# **The Bread of Life Mission and Service Sermon for Thanksgiving 2025**

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.”

This is how our reading today ends. It’s actually in the middle of a speech Jesus is giving, but I guess the lectionary creators wanted this line—*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*—to really hit home. John likes to talk about bread...a lot. Just before this passage Jesus feeds the crowd of 5,000 with the five barley loaves and two fish. In this chapter alone, there are 18 mentions of bread. So, it must really mean something that Jesus calls himself the bread of life.

Now it is Thanksgiving, so my apologies if you are already thinking about a delicious meal. This reflection may get you hungry. Or maybe you came to worship today already hungry?

Did you ever go to school hungry? Or can you remember a time you were trying to focus on an important task—at work, or with your kids, or even sitting in worship trying to listen—but your stomach is grumbling? It is hard to bring our best selves when we haven’t had enough to eat.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus is talking to a crowd who are hungry in both the physical and spiritual sense. They have a lot of questions for him. They are hungry for his teachings and really digging in with their spiritual knife and fork. They are asking for signs that he is who God has sent; that Jesus is indeed the expected “Son of Man.” As if feeding the crowd of 5,000 wasn’t enough, Jesus has also just walked across the water to his disciples in the boat. And before all that Jesus was healing the sick and making waves with Jewish leadership. So clearly, there had been signs.

But the curiosity of this crowd was insatiable. Jesus did what he often does in John—he doesn’t answer their questions, but redirects the conversation to an important issue. The crowd is focused on what works they should perform for God, instead of what work God is doing right before their eyes. Jesus lands a zinger claiming that they just want “signs” that get them fed, and he isn’t exactly wrong. The crowd says, “Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness.” If Jesus is indeed sent by God, couldn’t he just rain some bread down from heaven?

Alas, no. Jesus turns the point of that story to the activity of God here and now. The true giver is not Moses, but God; the true giving was not in the past, but in the present; the true bread was not the manna in the wilderness, but is the bread of God that has now come down from Heaven in the person of Jesus.

For original readers this would have been important. John’s audience was new Christians—some of whom may have been Jewish by birth. Nearly all would have had connections with the Jewish stories, like the story of Moses and the manna from heaven. He would be making sure that his readers understood that this new understanding is not the same as what went before in Judaism. This leads to a not-so-subtle comparison between the stories of Moses and the Torah, and Jesus. As contemporary readers we need to remember that Judaism and Christianity share the same roots. The vines of our two faiths may have grown in different directions, but there isn’t a need to compete or compare.

But let’s get back to the meat of the issue—or should I say, bread. This crowd is skeptical. Even though they follow Jesus and listen to him speak, they aren’t too sure about this “food that endures for eternal life” he has promised. Actual food—fueling bodies and minds—is never too far away from any of our thoughts.

In southern Alberta, 65 kilometres west of Calgary, lies Mînî Thnî (pronounced: mi-NITH-nee), formerly called Morley First Nation. The Stoney Nakoda people have lived alongside United Church folk since the 1800s. Like many First Nations who are working against the consequences of generations of violence including forced relocation, residential schools, and ongoing racism and discrimination, Mînî Thnî struggles with high rates of poverty, and some residents face food insecurity.

Food insecurity is something we hear about a lot about these days. It is a term that covers a few different experiences. Folks in Canada who are marginally food insecure may have a limited selection of food. Those who are moderately food insecure likely make purchases that compromise the quality or quantity of food. Severe food insecurity means people are missing meals, reducing food intake, or even going days without food. Unfortunately, across our country there are more people experiencing each of these levels of food insecurity.

In 2022, one in 10 Canadians were living in poverty. I suspect that may be even higher today. However, it isn’t just people living in poverty that are food insecure. In 2022, 15 percent of people who were living above the poverty line experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. That means people who aren’t considered poor are buying lower quality food, skipping meals, or reducing their food intake because they can’t afford it.

Those figures from Stats Canada also tell us that there are probably people worshipping with us today that face food insecurity. It means that there are people in every community across Canada having to make tough decisions about paying rent or buying protein. It means that there are hungry folks who aren’t able to bring their best selves with them—whether to school, work, or to relationships.

I believe (I hope we all believe) that all people need to be spiritually fed and uplifted. Everyone needs to belong to a community, to feel known and needed. Most people want to learn more about themselves and the world around them. People want to commit to practices that grow their understanding, strengthen their bodies, and make a difference in the lives of others. The truth is, though, all of these things are pretty hard to do when you are hungry—when you are not your best self, and are barely making ends meet.

You may be familiar with the psychological theory articulated by Abraham Maslow. Known as Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, it suggests human behaviour is driven by ascending needs—where the foundation is enough food, water and rest. Once those are achieved, people move up through other needs like safety, belonging, and self-actualization.

We all require food to fuel us. Food and water are our starting point. Thankfully, our shared Mission and Service gifts are helping ensure that Indigenous Elders who live on reserve in Mînî Thnî and in Lethbridge have the funds they need when they go to a grocery store, through The Food Security for Elders program run through Chinook Winds Regional Council. Your gifts to Mission and Service mean that people who feel worry and scarcity when they open their fridge or cupboards can instead feel comfort and nourishment. For elders, many of whom provide care to younger generations and provide guidance for the community, this program means they can bring their best selves.

Because of your gifts to Mission and Service, people who are directly connected to the land, weather, and agricultural success in other parts of the world are also being supported and fed. The Scaling Up Resilience Program in the Bikita and Gutu districts of Zimbabwe provides training in gender-sensitive, climate-smart agriculture, strengthening disaster risk-management systems, and reviving essential community assets, such as water conservation works and irrigation schemes. This is essential in a place where 60 percent of people face severe food insecurity due to frequent droughts, unpredictable rains, tropical cyclones, economic instability, and outbreaks of diseases like cholera. Your support of Mission and Service is helping these subsistence farmers have greater success, which means more food on the table, more money to send children to school, and greater financial resilience. Scaling Up Resilience is creating a brighter future for thousands of people. A hungry person doesn’t have the time or energy for self-actualization or communal liberation. It is amazing that when you give to Mission and Service you are helping literally feed people, but also creating the space for spiritual nurture.

That Hierarchy of Needs was true during Jesus’s time too. The crowd in front of Jesus has questions about bread. They wanted miracles or signs about food. Just a few verses (and what seems like a few hours) before, Jesus had done just that. He had fed the 5000; they were physically fed before he started teaching and preaching about spiritual food. He knew that the crowd needed food and water before they could move up the hierarchy to really hear and live out what he was teaching about God, love, and self.

Jesus is inviting their faith—in God and him—and inviting their involvement in a movement that would eventually see members of the early Christian church hold everything in common, share homes and meals, and sell property and possessions to give to those who had a greater need.

And we, 2,000 years later, are inheritors of this story, of this faith, and of a legacy of caring for those with a greater need. In the United Church of Canada specifically, we are the inheritors and stewards of Mission and Service. Born alongside our denomination, Mission and Service has been the arm that seeks daring justice, pushes bold discipleship, and understands its care for others and compassion for the world as a reflection of deep spirituality. Concretely, Mission and Service is our collective generosity, converted by the Holy Spirit to transform lives and build a better world.

What is beautiful about Mission and Service is that it is all of us. Our shared generosity can do more, feed more, spread more hope, because it is done collectively. The United Church of Canada is made strong and relevant by our—yours and my—financial support to Mission and Service, and by sharing stories like those of Elders in Mînî Thnî and the farmers in Zimbabwe, so that the world will know we are Christians by our love.

And so, I conclude by saying thank you—thank you for being a part of this congregation and choosing to live your faith with us. And for those of you who already give to Mission and Service, thank you so much! Please prayerfully consider increasing your gift this year. For those of you who do not give to Mission and Service yet, it is never too late to join your generous siblings in the wonderful ministry of the whole United Church of Canada. Your gifts truly make a difference as we work alongside God to transform lives, inspire meaning and purpose, and build a better world. Thanks be to God. Amen.