

Homily Thanksgiving Day 2025 William D. Glenn+

John 6:25-25 I am the Bread of Life

Happy Thanksgiving! This utterly American nationality holiday. One we share across the spectrum of politics, religion, and all of the other divisions that seem to embroil these United states.

Point of departure: the original Thanksgiving was the indigenous people of the eastern shore of what we call Massachusetts welcoming these strange, smelly, oddly-attired, and very pale complexioned Puritans, Pilgrims, religious refugees from the Church of England. And so it starts. Immigrants being welcomed by the locals. Immigrants being fed by the locals. Immigrants being honored by the locals. The natives, having never heard the word Jesus nor the Christ, treated them as the Gospels suggested we must always treat the other. Just how did they know to do that?

Well, have we **since gotten** things backwards. And, thus, on Thanksgiving Day, we are reminded —again —of the task at hand: to re-learn how to welcome the stranger, the disenfranchised, those of a different pigmentation, those wanting a safe place to worship God the Father, by those who worshipped the Great Spirit, the holy Ancestors, our Mother, the Earth, our Two-Spirited Shamans, the wise elders, and the babies papoosed on their mothers' backs.

I have thought often of a Thanksgiving celebration I was part of several years ago.

For ten years, I was a volunteer therapist and group facilitator at San Quentin State penitentiary ,working with lifers, men had committed a murder, often drug and gang-related or an impetuous act of violent passion, usually with a gun at the ready.

We worked with the men on their rage, regret, accountability, guilt, shame, forgiveness, masculinity, sorrow, grief and family—their own and the families they had cruelly rent into disparate pieces: the gamut of feelings that accompanied these men daily, just as these themes might accompany our lives, daily, too.

Their motive, to get early release on their reformed behavior? Hardly, because back then no lifers were ever given parole. No, their motives, I learned to surmise, were because they wanted re-admittance into the human family.

These men worked exceedingly hard, drilling down to the core of their crime, their motives, their impulsivity, their callousness, and almost always, into the trauma they had suffered from childhood: sexual abuse by their mother's partners, no-active-parent households, neglect, emotional shaming, boys raising boys in gangs, a whole panoply of horrors. Drilling down into their selves.

Over the years, the men grew, they grew up, they were humbled, felt palpable guilt and shame, and became, in each other's, and my, presence, new men, new human beings, new persons.

Prison: monotony, 24/7 noise, ever-present foul odors, micro and maxi-aggressions, sexual dominance of one over another, in-house gang rivalries, and almost unbearably bland processed mis-cooked food. Every day, 365.

My colleague Jacques and I approached the warden one year, the only year a woman led the prison, and one who admired the work we were doing. We asked her if our group might bring a Thanksgiving Dinner, with all the fixings, inside the prison, to our men. She reluctantly agreed, if we abided the prison's endless roster of rules.

No cooking on site, nothing but plastic forks and spoons, no glass, no metal serving utensils, no candles, no matches, no blue cloth (the prison's required uniform color) , no assistance from the guards if any of us were held hostage, the usual stuff.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, we rolled a van to the prison gates, and onto prison carts, we unloaded roasted and still warm turkeys, hot mashed potatoes and gravy in thermoses, room temp French green bean and fried onion rings, bowls of warm collards, tubs of cranberry sauce, and large thermoses of Peets coffee, with real ½ & ½. The finale: pecan and pumpkin and apple pies, real whipped cream, plenty for everyone to have plenty, and enough for the men to take a piece back their cells.

We were shepherded into an old room in the rapidly deteriorating 1885 prison infirmary—since torn down—which we decorated with orange and red and yellow crepe paper streamers.

When the men were invited in, there were gasps, shouts of joy and amazement, some tears, a lot of hugging (strictly forbidden by prison protocols). Each man found his name on a place card, and we all sat down to dinner.

For many of the men, they had not had a Thanksgiving in two, three, four decades, nor could they imagine they ever would again.

I sat opposite my friend Jacques, and he asked if I would lead us in prayer, I asked the men to take the hand of the man next to them, or the hand of one of the dozen volunteers who had created this abundant meal, and to share what they were grateful for this day. With 30 of us around long, table-clothed and beflowered connecting tables, each man shared those things, those people for whom they were grateful. In this heavenly banquet inside this notorious prison, as men shared, soft tears filled the room. Their gratitude was immense, intricate, enveloping.

Sitting next to me was Israel, an eloquent and deeply spiritual young man, and he had the presence to hold the room, to hold the silence.

He started slowly. He began: *I am grateful for now, no, now, no no, now, this very moment to be together, that we are alive. Now.*

By now the room, to a person, was in tears, and leaning on each other's shoulders, and smiling broadly. As I led a concluding prayer of thanks, I realized that in that room, and in this one, this morning, lay the deepest universal truth, that we are alive, we get to be together, and we know to give thanks. Now.

This is love in action. Healing, redemptive, consoling, forgiving, extending in every direction, including a maximum-security prison, including in a red-doored church on Mendocino Avenue in Santa Rosa.

This is Eucharist, this is the Bread of Life, this is Thanksgiving.

