



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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You Give Them Something

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 2, 2020

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Isaiah 55:1-5; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

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

The English poet William Wordsworth wrote,

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;ⁱ

There really is no accounting for all that has been lost. What we have lost personally, what we have lost as a city or as a nation. Some say a pandemic is God's way of getting our attention, but I seriously doubt that's how it works. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that during the "Death of God" theological fad, he once saw a bumper sticker that read, "My God is not dead; sorry about yours." He thought his own bumper sticker should read, "My God is not cruel; sorry about yours."ⁱⁱ

Today's lessons are not about what has been lost, but about what has been found. Today's scripture readings focus on God's extravagant compassion and abundant love. The message is clear to those who have ears to hear it: there will be enough. There will be enough love. There will be enough food. There will be enough forgiveness. And finally, there will be enough grace for us to complete all our journeys.

Today's gospel reading, *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*, is the only miracle story found in all four of the gospels. It's an important story in terms of Eucharistic theology, and it takes place immediately after Jesus and the disciples are informed of the murder of John the Baptist.

The prophet John, the baptizer of Jesus, the forerunner of the Messiah, has been beheaded by Herod. After John's disciples receive his body and bury it, they go to tell Jesus the sad news. Jesus is shocked—grief stricken—and understandably wants to get away from the crowds. In fact, he wants to get away so badly that he goes so far as to take a boat to a deserted place by himself. But the anxious crowds, no doubt growing in numbers in the wake of the news about John the Baptist's death, follow him on foot. The crowds come out from the towns to listen to Jesus, much as they left the towns to listen to John. They're desperate to hear a word from beyond a world devoted solely to money, power, and prestige.

There have been many interpretations of this gospel story, and I'm certain you've had most of them inflicted on you over the years. One interpretation suggests Jesus miraculously feeds the multitudes to express his power and his intention to provide generously for his flock. Another interpretation suggests that the "real miracle" occurred when people sat down on the grass and began to get to know one another, and then they shared the food they had brought. Another interpretation has been offered by Feminist Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who wryly observes, "The reason there was so much food (at the feeding of the five thousand) is that all the women, as women are wont to do, brought picnic baskets, food enough for themselves, their children and one or two neighbors. So of course there was more than enough for all. But since the women and children were not counted, the gospel writer did not know where the food came from and presumed it was a miracle performed by Jesus."ⁱⁱⁱ

She may be right. One of the things I most enjoy about biblical studies is that you can embrace more than one "correct" interpretation. A Dutch Jesuit theologian told Ruether a story about his hometown in the Netherlands, which suffered a severe famine at the end of the Second World War. She writes, "He recalled a time when his father, 'thin as a rail,' had gone off into the countryside to search for food for the family. His father finally returned with many pounds of meat, peas, and potatoes. His mother took the food, and, before anyone could say anything, put aside part of it for hungry neighbors. She said, 'If you don't share with others, you die.'"^{iv}

She knew something more and more people need to understand.

Have you ever been just sick and tired of the world? Exhausted by its constant push and pull? Most of us who live in New York love this city, and most of us live here by choice. But we are not unaware of the costs of being here: the expense, the crowds, and that great, constant, urgent, vibrating hum of ambition, achievement, competition and fear, all rolled together and underlying everything.

People sometimes tell me, "Dean, I'm just so tired. So tired." You actually can come to a place where you don't want to run around on the wheel of your personal hamster cage any longer. You just aren't willing to give your one, glorious, precious life over to pursuits that are fundamentally unworthy of your God-given gifts. I think of it as holy decision-making.

The prophet Isaiah wisely asked, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Why, indeed? This city is truly a glorious thing to experience, but it can be wearying. Maintaining your spiritual bearings, finding refreshment and rest, staying in good physical and emotional shape, would be important anywhere you might live, but in this demanding environment?

Self-care is really *not* optional! And here we get an insight into the Son of God who, in spite of his own very real world-weariness, expresses compassion for the people. Matthew doesn't often attribute emotions to Jesus, but here he writes that Jesus, "...saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them and cured their sick."

You may remember the Latin root for the word "compassion" is *pati*, which means "to suffer," and the prefix *com-* means "with." So, compassion literally means, "to suffer with." So when you express compassion for others, it hurts. When you express compassion, it hurts because *you're* suffering with the other person. *You* are waiting anxiously for the test results to come back. *You* are going through the chemotherapy. *You* are experiencing the fear and the depression of your loved one's long illness. *You* feel the steady discomfort that never seems to completely go away.

Most parents say that given a choice between watching their child go through surgery or having the surgery themselves, they would much rather have the surgery. And the reason? It just may be that having

the surgery might actually hurt less. Jesus, in the throes of his own suffering, is willing to suffer *with* God's people.

Jesus is also willing to challenge his disciples. This story invites us to take our own discipleship as Christians more seriously. Please, please note that Jesus did not feed the five thousand plus people. (Scholars believe that with women and children, it could have easily been a crowd of 10,000 people or more.) Jesus told his disciples, "*You give them something to eat.*"

Dock Hollingsworth notes, "The disciples may (have been) genuinely concerned with dinner, but (when they say) 'send the crowds away' (it) makes it sound as if they are not concerned enough to get terribly involved.... For disciples who think they have 'nothing' the possibilities are necessarily small. How many times have we heard the Lord say (to us), 'Give them something to eat,' and because of our sense of powerlessness, turned away? If we think our baskets contain 'nothing' when in fact we have a few loaves and fish, then Jesus has 'nothing' with which to feed the hungry."^v

There is a consumerist mentality that has been creeping into Western Christianity for some time. And it's a completely understandable phenomenon. We are consumers in so many other parts of our lives that this tendency to act like consumers creeps into our church involvement as well. Clergy can turn into spiritual concierges for passive congregants seeking a "spiritual but not religious experience." Some will ask, "What can this parish offer me?" "What kind of programs will they provide for me?" "I certainly hope they don't ask me to do anything or to give anything or to change anything!"

It reminds me of a story about a mother who was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin, who was 5, and Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson, and so she told the boys, "If Jesus were sitting here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" So, Kevin turns to his younger brother and says, "Ryan, you be Jesus."

Like the disciples, we all want someone else to be Jesus. We would prefer someone else to feed the thousands of hungry people, someone else to chair the Committee and serve on the Vestry. We would prefer someone else to keep the books while giving sacrificially to the parish. Won't someone else be willing to care for all stripes and types of people who come to our door?

Jesus said, "*You give them something to eat.*" *You give them nourishment. You pray for them. You give them a cup of cold water. You provide them with spiritual refreshment. You introduce them to the God who "Sits up high, and looks down low."*

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;^{vi}

And the "strength in what remains behind" is a hope and a confidence that the God who made certain the multitude were fed will surely provide for us so that we may go on to provide for others.

Amen.

ⁱ William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45536/ode-intimations-of-immortality-from-recollections-of-early-childhood>, (originally published in 1807)

ⁱⁱ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, Avon Publishing, New York, c. 1981, page 134

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *National Catholic Reporter*, September 6, 1996, pages 13-14

^{iv} *Ibid*, pages 12-14

^v David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting On The Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, c. 2011, pages 311-313

^{vi} Wordsworth, *op. cit.*"

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