

# A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

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The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost



5 August 2018

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Exodus 16:2-4,9-15

Psalm 78:23-29

Ephesians 4:1-16

John 6:24-35

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Have you ever really been hungry? I mean really hungry? I think the only time you are really hungry is when you know you can't eat. I remember going to Paris with my sister when I was 18. We stayed in a campsite, and I had such a good time that I wanted to stay on after my sister went home. The only problem was, apart from my ticket home, I had very little money. Very quickly I had no money, and I found myself living on the kindness of a couple of paratroopers who were on holiday and who gave me some coffee in the mornings, and on some apples I managed to get from a nearby orchard. I lived like that for a week or so. By the end of it, I was really very hungry indeed, and I remember how life became almost exclusively about trying to find something to eat. Food became everything. I went home!

There are different types of hunger, aren't there? Desire of all kinds is really a kind of hunger. David desires Bathsheba. He hungers after her. His desire is such that he is prepared to have poor Uriah murdered just to get her. What a wonderful encounter with Nathan that is. David is enraged at the injustice of Nathan's story about the rich man taking the poor man's one little ewe lamb when he had so many flocks of his own. “You are the man!” Nathan's crushing truth echoes across the ages to us and brings King David to his knees. Our Psalm this morning, Psalm 51, is David's Lament for his own terrible sin. “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

Sin is inappropriate or inordinate desire. The object of sin is normally a good. There is nothing wrong with Bathsheba, or food, or most things we desire like money, or success, or beauty. These are all good. Sin is when our desire for the good is twisted in some way. Either we want something we should not have, like another man's wife or another woman's husband, or we want something too much or want too much of it, and set it up as more important than it should ever be. Wealth or fame or beauty or a particular person can become an idol we worship in our lives; our desire for it or them, the overwhelming and inordinate focus of our beings. But if we do not always want the right things what should we ~ what do we ~ really want in life?

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* also wrote a book called *The Confession*. In it he tells his life story. Nicky Gumbal, the author of the book, *The Meaning of Life* that is the basis of the world-wide Christian Alpha Course, reflects on Tolstoy's life story. "As a young man Tolstoy led the high life, drinking heavily, sleeping around, and gambling. But after a time he found it just didn't satisfy him."

Such experience is all too well known to our own generation is it not?

"And Tolstoy thought, 'well, maybe money is the answer.' He'd inherited a large estate and started to make a lot of money out of his books. But he found however much money he had, it didn't satisfy him." How many wealthy people today find the same?

"And Tolstoy thought, 'well, maybe the answer is success, fame, importance.' He wrote what the Encyclopedia Britannica described as 'one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature,' *Anna Karenina*. But still, he said, it didn't satisfy him."

How many people in Washington get close to the top of their profession or line of work and find this too.

"He thought, 'well, maybe the answer is family life – to give my family the best possible life.' He'd married in 1862 and had a happy family and thirteen children, so he certainly gave himself whole heartedly to the project! But he says, this just distracted him from his search for the overall meaning of life!"

How many of us are totally taken up with the demands of family and children but know that, however precious it is, that it is not somehow everything, even though it is supposed to be?

"He said he'd achieved all his ambitions and was surrounded by what is considered to be complete happiness; yet one question drove him to the verge of suicide. And the question was this: 'what meaning has my life that the inevitability of death does not destroy?'"

"And he was trying to search in every field of science and philosophy to try and come up with an answer to this, and the only answer he could come up with from philosophy or science was this. To the question 'why do I live?' – the only answer he could find was 'In the infinity of space and the infinity of time, infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity.'"

Strangely enough, he didn't find that very satisfying either!  
"Eventually, though, when all else had failed him, he found, in the peasant people of Russia, the answer he'd been looking for. In their quiet, simple faith in God through Jesus Christ, he finally saw something that had an undeniable substance and reality. They were strangely satisfied in a way he had never been."

Perhaps one the greatest British columnists of recent times, Bernard Levin, often used to say he was not a Christian. One time he said, "For the fourteen thousandth time, I'm telling you I'm not a Christian!" But he still wrote this: "Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire, together with such non-material blessings as a happy family, and yet lead lives of quiet and, at times, noisy desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them. And however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motorcars and television sets they stuff it with, however many well-balanced children and loyal friends they parade around the edges of it, it aches."

All of us ache for what we barely know. We think we want something but, when we have it, we find we are not satisfied. When I gave up smoking I thought I was hungry for food all the time. Yet, no matter how much I ate, I still hungered. In fact, of course, my body craved the nicotine it was no longer getting. I could eat all I wanted, and I would still be hungry because I had confused the two types of hunger.

Tolstoy finally realized that all the things he thought he longed for were not actually satisfying him, because it was really a spiritual hunger that gnawed away at him. He was hungry for God and just did not know it. He had a God-shaped hole in his life, as every human being does.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Those words speak to our inmost selves, and part of us understands completely what they mean, and rejoices at the hope they give us. Yet, another part of us can't help asking, "How it is that Jesus can be the one thing that can satisfy the souls and lives of men and women? What is this bread that comes from heaven and gives life to the world?"

To answer that, we need to answer that question we just asked. What it is that we really desire deep down at the fundamental level of our being?

I used to ask soldiers what made them want to join the Army. The overwhelming majority said it was because they wanted to make a difference. If I probed a little more, this wanting to make a difference came down to the desire for purpose: Wanting to serve something they could believe was a good cause, wanting to belong to a strong community where they found a strong sense of belonging and, last but not least, they wanted a life they could be proud of: Self-esteem, in fact.

Last week the Church remembered the life and witness of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. He was a soldier and, as a young man, fiercely ambitious for fame and success. In a piece of reckless bravado in the Battle of Pamplona in 1521 he was hit by a cannon ball and his legs were badly shattered. During his year-long recovery in a monastery (all hospitals were run by religious orders in those days), he found himself with nothing to read except the life of Jesus and the Lives of the Saints. Reluctantly he picked up these books (most unappealing to a young man whose head was full of chivalry, battles and romance).

As he read them though, he began to be aware of a cause greater and more truly good than any he had known. He discovered a purpose and a challenge more honorable and worthy than any his current course could offer. He found the cause of Christ and the redemption of the human race. He laid down his sword at the Lady Chapel Altar in a Monastery in Montserrat, and rest is history. He founded the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, and all the work of that order ~ including Georgetown University along the road there ~ have their origins in his change of heart and life. This is the bread of life. This is what Jesus can give each one of us.

Over the last two years I have watched people finding their way into the life of this congregation. Many are very successful in the world. Many have also faced troubles, sorrow, and loss. Many have what everyone around them assumes to be almost ideal lives in almost every way. Yet all of them ~ tentatively at first, perhaps, have found something here that they cannot find anywhere else. Whether it is through service in the Soup Kitchen, through the quiet stillness and profound presence of God in the Daily Offices in the Chapel, or through the real and honest discussions in parish groups; or perhaps through the sense of the reality of God in the beauties of the music and the liturgy in this place. Through many different beginnings, I see people finding the bread of life that feeds their lives and souls.

Like Saint Ignatius, we discover that the only real purpose is God's purpose, the only truly good cause is God's Kingdom and service, the only real eternal community is the Church, and the only real fulfillment of our self-esteem is knowing that we are Christ's own people.

So here, as we receive Christ in the Eucharist each week, we are reminding ourselves ~ our whole selves, body, mind and spirit ~ that it is here in Christ that we find our true purpose in life. What must we do? Whatever it is we believe that Christ wants us to do. If we do that (and, of course, are right and not self-deluded about it) then we will desire to do nothing else, because nothing else will ever be as worthwhile. Here, in all our struggles, internal and external, the good wolf in us is fed, and the bad wolf is turned away at the door. Amen.



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