

Harvest Thanksgiving
12 October 2025
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 100; Philippians 4:4-9; John 6:25-35

Sermon Preached by Fr. Matthew Bowman
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Today's Gospel follows directly after the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on water. The crowd, amazed at having eaten their fill, goes searching for Jesus, eager to know the source of this power that multiplies loaves and calms waves.

The impulse to search is a familiar one. Faith rarely arrives in a flash of certainty, but unfolds through experience, conversation, and the witness of others. The people by the lakeshore seek Jesus together, question him together, and learn together—a picture of the Church itself. As I said last week, faith develops in community. Our understanding of God grows as we pray, sing, and serve alongside one another. No one believes entirely alone.

For the crowds fed on the hillside, to be *full* was a rare experience in a world of scarcity. When Jesus fed them, they likely tasted abundance for the first time in years. Yet when they find him again, Jesus calls them beyond the satisfaction of a full stomach to the deeper nourishment of believing in the one whom God has sent—turning their attention from the gift to the Giver.

Harvest Thanksgiving does the same for us. We give thanks for grain and fruit, for work and abundance, but we are also invited to recognize God's generosity behind it all. Gratitude for the harvest draws us deeper into faith in the God who provides and sustains both body and soul. And notice that Jesus contrasts "*food that perishes*" with "*food that endures to eternal life*," yet he does not scold the crowd for seeking bread. He meets them where they are and calls them deeper, reminding us that the divide we sometimes draw between meeting human needs and proclaiming the Gospel is one of our own making. In Christ, care for body and soul belong together. When he feeds the hungry, he reveals the character of God; when we do the same, we share in his work.

The crowd asks, "*What must we do to perform the works of God?*" Jesus answers, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*" Belief itself, it seems, is a kind of work—requiring choice and perseverance. Our good works do not earn God's favour, but they show that faith is alive within us. Belief is not passive; it keeps turning again and again toward God. It is both gift and labour—the grace of God meeting our willing response.

It takes work, too, to be thankful. Gratitude is not always spontaneous; it must be practiced as a daily discipline—the effort to notice beauty, to name blessings, to remain kind even when life is hard. When the news feels grim or anxiety weighs heavy, it can be exhausting to find reasons to rejoice. Yet Paul tells us, “*Rejoice in the Lord always... Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*” Gratitude, Paul implies, does not ignore trouble but brings it honestly before God within the frame of thanksgiving. And the result is not denial but peace—the peace of God guarding hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Yet Harvest Thanksgiving, especially in Canada, always feels complicated. We give thanks for the bounty of this land, yet the land itself carries stories of promise and betrayal. We live and worship on treaty territories whose obligations remain unmet. The food on our tables comes from soil that is occupied land, tended through systems that have often excluded the very peoples who first cared for it. It is watered and wash with water from Shoal Lake—a project that for more than a century cut an entire nation off from the mainland—while many Indigenous communities still lack safe drinking water. In remote regions, groceries cost several times what they do here in the city; and in our own neighbourhoods, families line up at food banks.

So our thanksgiving cannot be one that is sentimental. It must be honest enough to hold gratitude and lament together. We can give thanks for the harvest and still grieve that its abundance is not equitably shared. We can rejoice in creation and yet repent of the harm we have done to the land and to one another. True gratitude does not look away from injustice—it moves us toward repair.

The pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber calls this *imperfect gratitude*. She once wrote:

God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for [our] failings. [Our] failings hurt [ourselves] and others and even the planet, and God's grace to [us] is that [our] brokenness is not the final word ... it's that God makes beautiful things out of even [our] own [crap]. Grace isn't about God creating humans and flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace - like saying, 'Oh, it's OK, I'll be the good guy and forgive you.' It's God saying, 'I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.'

-*Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (2013)

Our thanksgiving, too, will never be flawless. We bring it with mixed motives and distracted hearts. But God's grace fills the gaps. God receives even our halting gratitude and transforms it into praise.

Bolz-Weber also says that whenever we draw a line between ourselves and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it. That line-crossing grace challenges the way we think about gratitude. If we give thanks while others go hungry, or while entire nations are denied clean water, our thanksgiving is incomplete. Jesus calls us across those lines—to a gratitude that overflows in generosity, justice, and reconciliation. To thank God rightly is to join him in that movement toward others.

Imperfect gratitude, then, is not failure—it is honesty. It begins with awareness: of grace, of need, of neighbour, and of our dependence on God. It admits that we have not earned what we have received, and that we benefit while others are deprived. And yet it still dares to say “thank you.” Because in saying thank you, we recognize God as the giver of all and commit ourselves to using God's gifts rightly.

This is why Harvest Thanksgiving is not only a festival of plenty but a summons to responsibility. Gratitude and stewardship belong together. To offer thanks for creation is to renew our baptismal vow to respect and sustain it; to give thanks for daily bread is to work for a society where all are fed.

So today, as we bring our offerings and sing hymns of praise, may our thanksgiving be both joyful and real—holding together the beauty of the harvest and the pain of the world. May it be, in Bolz-Weber's sense, imperfect but sincere—utterly reliant on God's grace to make it whole.

And may the God who fed the multitudes and calmed the storm grant us hearts steady in faith, hands open in generosity, and lives that reflect God's peace. For even in a world of injustice and uncertainty, the gifts of God abound. The bread of life is still given, and the harvest of God's grace is still being gathered in.

Let us pray.

Thrill us, O lord we pray, with the signs of your life in our midst as we serve you in the community in which you have placed us. Make this parish a source of rich blessing for all who walk past its doors, a place of hope for people who under the shadows of distress or despair, a place of solace for people who are overwhelmed by a weight of sorrow or sadness that is too much for them to bear, and a place of astonishing joy and thankfulness for all who dare to seek you here. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

