

“So That Nothing May be Lost”
John 6:1-14

“Gather up the fragments...so that nothing may be lost.”

It’s a delight to be here with you this morning and to reflect with you for a bit on this remarkable passage from John’s gospel. I’ve heard a lot of wonderful things about Campbell United Methodist Church from Joshua, who graces the campus of Pacific School of Religion (and occasionally the classes I teach there). And of course, I have heard great things about you from Kathi, from whom I have learned so much over the years and whose friendship I cherish. Let me just say, though I’m sure you already know this, how blessed you are to have her here as your pastor.

As something of a theology geek, I relish reading ancient texts and weaving together theological ideas into systems of interrelated doctrines (I’m even paid to do it!). In all that textual work, though, I try always to remember that Christian faith began, not with a text, or a doctrine, or an institution, but with radical social practice – table fellowship.

It’s important to remember that in the ancient Mediterranean world, it mattered a great deal with whom one shared meals. Indeed, that was just as important as with whom one shared sexual intimacy. In those societies, food and sex were the primary ways to maintain social hierarchies of value based on ethnicity, class, gender, and religion.

Remembering this, we can understand better why Jesus so often got into trouble for eating with the *wrong* people. He not only ignored those powerful social divisions; he dissolved those barriers by gathering around a single table with those who weren’t supposed to be there. And it was for them a fresh and compelling insight into who God is, what God is like, and what in the world it means to say that “God is love.”

After taking meal sharing to a whole new level by feeding 5,000 people with some fish and a bit of bread, Jesus then says to his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.”

It matters that this table sits here, in this space – a visible reminder in a deeply fragmented world about the kind of God we worship and the kind of witness we can and really must bear to the Gospel.

I’m reminded of why this matters whenever I listen to the ongoing debate over immigration in this country.

As you may know, there is a massive fence jutting out from the west coast in southern California, between San Diego and Tijuana. That fence juts out from the shoreline into the Pacific Ocean and marks the U.S./Mexico border.

This fence also sits in a place rather hopefully (ironically?) called “Friendship Park.” It has been a place over the years where divided families and separated friends could meet and chat and even have picnics together, separated by a chain-link fence.

First Lady Pat Nixon dedicated that park in 1971 and declared her hope that one day the fence would come down. Imagining a First Lady saying that today is not only difficult politically but also logistically because the Department of Homeland Security has been dismantling that park over the last few years to build a better fence.

Meanwhile, a Methodist minister, John Fanestil, has been going every week to that park, crossing construction lines, and celebrating Eucharist there, passing Communion through the wire gaps in the fence.

“Gather up the fragments,” Jesus said, *“so that nothing may be lost.”*

Ancient empires and modern nation-states alike rely on the notion of “acceptable losses.” Not merely acceptable as if unavoidable or unfortunate, but *necessary* losses, *necessary* exclusions, mandatory fragmentations of the human family for the sake of identity politics and the consolidation of power.

Many of us, I’m sure, have been gripped by images of the current refugee crisis unfolding in Europe. Lest we forget, such crises are not new. Prior to 1944, strict immigration quotas prevented hundreds of thousands of Jews from entering the U.S. after fleeing Germany and Poland. Most of them were sent back; many of them died.

Whether in first century Rome or 21st century America, “divide and conquer” is the preferred strategy of the powerful, pitting the “haves” against the “have-nots,” stoking fear over the scarcity of resources, and sequestering the undesirable ones, mostly people of color, through mass incarceration or with taller border fences.

John Zizioulas, a Greek Orthodox theologian, urges us to reflect on those dynamics of division whenever we gather around the Eucharistic Table, whenever we see this Table sitting here in our midst. In the Eucharist, he says, we become Church, the place where faith, hope, and love are no longer *my* possessions to own and to protect but rather *ours* to share in common. Zizioulas puts it this way: in the Eucharist “the human ceases to be an individual and becomes a person, that is to say, a reality which is not a fragment.”¹

What a striking way to put it! We are no longer fragments at this table, but persons. Because persons are made for communion.

“Gather up the fragments,” Jesus said, *“so that nothing may be lost.”*

The distress and consternation over socio-political divisions can, it seems to me, reflect the fear many of us harbor about our own personal fragmentations, the anxiety over holding together all the many, often disparate pieces of our lives and relationships.

¹ John D. Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, 128.

I cannot help but think of my dear, 93-year old mother, who just died this past March after living for a number of years with Alzheimer's related dementia. It was painful, I have to say, to travel with her on that journey as I watched and listened to the fabric of her memory, once a whole cloth of rich experiences and relationships, slowly unravel; the seams of that colorful quilt coming apart as one piece after another fell away.

It was painful but also a privilege to be the one picking up the pieces she dropped, gathering up the fragments of her life and telling the stories again and again – quite literally re-membering her life with her for moment to moment. And of course worrying about what I myself may have forgotten, what pieces may have fallen away unnoticed, a cherished fragment sloughed off and unseen in the corner of the room.

That kind of fear and anxiety can easily tempt us to despair, especially when we're convinced that everything really is up to us. I can hear that kind of anxiety from the disciples in this morning's story. "How can we possibly feed all these people? What are we going to do?"

The answer is disarmingly simple: Do what you can with what you've got. God will do the rest.

"Gather up the fragments," Jesus says. That's what we do.
And when we do, God will ensure that "nothing is lost."

John's gospel is rather strange compared to the other three, and for more than one reason. As I often say in my classes, John reminds me of that old Sesame Street song – one of these is not the like the others.

John does not include, for example, a last supper narrative in the same way that the other three gospel writers do. John's Jesus does not say "this is my body" and "this is my blood." Instead, as you might recall, John's Jesus washes feet at the last supper and says "love one another."

So, does this mean there's actually no "Eucharist" in John's gospel? No, not at all. Quite a few scholars and commentators over the centuries have suggested that nearly every chapter in John's gospel points toward the Eucharist, discloses yet another layer of Eucharistic meaning, invites ever deeper participation in God's own abundant life and unending love.

Some have argued that the chapter we heard from this morning, with the familiar feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, is especially rich with Eucharistic overtones. Notice that John's Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them (6:11) – that is exactly what Jesus does in the last supper narratives in the other three gospels. "Gave thanks" in that verse comes from the Greek *eucharistein*, from which we derive, of course, the word Eucharist.

Notice as well that rather than violence, sacrifice, and death, John puts Eucharist in the context of feeding hungry people, ensuring that absolutely everyone is fed, and that no one is left out.

And do notice that the leftovers from this miraculous feeding amount not to eleven, not thirteen, but exactly twelve baskets, just as there are twelve tribes of Israel, just as there are twelve disciples. Ah – twelve! John thus includes even Judas-the-betrayer in that number.

“Gather up the fragments,” Jesus says, *“so that **nothing** may be lost.”*
Nothing will be lost, not even the one who betrayed him.

The good news of the Gospel is good, and news, and also a bit troubling at times. Exactly how much room really is at the Table? How much room can we bear? Not even the gospel writers were able fully to digest the idea that Judas himself belonged there.

And still, and perhaps despite himself, John makes clear in this chapter that the Eucharist stands for divine abundance and not just the abundance of food. John means the utterly unmerited, wildly excessive, and shockingly profligate abundance of God’s love and grace extended to all, even the betrayers.

This, I dare say, is not just counter-cultural but world-changing.

Dissolving borders, welcoming the stranger, becoming persons, dismantling barriers, unimaginable love and forgiveness – these are just a few of the ways that this Table matters and how it shapes our lives together in a fragmented and violent world.

I’m grateful for multiple meanings and diverse approaches because it helps to ensure that each of us, in all of our diversity, can find a way to the Table of Divine Abundance.

God ensures a way to God’s own life and love, a way particularly suited to you and to me, so that, in the end, nothing and no one will be lost.