



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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

## Dearest St. Luke

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 17, 2021*

*The Feast of Saint Luke*

*Sirach 38:1-4, 6-10, 12-14; 2 Timothy 4:5-13; Luke 14:14-21*

*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*

Today we're celebrating the Feast of St. Luke, something we seldom do. We celebrate the Feast of St. Bartholomew, the saint after whom our church is named, to kick-off the programmatic year. And we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis, so we can bless the animals and highlight our responsibilities as stewards of Creation. But Luke is not usually a saint we commemorate.

Yet, in the midst of persistent pandemic which has taken 4.5 million lives worldwide—and 724,000 lives here in the United States so far—in a time when we yearn for wholeness and healing, St. Luke may be just the saint for this moment.

Now, every Episcopalian has his or her favorite gospel. My mother believed the Gospel According to Matthew covered all the bases best. Others prefer the terse and more ancient Gospel According to Mark. Some are drawn to the soaring prose and the intricate Eucharistic theology of the Gospel According to John. But it was always the Gospel According to Luke that tugged at my heartstrings.

In my mind, Luke's Jesus is the most tender and compassionate depiction of Christ in the four gospels. And, of course, Luke is the only gospel writer to include the story of The Prodigal Son (perhaps better named "The Story of the Loving Father"), which is, in my humble opinion, the very best story in the entire New Testament. You'll remember that when Jesus was asked, "What is God like?" this is the story he told. This is the response he gave. He told the story of a father whose love and mercy for his son completely redeemed his son's weaknesses and failure. If this is truly what God is like, I feel like we're all going to be alright.

It's always made sense to me to believe that Luke was written by a disciple who was also a physician. Some biblical scholars may disagree, but among the doctors I know, there are a fair number of Episcopalian doctors—largely because Episcopalians embrace the sciences, and most doctors can only be at home in a denomination that does. The doctors I know seem to possess the very same kind of authentic compassion as revealed in Luke. It's as if their empathy and their compassion give them the strength to stand in the fires of the suffering and brokenness they are exposed to regularly. The compassion they cultivate is an extension of the gifts they use for healing.

In our first reading from the deuterocanonical Sirach, the writer says,

Honor physicians for their services,  
for the Lord created them;  
for their gift of healing comes from the Most High,  
and they are rewarded by the king.  
The skill of physicians makes them distinguished,  
and in the presence of the great they are admired.  
The Lord created medicines out of the earth,  
and the sensible will not despise them.

It's as if the author of Sirach, writing some two hundred years before the birth of Christ, was anticipating the current skepticism around the COVID-19 virus. How many doctors and health care professionals, exhausted by back-to-back shifts in ER's and ICU's, have expressed their exasperation at those who still believe, some even while on their deathbeds, that the COVID virus is a hoax or, worse, some sort of governmental conspiracy. "The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them."

I cannot believe the God of justice will look kindly upon those who have exploited the suffering of others for political or financial gain in this crisis. Even as I cannot believe the God of mercy will fail to richly bless those who have brought care and healing to countless others, even at the risk of their own lives and the lives of their precious families.

I am reminded that in the Gospel According to Luke, it is a scant 15 lines of scripture between the verse that says, (Jesus) "began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone" and the verse that then says, "When they heard this... all in the synagogue were filled with rage." This sudden turn of popularity would not be lost on medical professionals who have had the very patients they risked their lives for, turn on them with a passionate and irrational anger.

We held the funeral this past week for our beloved Bill Hawthorne, a longtime member, Verger, and a member of our altar guild; and, Lord God, I do miss him. In his funeral homily, I shared a story from Alexander Irvine's novel, *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*.

A lady went to comfort a neighbor whose boy lay dead. She laid her hand on Eliza's head and said, "Ah, woman, God isn't a printed book to be carried around by a man in fine clothes; not a cross dangling at the watch chain of a priest. God takes a hand wherever he can find it.

Sometimes, he takes a bishop's hand and lays it on a child's head in benediction, the hand of a doctor to relieve pain, the hand of a mother to guide a child, and sometimes he takes the hand of a poor old woman to give comfort to a neighbor. But they're all hands touched by his Spirit and his Spirit is everywhere looking for hands to use."

God is always looking for hands to use. God is always looking to use your hands and mine.

Some of you may have read the Reuter's report<sup>1</sup> about the two nurses in San Carlos, Brazil, who've been caring for lonely patients forced into isolation in intensive care wards, separated from their family and friends. The nurses discovered a way to help with latex gloves and some warm water that mimics human touch. Semei Araújo Cunha and Vanessa Formenton improvised the technique they call "little hands of love" while working in the Santa Felicia Emergency Care Unit. They fill latex medical gloves with warm water in a hospital shower, tying them off like water balloons. Cunha demonstrated how she puts the gloves on an unconscious man fighting for his life against COVID-19, placing one glove on each side of the hand.

"The patient feels comforted as if someone were holding hands with them," Formenton said. The two nurses developed the method as the brutal surge in COVID-19 was gaining speed in Brazil. Warming the patient's hands has had several benefits beyond the emotional support it can provide, the nurses say, including increased blood flow. Cold hands can result in incorrect readings of patients' blood oxygen levels, falsely showing that oxygen levels are low. The gloves ensure that doesn't happen."

Hospitals around the city are now using the technique, with staff praising the "hands of love" for delivering immediate results. "It's unbelievable that you can see how fast the change in the patient is; it's magnificent," Cunha said.

I find it interesting that the Hebrew (and Greek) word for "hands" is used in the Bible 462 times.<sup>ii</sup> God is always looking for hands to use, even if they need to be made by hand. I am reminded of the work of the St. Tabitha's guild which we will bless at the 11:00 am service. In this ministry, countless volunteers make blankets and hats for infants. They pray as they knit and they build community with one another as they pray. What a blessing the work done by their hands will be to those who receive their hand-made gifts of love.

I've been thinking this week of the ways members of the health care profession have cared for me and my loved ones. Of course I remember and value their skills as healers, surgeons, and caregivers...

- But I also remember the surgeon who operated on our nine-year-old son and asked if we would like to pray with him before the surgery.
- I remember the hug I received from my father's nurse when his failing health was almost too much for me to bear.
- I remember the comforting hand placed on my shoulder by my mother's physician as he told me her dementia was simply not going to get any better.

We live in a dark and cynical age; a time filled with fear and credible doubts. I do not need to exaggerate the height, nor the depth, nor the length, nor the breadth of the challenges we face. We have all the doubt we need for any one moment.

And still, and still, in such a fearful moment stands the broken Body of Christ. Yes, and each one of us who comprises that Body of Christ, which is the Church. The only hands God has on this planet are ours. So this may be *precisely* the moment to lift up a healing saint. This may be *exactly* the moment to focus on Luke's tender and compassionate depiction of God: the father who loves his child so much that he stands up and literally runs to embrace him.

This may be the time to commemorate the one who proclaims, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Reuters, April 20, 2021, San Carlos, Brazil, "Hands of Love: Warm Latex Gloves Mimic Human Touch for COVID-19 Patients in Brazil"; Reporting by Leonardo Benassatto; Writing by Jake Spring; Editing by Andrea Ricci

<sup>ii</sup> Source: *Woman of Noble Character*, blogpost by Susan J. Nelson