

August 5, 2018
Texts for 10th Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, IA
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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No Leftovers

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I get to witness some very Godly behavior around Good Shepherd.
There's lots of Christ-like activity as people - serve others, advocate for justice,
tend to community - and take care of leftovers.

Yes, leftovers - as in food.

As in- "Save the crumbs from the Krumkake for Vacation Bible School because they're so good on ice cream."

Or "I'll take these stinky brown bananas home for bread."

Or "Who can take this food to the Mission - (that's a center in Cresco for people struggling with addiction where we bring the leftovers from funerals)

Or, "How can we make sure the garden produce doesn't go bad before it's put out on Sunday?"

On the surface, these seem like simple, nice habits that allow us to be frugal and responsible. We don't think of them as particularly Godly.

God is all about spiritual matters, right?

And leftovers have more to do with Tupperware or these days - Gladware.

I feel anything but Godly when I'm searching for a cover for a Gladware container in my kitchen and the whole pile of containers and covers comes crashing down on me.

I don't feel, or sound, particularly spiritual then.

Except there's no real distinction between the physical and the spiritual. God created our bodies and spirits and the whole earth and God cares about it all. Jesus came to feed, heal and save whole persons, not just souls. Leftovers, it turns out, are important to Jesus' work of tending to both physical and spiritual needs.

We see this in our Gospel story today.

When 5000 people had eaten as much as they wanted and were satisfied, Jesus told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So, they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets."

That detail of twelve baskets filled is important because twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel. Twelve symbolizes the whole people of God. So, this conveys that the leftovers from Jesus' feast could be shared again to feed all God's people.

The language of gathering up what's left so that nothing may be lost is also significant. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is clear that he's been sent to gather all things and all people into God. Nothing and no one that God has made is to be wasted, tossed aside, passed over, left behind. All of creation is to be gathered into God's embrace - tended and nourished.

This is so very different than what happens in our consumer culture, where food, goods and even human life are seen as expendable. 1 in 6 Americans are food insecure - unsure where their next meal is coming from. Many poor Americans live in food deserts where it's difficult to access healthy food. Too often these people are overlooked and left behind. Yet 40% of the food produced in the US ends up in landfills where it releases 16% of our methane emissions, the equivalent of putting 33 million more cars on the road.

Pope Francis describes this as a "culture of waste". In an address on World Environment Day in 2013, he said, "This 'culture of waste' tends to become a common mentality that infects everyone. Human life, the person, are no longer seen as a primary value to be respected and safeguarded.... This culture of waste has also made us insensitive to wasting and throwing out excess foodstuffs, which is especially condemnable when, in every part of the world, unfortunately, many people and families suffer hunger and malnutrition... Let us remember well, that whenever food is thrown out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor, from the hungry!" He continued, "I ask everyone to reflect on the problem of the loss and waste of food, to identify ways and approaches which, by seriously dealing with this problem, convey solidarity and sharing with the underprivileged."

This is happening these days in wonderful ways. Luther's Cafeteria to Community program has packaged and donated over 50,000 pounds of leftover food from the cafeteria to the Decorah Food Pantry. A grocery store called Daily Table in Massachusetts receives food that would otherwise be thrown away and sells it at low cost in an area that is otherwise food desert. They get all sorts of random things. *Culture Magazine* called them up after sponsoring a Cheese Festival and said, "if you can get here in 90 minutes you can have a huge amount of artisanal cheese." Some things are put directly on the shelves for resale. They also prepare creative, healthy, take-out meals with what they receive. One customer with disabilities reported, "When I got to the Daily Table and saw the prices, I started crying [and saying] 'I can afford the food here. I can afford it! And you have prepared, healthy meals which are so helpful for me because of my health conditions.'" Stories like these show us that the miracle of feeding 5000 people, plus more with the leftovers, didn't just happen long ago. Jesus is still at work to feed hungry people. Jesus is at work through places like the Daily Table, and through each of us, to do that. Jesus looks at us, as he looked at Philip that day long ago, to ask,

“how will we feed all these people?”

God has provided more than enough for everyone to have enough.

We don't have a supply problem, we have a problem with hoarding and wasting.

So, how will all of creation be fed and nourished? In part, when we tend to our leftovers and avoid throwing out food. These are small acts, but they are important ways that we turn from the culture of waste and join in God's work of tending to the whole creation.

As we seek to do this, we can trust that Jesus is always gathering us all into God, even when we waste food. We are so valued by God even when we aren't able to eat that soup for the fourth day in a row, even when we can't power through that slimy spinach another day.

We are gathered and fed each week by God's word and by Christ's body and blood - nourished at this feast of forgiveness and grace. Our bodies and spirits are fed and healed and saved. Here we are given what we need to be about God's abundant nourishment for all.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.