

Sermon – John 6:1-21  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
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### “Picking Up the Pieces”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The crowd was out in full force yesterday morning, and we were part of it. The boys and I rode our bikes up to Lake Street, pilgrims to the parking lot. We dutifully took our place at the back of the line, knowing that our journey would soon reach its end. A woman approached me, wonderstruck: “What’s the deal with these donuts? That’s all I’ve heard anyone talk about this morning!” I did my best to do them justice, especially the powdered, but in the end, I shrugged: “You just have to try them for yourself.” To the best of my knowledge, she did. But as we sat there eating our donuts and listening to bluegrass, the satisfaction was fleeting. I mean, yeah, a good donut is good, but it’s not going to carry you through the day. At that moment I remembered that the refrigerator we were biking home to was almost barren, bereft of groceries. We’ve been gone so much lately that we hardly have any food at home. I hadn’t planned for lunch! So, I struck out across the parking lot on a new quest. Knowing we had some sandwich fixings, I decided to get some bread. I approached, appropriately enough, a stand run by the Bread Man, and bought two loaves. Later, at home, I was rewarded with the best pepperoni, cheddar, and horseradish mustard sandwich I’ve had in a while, thanks to the Bread Man’s handcrafted seven-grain. It was enough to make me consider hopping back on my bike; I wanted to find this woman and tell her, “You thought that donut was good? Sure, it was! But have you tried the bread? That will fill you up; that will last. That was *good!*”

2. We set out on our journey with one goal in mind but found a different sort of fulfillment altogether. A similar thing could be said for the crowds that followed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee that day. They'd seen the signs, witnessed his healings, and they went hoping for more. But they forgot to pack lunch. So it is that they find themselves far from hearth, home, and grocery store with the lunch hour approaching. They had set out searching for something, but they find something else entirely. They go hoping to see another sign but find themselves nothing but empty. The disciples are wise enough to know there's nothing to be done; not by them, anyway. Better to send the people home quick as can be. But Jesus looks into their emptiness, into their hunger, knowing already what he will do. With the contents of one boy's lunchbox, Jesus transforms scarcity into abundance, feeding the multitude with plenty to spare. While John doesn't mention how the bread tasted, our minds wander back to the wedding at Cana, where Jesus didn't simply turn water into wine, but into the best wine. I imagine these thousands finding themselves not simply fed, but at a feast, finally pushing the food away because they just couldn't eat anymore. In Jesus' presence, hunger and emptiness are opportunities to show forth who he is. Not simply one who can make bread, but One who *is* bread. The Bread of Life itself, so plentiful that his disciples, who couldn't figure out what to do a few minutes ago, are left to pick up the pieces, twelve baskets in all. Whatever the people set out to find that morning, they discovered something else: the prophet long awaited, now come into this world's void to bring fulness. The very I AM who calmed the world's watery chaos at creation and now walks across the water, casting out fear.
3. Who among us has not felt the hunger of the crowd, the helplessness of the disciples? To be sure, if you are worshipping here this morning, in person or via livestream, it's unlikely you are one of the 690 million people in the world who will go to bed hungry tonight. That number, by the way, will likely

increase to 840 million by 2030, a projection that is almost certainly now an undercount, as chronic hunger has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. But if you, like me, can buy a loaf of artisanal bread when you realize lunch is looming, you are nevertheless afflicted by other hungers. For meaning, for identity, for purpose. For health, wholeness, community. We, we who have so much, who are so rarely hungry, have stomachs that are empty in other ways. We try to fill them with so much that does not satisfy; with the omnipresent quest for more that is insatiable, because there is no amount of stuff we can have – money or status or privilege or whatever – that cannot be added to. There is always more to have, so we convince ourselves we never have enough. And we do so knowing full well that our siblings throughout the world, God’s handiwork every bit as much as you or me, are actually hungry. In our rare moments of clarity, when we recognize this dire imbalance and iniquity, we feel helpless. Philip speaks for all of us when he answers Jesus’ question. The problem is too big, the hungry are too many. There is nothing we can do. How do we even begin to pick up the pieces of all that is broken in and around us?

4. It is exactly here, in the realization that there is nothing we can do, that hope finds us. The thousands did not eat that day because Philip and Andrew figured out how to feed them. They ate because Jesus was there, because Jesus decided to feed them. Neither feeding nor saving the world is up to us, thank God. Jesus comes to feed, to save. Our task is simpler if we would hear and heed the call. What are we to do? While Jesus is the sole driver of the action today, there are roles for us. First, we look to the boy, this child who offered what he had. He knew it wouldn’t be enough, but so what? In Jesus’ hands, his lunchbox held an abundance. If you have something, however small, give. Share. It will be enough. Second, we look to the boy, and remember not to overlook those like him. Andrew is a disciple, an *adult*, who dismisses the child’s gift out of hand. But Jesus doesn’t. Jesus receives what the child has to offer and does the rest. Don’t dismiss the gifts of others

- simply because these others don't measure up in your eyes. Who knows what Jesus will do? Third, take up the task left to the disciples. Jesus breaks and blesses; Jesus distributes and feeds. What do the disciples do? They pick up the pieces. Their call is not to perform the miracle; their job is to gather up what's left, following in Jesus' wake so that nothing may be lost, so that the blessing might extend ever more broadly. Remembering this call, we can stop trying to baptize Jesus for our purposes and know in faith that we have been baptized into his mission.
5. Jesus initiates here the new Passover that will be brought to fulfillment in his death and resurrection. More than a thousand years before Jesus fed the crowds by the sea, the Lord told the people to prepare a meal of lamb and bread, just enough for that night's journey out of Egypt. As they wandered in the wilderness, God gave them manna each day. Just enough. Make no mistake; when it comes from the Lord just enough is exactly that: enough. But the Passover which Christ inaugurates is not one that's just enough. It is abundant. Plentiful. Overflowing. It is all these things and more because it is Christ himself, both host and meal. As much as this feast by the sea is more than the crowd anticipated, so is it less than what the sign signifies. When Christ is broken open upon the cross, when the empty void of this world's sin and hunger and death sought to swallow him whole, the I AM has one more surprise in store. In his dying, Jesus fills the creation he once called into being. He meets us here again today, in wafer and wine, too small to make a difference to our hunger, it seems. Yet we will never be so full as we are when we meet Christ in the Eucharist, a foretaste of the feast to come. Filled, we are freed. Free to follow in Jesus' wake, picking up pieces of grace and mercy that nothing would be lost. Free to feed those whose hunger has run too deep for too long. Free, like young Hudson today, to be the like young boy on Galilee's shores, offering our meagre gifts to Christ, that they might by his power become exactly what the world needs. In this new Passover, we are fed by the Paschal Lamb who offers himself for us, who meets our needs not with

just enough, but with the full abundance that is simply Jesus. Whatever you were looking for this morning, you have been found by the Bread Man, the One who is always more than enough.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.