

Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible

Part 9: The Last Breakfast

by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

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Scripture: John 21:1-19; Luke 5:1-11

I. Gone Fishin'

Today we complete our series on holy, horrid and hilarious meals of the Bible. We've figuratively eaten a lot of meals together! There was the meal that Abraham and Sarah ate with the angels, the bowl of lentil stew that Jacob traded Esau for his birth right, the meals of manna that the Hebrew people ate in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, the poisoned stew that the prophet Elisha made safe, and the erotic meal conceived in the imagination of the author of Ecclesiastes. Then there was the dinner Jesus spoiled for the Pharisees and lawyers by critiquing them the whole time, and the wedding feast Jesus made more lively by turning water into wine. The first meal of our series, however, was Jesus' Last Supper. Now we complete our series with the Last Breakfast which is said to have taken place after his resurrection.

The Last Breakfast raises a lot of questions for me. Such as:

- Why was Jesus' last act in John's gospel serving breakfast?
- Why didn't the disciples recognize Jesus at first?
- Why did he serve fish?
- What is the significance of the disciples catching exactly 153 fish?

I can tell you right now that we won't solve the 153 question. Biblical scholars have scratched their heads for centuries wondering about this number. The simplest explanation, of course, is that 153 is the number they actually caught! But as we've found before with stories in John's gospel (viz. last week's story about turning water in to wine), every detail seems to have more significance than a surface reading would suggest. Each detail seems to be a symbol or metaphor for something the gospel is trying to teach us about Jesus and our lives with God.

The most satisfying answer to the 153-question may just be one of the earliest. The 4th Century scholar, St. Jerome, asserted that 153 corresponded to the number of known species of fish at the time, thereby pointing to Jesus' command

to go and make disciples of all nations. There's no clear evidence that this was, in fact, the known number at the time, but Jerome's answer is certainly simpler, and more satisfying than one of his contemporaries, St. Augustine.

Augustine speculated – and I do mean *speculated* here (!) – that the significance of 153 lay in the fact that 153 is the sum of the first 17 integers ($1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14+15+16+17 = 153$). This was significant to Augustine because 17 is what is known as a triangular number, meaning that you can arrange 153 stones, or dots, or anything into an equilateral triangle, signaling the Trinity. The number 17 itself, he said, stood for the 7 fruits of the spirit plus the 10 Commandments. You get all that? I'm going with Jerome!

The biggest question I have about the Last Breakfast, though, is not one I hear many others asking. What I wonder is *why were the disciples out fishing in the first place?* I mean, in the preceding chapter of John's gospel, Jesus was resurrected and the disciples were freaking out. Now, instead of being "fishers of men," a number of them seem to have reverted back to their old profession, being "fishers of fish." You'd think that after experiencing Christ's resurrection – one of the most mind-blowing events ever recorded in human history – the disciples would be out in the streets proclaiming the amazing news to every man, woman, and child who would listen. But they're back to fishing. Why??

I suppose I could be making more out of the disciples going fishing than it seems. The disciples who had been fishermen may just be hungry and doing what they know how to do to put food on the table. Or, without Jesus constantly around, maybe they're just uncertain of what to do next, so they're just biding time until clarity came.

Certainly these are possible explanations. Even logical. But again, every detail in John's gospel seems to have significance that points beyond itself to a symbol or metaphor of something the author wants to tell us about Jesus, and our life with God. What could that be?

Call me a Bible geek, but I've actually thought a lot about this over the years. One thought I have relates to the nature of spiritual experience itself. Have you ever had a profound, even life-changing, experience of the Divine – perhaps one that would seem completely illogical in the eyes of the world that seemed to have special significance regarding how you are to live your life? If so, then

perhaps you'll get where I'm headed with my next question: *Are you actually living your life in light of that discovery?*

Many of you know that I had an experience in 1981 that convinced me beyond all shadow of a doubt of three things: (1) That there is a God; (2) that this God is not only aware of us, but more aware of us than we are aware of us; and (3) that because of this awareness (and in spite of it), this God loves us beyond our wildest imagination. Then, in 2016, I had an equally profound experience that not only confirmed the 1981 experience but doubled down on it. Yet, despite the fact that I can point to definite ways that these experiences changed my life, such as the fact that I became a minister rather than a solar energy research scientist like I'd been intending in 1981, I am still so far from actually living in the light of this revelation that it makes my head spin.

I'm not just engaging in false modesty. If I was truly living out the implications of my experience, not only would I never have a doubt again about whether or not God loves me (Not!), but I would be constantly treating everyone I come into contact with as if they, too, are loved beyond their wildest imagination. Quite clearly, I'm not. I feel like I'm constantly out fishing instead of doing what God wants me to do.

How about you? Like the disciples, are you doing what you know deep down that God wants you to do, or are you "fishing"?

II. Out of the Boat, Into the Field

When I admit to myself that I am quite far from orienting my life around the revelation that you and I are loved beyond our wildest imagination, this admission is nearly always accompanied by a sense of guilt. Sometimes even shame. But when I start spiraling into guilt or shame, that's exactly when this story speaks to me in a way that brings me comfort. After all, if the disciples had a hard time living up to the revelation that had been given them, how can I expect to be any different? The story reminds me that I, like the disciples, am human. I may be created in the "image and likeness of God" (*imago dei*), but that image is more like a cracked mirror. Even a broken one. It's only in those rare moments when I'm able to piece all those shards of mirror together that my life looks even remotely like God intended it.

There's something else comforting about this story, too, and it points me in the direction of how I can put the pieces together. When Jesus pulls Peter aside and

asks him three times if Peter loves him, I definitely think that the author of our story is trying to say something important to me and you. But to get his message, we need to take a step back and put the story in a larger context.

When we consider what had recently happened to the disciples, it wasn't just resurrection they experienced. Before the resurrection there was a crucifixion. In other words, their world was not defined by elation and joy, but also by trauma. Serious trauma.

If you've known trauma in your life, you know that once it sticks in you, it is extremely hard to unstuck. It doesn't go away anytime soon, despite your best efforts to move beyond it. In modern lingo, you could say that the disciples were all suffering from PTSD. In fact, they may just be the archetypal examples of PTSD sufferers.

If you know anything about PTSD, you know that the trauma can reside within you quietly for quite some time until something triggers it and suddenly you're right back in the middle of it. Many veterans, for instance, leave Omaha around the Fourth of July. All firecrackers and M80s put them right back on the battlefield. Ironic, isn't it, that on a day in which our nation celebrates the founding of our country, many of those who have actually fought for our country suffer trauma?

This kind of bitter irony applies to the disciples as well. For, even though they experienced the joy and elation of Christ's resurrection, they had only recently been heavily traumatized. Because the trauma and the joy were intimately related to one another – the joy, in fact, being the direct result of the trauma – the trauma couldn't simply have been "unstuck" from the joy no matter how much the disciples would have wished that to be the case. In fact, since joy and trauma were so bound up with each other, it is almost certain that future reverberations of Easter joy would trigger the Good Friday trauma all over again – like a PTSD experience. I can imagine the disciples all ducking for cover on every Easter Sunday for years.

For Peter, especially, the PTSD must have run particularly deep. I mean, can you imagine the guilt and shame he still would have been feeling about denying Jesus three times when Jesus was on trial before the authorities? I can imagine him doing everything in his power not to be put in a position to remind himself of that.

I think Jesus could imagine it. And this is why Jesus called him aside to ask him three times if Peter loved him. On the surface, Jesus' questions seem like a recrimination, not a source of comfort. Peter himself seems to take it that way at first. But I think Jesus was pointing the way to healing, and by extension, the author of John's gospel is trying to point us in a direction that can heal our own traumas.

For centuries, theologians and scholars have recognized the deep significance of the fact that Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. By offering Peter the opportunity to state his love for Jesus unequivocally, in Jesus' own presence, Jesus provides Peter the way to forgive himself for his betrayal – each betrayal countered with an expression of love and loyalty. And by asking Peter three times to feed his lambs/sheep, Jesus is revealing the way forward for Peter – how Peter can continue to heal and eventually recover from all of his “PTSD.”

For PTSD sufferers, one of the things they eventually have to do is place themselves in situations where they can be triggered again but be safe and secure, until their brains essentially re-wire themselves and they begin to see that they are safe and secure when a trigger-event happens. For Peter, I would imagine that each time he overcame his fear, guilt, and shame long enough to share the Good News of Christ's resurrection with another person, and treat them as people for whom Christ died, the wound inside him healed a little bit. Bit by bit, it would heal until finally these situations would bring him joy, not trauma – especially when Jesus had also made it clear that he forgave him of his betrayal completely.

Could this final story in John's Gospel contain a healing message for you and me? I know that, each time that I am able to help someone see that they are loved beyond their wildest imagination, it helps me remember that I, too, am loved this way, and that I, too, am forgiven for being human. And this allows me to forgive myself a little more for being human, too.

We may all be like broken mirrors when it comes to living into our identity as people created in the “image and likeness of God.” But this story reminds me that there's always light around those cracks and shards. The Light of the World, in fact.

How will the Light of Christ help you forgive yourself for being human? How will it allow you to forgive others for being human as well? Our story this morning doesn't provide easy answers, but it does get us asking the right questions.