

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

GATHER UP THE FRAGMENTS SO THAT NOTHING MAY BE LOST

John 6:1-21

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

1After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. 2A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. 3Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. 4Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. 5When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" 6He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. 7Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." 8One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" 10Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. 11Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. 12When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. 14When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." 15When Jesus realized that they were

about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. 16When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, 17got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. 18The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. 19When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. 20But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." 21Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

DIAGNOSIS: A World Measured and Fragmented

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Speaking in Terms of Limitations*

John loads this text with measurements: a large crowd; 200 denarii worth of bread; a small amount; a lot of grass; 5,000 men; five loaves; two fish; 12 baskets; 25 or 30 stadia ("three or four miles"). Such measurements are how we think and how we make sense of our world. When Jesus asks Philip where they can get bread to feed the crowd, Philip, making a mental calculation, says, "Six months' wages [bread of two hundred denarii] is not enough for each of them to get a little" (6:7). Andrew, too, wonders what good five barley loaves and two fish are among so many.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Living by the Structures of This World*

In the Middle Ages there was much debate over whether God implanted a natural order in the creation (biologically, socially, etc.) or whether God created humans with the capacity for reason and language with which to order our world. In any

case we live within structures that we pass on to our children. Those who transgress these limits are punished. Such structure comes at a cost, though, as we see the disciples in this text, like us, with imaginations bound. We cannot imagine limitless abundance. The crowd, too, tries to contain Jesus within the categories that they recognize: prophet or king. Such a status for Jesus would put him squarely in their box, on their side. He would be against all sinners and people of other nations, for these are the divisions created by prophets and kings. We want to make sure that there are distinguishable sides and that we are on the side of the chosen and the righteous. We want the natural world, too, to behave as we expect. The disciples are terrified when the storm does not drown Jesus. What would a world without such order be?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Meeting the God Who Is Not Bound, Part 1*

At the very least God allows and encourages us to live within structures if God does not actually provide structures for us to live in. Structures preserve life but they also divide and kill; therefore they make no one righteous, not even the most obedient. God is not bound by our structures and God can destroy all order, as Jesus does in this text. As the text continues Jesus explains that he himself is the boundless bread from heaven that never runs out and does not perish (6:35). In transgressing the limits of measure by creating an overabundance of bread in our story, Jesus has pointed a sign at himself. Jesus rejects the titles of “prophet” and “king” as too small, bringing boundaries with them that divide and leave some outside. The language of money and distance in this text happen to be Roman (denarii and stadia), as is the name of the sea (Tiberias). But these measurements, imperial as they are, are all irrelevant to Jesus who is not a king but God, who overrides all of the above. No money, no distance, no geography, no

political office can limit, hinder, or contain him. In a Passover exodus of his own, Jesus walks through the wind-blown sea near his people as God the “I am” (6:20). The disciples are terrified because they stand in front of such a God with all their supporting structures shattered by this very same God. What will God do with them?

PROGNOSIS: A World Gathered in Abundance

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Meeting the God Who Is Not Bound, Part 2*

Jesus says to his disciples, “Do not be afraid” (6:20). By defying this world’s structures he intends to bring the disciples home immediately to God’s heart and God’s kingdom in which no one is lost and nothing perishes; God’s “kingdom is an everlasting kingdom” (Psalm 145:13). When the structures of the world have collapsed, “The Lord upholds all who are falling,” for “the Lord is kind in all his doings” (Psalm 145:14 and 17). John uses the language of the eucharistic liturgy in verse 11: “Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.” In speaking this way, John reminds us of two things. Jesus is not only the bread that feeds without limit; he is also the divine host who gives the bread (himself) to the dinner guests in his royal household. Later in this chapter (6:51) Jesus explains that the bread is his flesh, punished to death by the structures of this world for having defied them but rising to life along with all who have eaten him and thus share in his life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Living by the Abundance of This Word*

As the prophet Elisha said in a similar outbreak of bread, “[The people] shall eat and have some left,’...according to the word of the Lord” (2 Kings 4:43-44). The gospel of John makes it clear in its opening lines that Jesus is this word of the Lord

in the flesh (John 1:1 and 14). In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul marvels that those who eat the word of the Lord are able to do much more than they ever imagined possible. He tells them, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:18-19).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Speaking in Terms of Faithful Power*

When the disciples comprehend what Jesus does with the bread (his flesh that they share), they stop using measured words. Instead of parsing and categorizing into divisions, they begin to gather up all the fragments so that nothing is lost. Jesus' fleshly body comes together from sinners of all nations, drawn to Christ by God's own Spirit and given a new life in a kingdom beyond all expectations and subject to no worldly divisions.