

Picking Up the Pieces

John 6: 1-21

Home Moravian Church

This morning I'd like to start with a little show and tell: You can't see what I'm showing, so I'll tell you about it. What I have here is a few old buttons from the 1970s, with various slogans. Here's one I had in college; it has a cow on it, and the cow is saying, "No nukes." I wore this paired with this other button with a nuclear power plant on it, saying, "No cows." That got me some laughs in the 1970s!

I have some Moravian buttons. This one says, "John Hus Power" – this one was from a Moravian youth convocation that my older brothers attended in the late 1960s. And this one is from the convocation I attended myself, in Bethlehem in 1975. It says, "We are five loaves and two fish."

That's a reference to the gospel of John. And of Luke. And Mark, and also Matthew. Jesus' feeding thousands with only a tiny amount of bread and fish is the only miracle included in all four gospels. So we can't overstate its importance to our understanding of Jesus.

The basic details are consistent from gospel to gospel: There is a crowd of at least 5,000. The question arises: how will these people eat? An inventory of resources reveals only 5 loaves and 2 fish. Yet the people are made to sit down. Jesus gives thanks, and the food is distributed. Everyone eats as much as they want, and the leftover fragments fill 12 baskets.

This is the Jesus all four gospels want us to know: the Jesus who trusts God to provide for everyone's needs, and even beyond. The Jesus of superabundance.

That being the case, have you ever wondered why they bothered to gather the leftovers?

The theme of Convo '75 was “We are five loaves and two fish.” My button helps me remember that theme, and my faded photographs help me remember the fun. For more information, I had to visit the Moravian Archives. Sifting through a box of papers—mimeographs printed from wax stencils, if you please—I was reminded of the field trips, discussion groups, and Bible studies that kept us very busy all week. We learned about serving the ill, the elderly, the homebound; about speaking for justice and environmental protection; about bringing Christ’s love to people suffering in prisons, in hospitals, and in our own families. We learned that Jesus distributes us, like loaves and fishes, to meet the needs of the world.

There were more than 300 of us at Convo. That’s a big number for a youth convocation, but it’s not a lot to feed the world. Like the loaves and fishes, we were surely too small to meet the need—yet our Convo leaders taught us that, with the blessing of Christ, whatever satisfaction we might offer the world would be multiplied in superabundance.

That was *forty-nine years ago*.

Forty-nine years ago! And speaking for the friends I’m still in touch with who attended Convo '75, I can say that mostly we’ve tried to be those loaves and fishes, meeting the needs of the world. Besides at least one Moravian pastor, there’s a radiologist. Two school teachers. A physician’s assistant. A stellar church youth leader. That’s just among my small group of friends, off the top of my head. I think that for most of these folks, church “took.” Convo took. At least we grew up with a sense of mission and a sense of responsibility to serve.

But still—forty-nine years ago! And life strikes its random blows. I’ve kept in touch with these Convo folks enough to know what some of them have been through. Abusive spouses. Alcoholic parents and family dysfunction. Divorce. Tragic loss. Coming out as gay, and being rejected for it. And still they have gone on being the loaves and fishes.

Meanwhile, they also suffer the emotional toll of their work—the impossibility of curing every suffering patient, mending every broken heart, fostering success in every student. The frustrations as their helping professions change with the times, so that doctors feel beholden to the financial end of the so-called health care “industry,” and teachers are forced to substitute testing for teaching. After decades in service, loaves and fishes may feel reduced to so many fragments. And then they ask themselves whether, as fragments, they can really be useful to anyone. Perhaps, they think, we should just lie here on the grass, while the crowd we have fed arises satisfied from their meal and moves on.

The professional name for this fragmented state is burnout. One source claims this word was coined in 1975. Maybe someone was first writing about “burnout” while Moravians ages 16 to 25 were at Convo, learning to feed ourselves to the world.

Another source defines burnout as “a progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose.”¹ Those words are written about the helping professions, but I think the phenomenon of burnout is much larger, and I’m pretty sure it is rampant in the church.

Because church work can also wear folks out. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. On top of that, there’s the organizational work. Volunteers keep the church existing as an institution so that it may continue feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and so on.

Sometimes it’s the organizational work—committee meetings and such—that burns folks out the fastest, because it has the least immediate reward. Church leadership blogger Brian Dodd quotes a burned-out volunteer: “I don’t sense I’m making an eternal impact and I don’t know what I’m doing is impactful for today.... I feel like if I’m there or not it doesn’t make any

¹ Edelwich, J., & Brodsky, A. (1980). *Burn-out: Stages of disillusionment in the helping professions*. New York, NY: Human Sciences Press.

difference.” Couple this frustration with whatever random blows have struck the volunteer’s personal life, and it’s no wonder the volunteer declares, “I just feel burnt out. I just want to go sit down.”²

That is the sound of another fragment falling to the ground. It might also be the sound of someone thinking about leaving the church.

Wouldn’t that be easier? When you’re just feeling like a fragment, with nothing left in you to feed anybody? All who work and work, and serve and serve the church—we could all just give up and lie on the grass while the crowd moves on.

Except for the voice of Jesus, in the gospel of John, telling the disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” In Jesus’ eyes there is no bread so broken that it cannot be of use—no fragment too small to nourish. So he calls the disciples to pick up the pieces.

Notice that. Jesus cares about all those broken pieces, but gathering them is a job for the disciples. The hands of Christ bless us and give us to the world, but it is the work of the church to pick up our own broken pieces, and help those who have served themselves into fragments to find wholeness again.

Home Moravian Church is full of loaves and fishes. I see you in every pew, blessed and distributed by Christ. I see people who feed neighbors in Winston-Salem and around the world. I see people who serve through their daily work in the helping professions. I see people who lie awake at night, wondering how to do more to help the hurting people. I see lots and lots of loving volunteers who give huge amounts of time and energy to the work of this church, even as they struggle with upheaval and tragedy and weariness in their personal lives. I see people who

² <http://www.briandoddonleadership.com/2013/10/27/15-reasons-why-good-church-volunteers-quit/>

served for decades and now, with age making physical service difficult, serve by tireless prayer for the ministries of the church. I rejoice over all the ways that Home Church members nourish the world.

But feeding the world does leave the loaves and fishes in fragments. That means the church needs to offer more than endless volunteer opportunities. Christ's servants need rest and restoration, and if it's not available in the church, the most committed servants will eventually start looking for the exit. The fragments will be lost. And Jesus would have some very stern words for the disciples who let that happen.

Professional literature suggests some ways to avoid burnout. Some of these should sound very familiar to the church. One is relationships. People are less likely to suffer burnout if they have strong connections with others and can share stories about their lives. The more Home Church can foster relationships, the more we will be a place of restoration. I pray that as we serve our neighbors, we also truly connect with one another.

Another defense against burnout is personal growth: learning new things, serving in new ways. The church especially should offer opportunities for growth. I would love to know what more Home Church can do to help you grow spiritually, deepen your faith, help you make new use of your spiritual gifts. Delving deeply into spiritual work will keep us engaged and might even restore the fragile treasure called *idealism*.

Finally, we can't avoid burnout if we don't rest. Sabbath rest is not just God's desire for us; it is God's *command*. I would welcome your ideas for how we can make church life more restful, instead of more stressful.

Last Sunday I met a member at the door as we were leaving the church together. We had a brief conversation, which she has given me permission to share with you. She had just come

out of the listening session with the Community Engagement Team, a discussion of local needs that is part of a county-wide organizational effort. I thought this member might be energized from being in the same room with people who share her passionate concern. I thought she might feel empowered.

Instead, she confessed to feeling tired—even exhausted. As she expressed it, there are so many needs that to hear them all named is overwhelming. Worse: The needs are not new; they are only greater. Even as we learn more and more about how systemic injustice has created structural inequities, the politics of the moment seem to advocate against addressing either the systemic injustice or the structural inequities. People of faith have struggled with injustice and inequities for a very, very long time—ask any of the Old Testament prophets. But there are historical moments when entire cultures seem to suffer a collective exhaustion; and I think we might be there right now. And so, while we need to keep feeding the world, we also need to be asking, “How can the church gather and save all these fragments”—so, as Jesus says, “that none may be lost?”

In that phrase, the word Jesus uses for “lost” can be translated in other ways. That none may be *discarded*. That none may be *destroyed*. That none *may perish*. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus will use the same word as he prays for God to protect his disciples: “I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost.”

Jesus trusts in God’s abundance, but he also cares for what God gives him. Losing a few crumbs of bread may not be a big deal, but losing *people* is. Bread there may be in abundance; but there is only one you, and you, and you. Jesus is not willing that even one of you should be lost. Or discarded. Or destroyed. Not willing that even one of you may perish.

The Jesus who sends us out to feed the world is also the Jesus who cares for what is broken into pieces. We are five loaves and two fish; but we are also the disciples called to gather the fragments. The church that sent my convo friends and all servants of Christ into the world must also be the place where all the friends and all the servants return to find wholeness. Because the whole world depends on that.

Amen.