

# Sermon

**Preacher** | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

**The Gospel** | John 6:24–35

**Date** | August 1, 2021



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*'I am the bread of life, says the Lord, they who come to me shall not hunger'. Amen.*

Have you ever been hungry?

Growing up, truth be told we were not an affluent family. My mother, a single parent and a teacher brought only so much into the household week by week. I learned to save for the toys I wanted as a boy and learned to spend more than I had as a teenager. We went on modest vacations each year often by train or by bus, yet, as little as there was to spare I could not say that we were poor, because we were never hungry.

About to cross the rubicon in our own household today of having two teenage boys in the home, I recently offered a dire warning to my wife, Monica, stating that from my extensive research – namely having grown up with my brother - that we are soon to be eaten out of house and home by our children. 'You don't understand how it is,' I will say with a facade of authority – as if she has entirely forgotten what her own brother ate during his teenage years - 'boys eat, endlessly'.

I suppose what I am recalling is how my brother and I would indeed eat, at all hours, and that I can never once remember a time when he or I were unable to find something to satisfy that hunger. Yet the truth is that many, many Americans do go to bed hungry, in some cases night after night. According to the USDA, in 2019 over 10 million households in this country suffered food insecurity at least once and just over 5 million lacked enough food to eat on a regular basis. Right here in Georgia, the Atlanta Community Food Bank estimates that 1 in 7 children in the Food Bank's 29-county service area are food insecure, and they have seen a 300% increase in inquiries from people seeking food assistance during this pandemic. Hunger is a real and present danger to our society today.

I have never really known what it is like to be hungry and I imagine that most of us here might say the same. Consequently, it is very hard for us, I believe, to understand the context of the story we hear in John's gospel today without knowing for ourselves what it feels like to be hungry and to be unable to do anything about that feeling.

In the time that Jesus walked the hills of Galilee, poverty was the most common experience of life. Some biblical scholars suggest that 9 out of 10 people lived at or below the subsistence level. There was a double taxation system: one tax to the Jerusalem temple, the other to Rome. One of the reasons Jesus tells so many stories about landowners and vineyards and fields and harvests is that the people were all too familiar with life under absentee landlords who acquired property in the provinces of the Roman Empire growing rich off a land they never saw let alone worked on. Jesus' audience knew what it was like to live without power. They knew hunger.

And so, Jesus and the alleviation of hunger was a powerful combination. No wonder, as we hear John relate the story today, they get into boats. No wonder they scour the countryside looking for him. No wonder they ask the questions that seem almost blithely ignorant of the miracle they have just been recipients of: 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?'

Such questions are often dismissed as evidence of the childlike faith of these first followers of Jesus. To our minds, so far removed from their every day struggles, they seem remarkably amnesic to what has just happened. Jesus has fed thousands of people with just a handful of supplies; what more of a sign do they need? If people are not going to believe that, then what will they believe?

But for hungry people, knowing that sustenance might become a recurring thing is deeply significant. Poverty is precarious, unstable, highly unpredictable; proof that the miracles of food or shelter or whatever it might be are not just one-offs could literally be a matter of life and death.

Noting this makes Jesus' answer all the more enigmatic. He doesn't say, 'I hear you, you are hungry and my disciples will be back, setting up our 'loaves and fishes' food pantry. You will hunger no more'. Instead, he says 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.' You can almost hear the reply that John deftly leaves out of his gospel, 'I was hungry and you gave me a metaphor, thirsty and you gave me symbolism to drink'.

Textually, to have Jesus answer a material question with one of John's gospel's numerous 'I am' sayings is hardly a surprise. Jesus in John is such a theologically laden figure that some might say the Son of God struggles to be truly human at all. The 'I am' sayings are a good case in point. 'I am' the resurrection and the life, the true vine, the good shepherd, the light of the world, the door, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the bread of life, are all heavily loaded terms. Within the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, 'I am' is not merely part of Jesus' speech, it is an utterance of the divine name. When Moses asks the LORD at the burning bush who he should say has sent him to proclaim God's command, YHWH answers, 'you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'

On one hand, then, it looks like the ultimate theological trump card. Jesus, embroiled in a debate with poor and hungry followers about signs of life they so desperately need, offers a reply that takes them out of their bellies and into the cosmos. Hunger for God. Thirst for the divine not the earthly life. 'I am has sent me to you'. 'I am, the bread of life'.

Yet there is more than rhetorical redirection going on here. The response to hunger cannot only be food. The answer to not having enough money to pay the bills cannot only be a check in the mail or cash in hand. 'What do you hunger for?' is the question that Jesus seeks to trouble the waters with. What is it that remains unsatisfied even after you have had your fill? What would a life look like for you if ending the root cause of your empty bellies is what you hungered for? Herein are echoes of Jesus' teaching on the Mount of the Beatitudes, where he implores the crowd to be hungry, saying 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'.

So what do you hunger for such that others may hunger no more? What is your thirst for the Kingdom of God? These are the ever-present and foundational questions of our faith such that the words of the dismissal that will end this time of worship to go and 'love and serve the Lord', become our calling to leave the building in order to serve the world.

Leaving the building, getting off the block, is exactly what the steering committee for racial equity and healing is working on offering to this parish in an invitation that will be issued later this fall to go and serve the world in places where questions of hunger are not only metaphorical. We hope to offer work for our hands and our feet to join the work we are already doing with our heads and our hearts in the pursuit of a more just and reconciled world for all God's children. When we share those hopes with you there will be plenty of what we might do and how we might do it; so this might be a good time, might it not, for us to pay attention to the why.

There is so much that has been said and no doubt will be said about race in America. It seems that any mention of the word, let alone the trigger phrases that get news networks frothing at the mouth for days on end, can set us off down a road of quiet or loud indignation. In case you haven't noticed already, we are being played. Your news channel, your social media platform, your newspaper are all doing their work on you as they are on me. It can be a bewildering and alienating experience, including from one another. Race so often gets us talking past each other, not to each other. What might it be like, though, to ask one another what kind of life we hunger for when it comes to this multi-racial world we live in?

'What are you hungry for?' is a question you and I won't find an answer to until we can see the reality of the lives of others close enough to look them in the eye, which is exactly what happened to me, once again, just this week.

I was dropping our kids at camp at Trees Atlanta. As they bundled out of the car I rolled down the window to see a fellow 'junior intern' who works alongside my own two sons. He was an African American boy, and it immediately became clear that he was fascinated with the sight of me in my car. I would like to be able to say that this is an experience that I have often - that complete strangers stop and stare, transfixed as they are by the sight of me - but it isn't. I wondered whether it was the dazzling red Toyota Prius that had captured his heart, but then I glanced around the parking lot and realized that this was far from likely. Then I noticed that his eyes were keeping a pretty steady look at my clergy collar. I thought that he might be a Roman Catholic, desperately trying to figure out how it could be that three children had just said 'bye dad' as they got out of the back seat. Whatever it was that fixed his gaze, I also could not help but be drawn in and for a brief moment we looked at each other, in quiet stillness. Realizing that I actually had to leave, I said as I went, 'have a great day'. 'You too', he replied.

My hunger came to me as I drove the car away. I thought of him. I thought of that brief moment of encounter and how there seemed to be no fear, no hesitancy, no sense that he had yet realized how different the world was to be for him as it has been for me. I thought of my own boys and how they would never have to face the hardship and prejudices, would never be denied the opportunities that he would. I thought to myself, 'we haven't got to him yet', and I was heartbroken. It was an experience, in the words of Comer Yates who has done so very much to further the cause of children in this city, of seeing something in this child that I can now never unsee.

I hunger for a world where that child can grow up as any child should, free from the conclusions that will think less of him because of the color of his skin. I hunger for a world when all children can count on safe beds to sleep in at night, secure streets to walk on by day, good hospitals that will help keep them well, schools that will raise them up and communities that will love them with all they have. I hunger for what Jesus called his kingdom.

'I am the bread of life', says the Lord. And Jesus came that we might have life, all of us, and have it abundantly. Hasten the day. Amen.