

Saint John in the Wilderness Episcopal Church

Sermon by Dr. E.R. Haire, Jr.

August 2, 2020

Read: Psalm 17: 1-7, 16; Romans 9: 1-5; and Matthew 14: 13-21

The hour is late, the place, lonely. Along the shoreline they come: the sick, the forlorn, the outcast, the poor, the ones that want to be faithful but just can't seem to get it right, the grieving, the guilty, the hopeless and the lost; the scoffer, the proud, the rich and the self-possessed, the humble and lowly; the innocent, the victim; all come like beggars—and Jesus, who so desperately needs to get away to a deserted place after receiving the news that his beloved cousin John the Baptist has been grotesquely beheaded at the command of King Herod—comes ashore and has compassion on them all—and heals them.

*“This is a deserted place,” we say. ‘The hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may buy food for themselves.’*

*“They need not go away; you give them something to eat”* says Jesus.

In this deserted place—(not unlike the place where Jesus was first tempted at the start of his ministry, not unlike the wilderness Israel wandered in for forty-years for lack of faith), in such a deserted place as this, the crowds gather, and Jesus tells us to give the hungry something to eat.

*“We have nothing, we’ve spent it all on ourselves, times are tough Jesus, I mean, all we’ve got are these five loaves and two fish,”* we say.

*“Bring them here to me,”* says Jesus.

Where we lack faith, Jesus looks up to heaven. Where we are content to wander in the deserted place, Jesus tells us to sit down. Where we would settle for hoarding, protecting, preserving, Jesus would rather profuse, reveal, multiply, overflow. Where we lack the wherewithal, Jesus has the guts — where we put self over others, Jesus shows unlimited compassion.

This feeding is not merely a “feel good” story, not a “go out there and be good” story. It’s not simply a symbolic or even a spiritual story. Bread and fish made up the basic meal for peasants in ancient Galilee. There are no sweets, no cakes, no wine for these poor people. This feeding is about the basics, the basics that sustain life.

The God who looks deep into our hearts and into our souls with the eternal eyes of divine compassion; the God who fed Israel with manna in the wilderness— the God who empowered Elisha to feed hundreds with only a few barley loaves; the God who kept the corn meal running for a poor lonely widow— this is the same God who now and forever feeds his Church, and all those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, using the words he taught us, “*Give us today, our daily bread.*”

“*They need not go away; give them something to eat*” says Jesus. We are Christ’s disciples— and so we are qualified to feed others, if we ourselves have and are being fed by Jesus. This is a high calling, and one that often we feel incapable of fulfilling.

Yet, when Jesus enters the deserted places in our lives, the desert of our heart blooms and hopes flower, where there was once only selfishness, pain, fear, and raging appetites.

The only commodity that is in short supply in most of our lives is full faith that in Jesus, God has already supplied all we shall ever need, and because of this truth, within

the scarcity of the day, within the confines of very real hunger, our deepest hunger is satisfied— here and now— by the God who put on hands and a face and once walked the dusty lonely byways of ancient Palestine. Our hearts can be filled this morning by the same God who walks the city streets and country highways still; the God who places himself within our hands as well as in our hearts every time we come to his communion table, and celebrate the mystery of Christ’s unfailing love, a love that empowers us to do more than we ever could on our own—

In a recent novel an old man who has fathered many children says to his old friend sitting next to him on a park bench:

*“I remembered the other day something from when I was a little boy that I did not understand then. I was only six or seven, I guess. My dad was stuffing me into a snowsuit like parents do— this arm, then that arm.*

*When he had me in and only my eyes and the top of my head could be seen, he looked at me so long that it scared me. Whatever he saw made him shudder.”*

*“Well for goodness sake what did it mean?” cried his friend. The old man replied softly, “My dad knew, what I was going to know someday. Love can make a father shudder.”<sup>1</sup>*

The love of *The Father* made known to us by his only Son Jesus Christ, should make us shudder.

Jesus, who is the beloved of God, has called *us*— as undeserving as we are— *His beloved*. It should make us shudder. Jesus Christ has been taken, blessed, broken and given to and for us.<sup>2</sup> These words: take, bless, break, given, summarize a life of love.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rev. Don Shelby for this story.

In his book *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen reminded us that in each and every moment in the life of a Christian, somewhere, somehow, the taking, the blessing, the breaking and the giving of Christ is happening around us, happening to us, happening in us, happening for us. These are words and actions forged in the furnace of God's love. A love that transforms the familiar; bread and fish, bread and wine, body and blood.

Today the words and actions of Jesus speak to us of the divine as well as the human, the physical and well as the spiritual, the complexity of human life and the ever-unfolding mystery of Christ's presence with us. Jesus is the abundance of love—a love that makes us shudder, as we rediscover our own lives as his disciples.

Surely since the moment of our Baptism, we have been given our daily bread, our portion, given God's forgiveness, God's grace, and God's mercy. Christ is the Lover of our souls, waiting to be loved in return. *"You give them something to eat."* How will we answer his command before we leave today? Our answer will affect our life, and certainly our common life together.

Saint Augustine once prayed:

*"Come O Lord, and stir our hearts. Call us back to yourself. Kindle your fire in us and carry us away. Let us scent your fragrance and taste your sweetness... Jesus Christ, by making us wait in hope, you stretch our desire; by making us desire, you stretch our soul; by stretching our soul, You make it capable of holding more love."*

My brothers and sisters let us be filled. As the psalmist wrote, *"O, taste and see that the Lord is good."* Each of you is Christ's own beloved... Get ready to be taken, blessed, broken, and given. Alleluia.

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<sup>2</sup> See Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, Crossroads, 1996. This book was influential in connecting the Gospel text and the celebration of Holy Eucharist within this sermon.