a place to go for Thanksgiving. I had planned to go see an aunt, but it fell through for some reason, and my family was a very expensive plane ticket away. My roommate had mercy on me and had me back to his home. I was nervous to go, because we didn't know each other terribly well, and I certainly didn't know his family. But sure enough, I went and had a wonderful time. The people were kind to me and helped me not feel so much like an outsider. I enjoyed watching the aunts get a little tipsy and start gossiping about people in the town, and I enjoyed watching the uncles (who seemed old then but who were probably the age I am now) somewhat pathetically toss a football in the backyard. The magic that is giving and receiving food and taking time to thank God for the bounty of the earth was manifestly present, and I still remember it as one of my favorite Thanksgivings on record.

And yet, even with memories like those living in my mind, I had some ambivalence about hosting a Thanksgiving Eve service this year. A part of me was nagging a little in the back of my mind, and I decided to pay it some attention. And I noticed this part of me that was uncomfortable had a few things to say. This part noted that our church sits on Potawatomi land. This part noted that the Thanksgiving origin story told to me at school when I was little is not true and is instead a rhetorical cover for the doctrine of discovery, genocide, manifest destiny, and colonialism. This part of me also noted that Thanksgiving is a federal holiday and the church has historically acted badly when it's gotten in bed with the state.

So, if all of these reasons made me think I should not host a Thanksgiving service, why under heaven are we all here?

I think we are here because of need. In some ways, the more questionable parts of Thanksgiving are secondary to the reason we have come together tonight in fellowship and in praise of God. I believe our human need for each other, for sustenance, and for prayer is the reason our yearly observance of Thanksgiving has endured. I invite us tonight to divorce the holiday from its history — and indeed to fight actively against that history — and to see what is left.

I see a meal, prepared by and for the people that we love. I see a pause in the unending hamster wheel of life in 2019. I see a moment for grace, peace, and prayer in defiance of adrenaline-causing headlines and vicious public discourse. I see a domestic liturgy with special foods and traditions — a holy way to mark time and to create order out of chaos. These are the enduring facts of Thanksgiving.

And it is no surprise to me that they are also the enduring facts of our Christianity. The love, the prayer, the meal — these are what bind us. The meal that we have tomorrow is a reflection of the meal we have here every Sunday. Which is what I think the text from John's Gospel is driving at as well. Breaking bread and sharing wine with one another have at their core a truth about God — God is the generosity, the gift, receiving of food and grace. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life,

whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” To share our food with one another is to participate in the actual life of God. The elements seem humble, but our religious instincts across time and space have recognized in this act something divine.

So, I think tonight is as good a time as any to reimagine and reinvent Thanksgiving. I want to resist away the stories that hurt and destroy, and instead, I want to focus on the real reason we find ourselves craving sharing food and sharing ourselves with one another: God Almighty. Because of the way God broke bread with his friends two thousand years ago, every bread we have broken with each other since — and those we break tomorrow — have been made holy. Amen.