

10th Sunday after Pentecost B 28 July 2024

John 6:1-21

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus] told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' Let's pray: ...

In today's Gospel reading, we hear the story of the feeding of the 5,000. This is one of the few stories that appears in all four Gospels. So, what's going on here that's so important that all the Gospel writers made sure they included it in their accounts? What does it say about who Jesus is?

This story is so familiar that I think we gloss over many of the seemingly minor, but not insignificant details. Today, I'm going to gloss over the big story to focus on something that, far from being insignificant, teaches us that there's nothing, indeed, no-one too trivial for Jesus to devote his attention to. This compelling point is discovered when we unravel Jesus' instruction to his disciples to, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost" (John 6:12).

Now, I want you to imagine what the MCG looks like after the AFL Grand Final between, say, Carlton and the Adelaide Crows. What do you see? Empty drink containers strewn everywhere; the ground littered with chip packets, crumpled paper towels, paper plates and cups with hints of the feast they carried - pulverized chips, half eaten pie floaters, and roll upon roll of unfurled toilet paper.

Someone has to clean it all up, scraping it all into garbage bags, all the while, muttering descriptively about the fallen state of humanity. But imagine instead, twelve people roaming through the mess, picking up every last scrap of food, and placing it carefully in a basket? What kind of food would merit such careful attention? What kind of host would be so meticulous about even the fragments left over from the feast?

In this Gospel story, the abundance of food itself is miraculous. In the hands of Jesus, five barley loaves and two fish from some kid's lunch box, become enough to feed a crowd of thousands. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, "Too bad, you should have planned ahead." And when the bread and fish were multiplied, he didn't say, "Okay, everyone who's earned it, line up over here," or, "Limited quantities, available until it runs out!" Instead, Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them and the fish to all who were seated; as much as they wanted. Everyone ate until they were satisfied, and there were leftovers.

After everyone had filled their bellies, the disciples gathered up the fragments of the five barley loaves, and filled twelve baskets. The leftovers point to the abundance of God's generosity and provision. But what is often overlooked, is Jesus' instruction to gather up the fragments. This reminds us that nothing is too insignificant or worthless when it comes to God's attention.

Jesus' care and attention for the fragments and leftovers of the five barley loaves, speaks good news to those of us who are feeling fragmented, and those of us who are feeling like leftovers, cast aside and forgotten.

Maybe you've had a week that's left you feeling fragmented, torn apart, broken. It may be that you feel fragmented by too many commitments, or too many demands on your time and energy. Maybe you feel fragmented by disagreements or estrangement in your family. It's possible that you feel fragmented by the distance between your expectations, hopes, and dreams, ... and reality. Perhaps you feel fragmented by illness, pain, depression, addiction, or anxiety.

If so, you need good news, so hear this: Jesus gathers the fragments and binds us together. On the cross, Jesus' arms are open, inviting and drawing all people to himself. In the Body of Christ, we are made one. No longer fragmented or cut off, we are gathered in by love, for love; by Jesus, for Jesus. No one is too broken, too fragmented, too far from God's embrace. All are gathered up.

Maybe, like the bread, you feel cast aside and forgotten. Cast aside and forgotten in your grief, as the world dictates to you how long and in what ways you can live with loss and sadness. You may feel cast aside and forgotten because your body is failing you and you can no longer contribute in the ways you were once used to. Maybe you feel cast aside and forgotten in your relationships – friends who've left you behind, children who never call or visit. Maybe you feel cast aside and forgotten because you're no longer working owing to being laid off or retirement. Maybe you feel cast aside and forgotten because of who you are – your age, gender, ability, ethnicity, ...

You too, need to hear this good news: Jesus gathers up those who feel as though they've been cast aside and forgotten. Jesus never forgets, never abandons us, never sends us away. NEVER! Jesus sees you even when no one else does. He always seeks after the ones who feel lost, forgotten, and cast aside, and lovingly draws us into relationship.

This work that Jesus does to gather us in is also the work of the Church. As Jesus instructed the disciples to gather up the fragments so that nothing may be lost, we too, do the work of gathering up.

As Jesus' ministers to the world, we are the voices that call to the scattered, the eyes that seek out the lost, the hands that tenderly gather up the fragmented and outcast, the ears that listen. This is our call, as the Church. We are the ones who defiantly shake our fists at the myth of scarcity and point instead to the abundance of God. We are the fragmented ones who gather other fragments. We are the ones the world has cast aside and forgotten, doing Jesus' work of remembering and gathering others whom have also been discarded like worthless scraps.

Where in our world do you see the falsehood of scarcity instead of the reality of abundance, the pain of fragmentation rather than the intimate bond of unity, the despair and longing of those who have been cast aside instead of the love and support of community? Where are the tender, vulnerable places in need of the promise that God never leaves us or forsakes us, the promise that God gathers us up even when the world leaves us feeling fragmented and cast aside? From our own places of brokenness, from our own position as the ones cast aside, we are united with Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, and sent to share this powerful good news. Dear God, bind us together; make us whole; make us one, for the sake of the Gospel. Thanks be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.