



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## They Shall Eat and Have Some Left

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 25, 2021*

*The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost;*

*2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

We are leaving *The Gospel According to Mark*, and, for the next five Sundays, we'll be hearing from *The Gospel According to John*. Now, John's gospel was written later than Mark's gospel (some 50 to 60 years later), is much longer than Mark, and is much more theologically complex. At least one scholar<sup>i</sup> compares John's form and method of writing to a Greek tragedy. The Greek John used is scholarly, even eloquent, and the gospel notably contains seven "I am" discourses, where Jesus says, "*Ego Ami*," literally, "I am."

- "I am the bread of life."
- "I am the light of the world."
- "I am the gate for the sheep"
- "I am the good shepherd."
- "I am the resurrection and the life"
- "I am the way and the truth and the life."
- "I am the true vine."

These discourses reach their climax in the Gospel of John, when a doubting Thomas comes to faith as he dramatically proclaims the risen Christ as, "My Lord and my God." Like the other evangelists, the author of John records real events, but unlike the other gospel writers, John goes on to try to interpret them. In these interpretations he uses a number of common words symbolically like, "bread, water, light, life, word, shepherd, door."<sup>ii</sup>

The feeding of the 5000 is the *only* miracle story recorded in all four gospels. This was thought to be a key story to understanding Jesus by the early church. And because John has no other story of a final eucharistic meal in an upper room (as do Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the narrative we heard read this morning is John's theological equivalent of "the last supper."<sup>iii</sup>

Have you ever been hungry? I mean truly hungry? Most of us only know what it's like to experience physical hunger for a short period of time. We're keeping a rushed schedule that forces us to miss a breakfast or a lunch. Maybe we're following a demanding diet which torments us into "carb-less-ness." Only some people in our culture know what it is to be physically hungry day after day, week after week—to be exhausted by their hunger, numbed by it, to be rendered listless and light-headed by it.

The late Frank McCourt's masterpiece, *Angela's Ashes*, was based on his poverty-stricken childhood in Ireland. It's a hard book to read. There's one scene in the book which I simply can't get out of my mind, when a single, precious egg is shared between the hungry members of the entire household. The egg, carefully boiled, was sliced into five even pieces by the elder McCourt so that his wife and their four children could all savor a small taste of a rare delicacy. When I was in Ireland several years ago, I was told that more than a million Irish lives were lost to starvation and related illnesses in the Great Famine that took place between 1845 and 1851 and that the famine had made a profound impact on the nation's culture.

But while relatively few of us have first-hand knowledge of physical hunger, many more of us are familiar with spiritual hunger.

- We all know about longing for an ineffable connection.
- We all know about struggling to find a path through a difficult stretch of life.
- We all know about the mystical deprivation which brings us, listless and light-headed, to a holy place like this magnificent church, literally starving to death for a transcendent moment, one small sign, one—well, how can I describe it—one inexpressibly holy morsel that might sustain us on the journey. Isn't that, at least in part, why you have come here to worship? To find that connection?

Spiritual malnourishment, as it turns out, is a fatal condition. Mother Teresa said, "Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat." Spiritual hunger, like physical hunger, consumes our best selves. It's made all the more confusing in that our spiritual hungers can leave us feeling fat and bloated because we substitute what we truly need for the long haul with what we think we need in the moment.

I think one of the compelling details offered in today's gospel is found in these lines: "When they were satisfied, (Jesus) told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So, they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets." From only five loaves of barley and two fish, the 5000 were able to eat their fill and still, and still, there was some left over, just like there was in that Old Testament story from 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings. All of which speaks to a compassionate and infinitely-resourced God who provides for the things we most need.

I know I've shared this story with some of you before, but I was listening to an evangelist on my car radio one Sunday morning on my way to a visitation in Kansas, where I was serving as the diocesan bishop. (You know, you like to keep up on the competition.) And that preacher said, and I can remember this just as clear as a bell, "You all are buying things you don't need, with money you don't have, to impress people you don't even know!" And I immediately changed the channel because that guy was just too good, and he was just way, way, too close! He had my number down exactly.

"To whom much has been given, much is required."

The author Parker Palmer tells a story about boarding a 6:00 am flight on the way home from a speaking engagement. He writes, "Our departure was delayed because the truck that brings coffee to the planes had broken down. After a while, the pilot said, 'We're going to take off without the coffee. We want to get you to Detroit on time.' I was up front where all the 'road warriors' sit—a surly tribe, especially at that early hour. They began griping loudly and at length about incompetence, lousy service, etc.

“Once we got into the air, the lead flight attendant came to the center of the aisle with her microphone and said, ‘Good morning! We’re flying to Minneapolis today at an altitude of 30 feet...’ and that, of course, evoked more scorn from the road warriors.

“And then she said, ‘Now that I have your attention, I know you are upset about the coffee. Well, get over it! Start sharing your stuff with your seatmates. That bag of 5 peanuts you got on your last flight and put in your pocket? Tear it open and pass them around. Got gum or mints? Share them! You can’t read all of the sections of your paper at once. Offer them to each other! Show off the pictures of kids and grandkids you have in your wallets!’

“And, as she went on in that vein, people began laughing and doing what she had told them to do. A surly scene turned into summer camp! An hour later, as the attendant passed by his seat, (Palmer) signaled her and said, ‘What you did was really amazing. Where can I send you a letter of commendation?’ And the flight attendant said to him, ‘Thanks, I’ll get you a form.’ And then she leaned down and whispered, ‘The loaves and the fishes are not dead.’”<sup>iv</sup>

No, not dead. Not dead by a long shot. I just love that story, and wasn’t it Brené Brown who said, “Maybe stories are just data with a soul”? And this story, which features the intimacy of sharing food with strangers, can’t help but remind us of the isolation our souls have undergone during the pandemic. It’ll take a little time for us to heal and to reconnect with one another.

We are all invited to be good and generous stewards of the gifts we’ve been given: to share our food with the hungry, to care for those who are sick, to have compassion for the elderly, and to advocate for justice for the weakest among us. These are the *most minimal expectations* we can be expected to fulfill. At the very least, we need to share our stuff! But if we were to provide all these things and fail to offer Christ to those desperate for the true bread of life, we would have failed our faith ancestors who knew the sacred preciousness of that bread come down from heaven.

Yes, our appetites can betray us. That we strive and strive to fill our holy hungers with bread that perishes, while we are starving for the true bread of life is one of the great paradoxes of this life. Why we are so foolish, we do not know and we cannot say.

But in the end, our appetites may save us, too. Because in them we’ve also been given a desire for the sacred things that are essential for our life and our salvation. God endows us with a hunger for the holy, and, through God’s Son, we are truly and fully fed.

In his Letter to the Gentile Church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

To know “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” and to “be filled with the fullness of God” is the heart’s desire of every person who seeks to walk with Jesus. It is the very thing for which I yearn. We seek the power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of it, but, in the end, we cannot. What we can comprehend is that God’s love surpasses all knowledge, all logic, all wisdom, along with all matter, all space, and even time itself.

Madeleine L’Engle in her book *The Irrational Season* was paraphrasing St. John of the Cross when she wrote, “In the evening of life, we shall be judged on love, and not one of us is going to come off very well, and were it not for my absolute faith in the loving forgiveness of my Lord, I could not call on him to come.”<sup>v</sup>

Have you ever been hungry? Truly hungry? Starving to death? Then call upon the one whose love provides more than enough to sustain you and depend upon the one who wields power over the waters and calms the angry sea.

*Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> D. Butler Pratt, "The Gospel of John from the Standpoint of Greek Tragedy," *The Biblical World*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (Dec., 1907), pp. 448-459, published by The University of Chicago Press, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3140795](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3140795). Accessed 24 July 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Introduction to The Gospel According to John*, by Donald G. Miller & Bruce M. Metzger, c. 1991, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 124

<sup>iii</sup> *Preaching through the Christian Year, Year B*, by Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, c. 1993, p. 359

<sup>iv</sup> *Synthesis, Year B*, July, 2018, p. 2

<sup>v</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *The Irrational Season*, Seabury Press, Chicago, c. 1977

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