

## **Matthew 14:13-21**

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

### **“Crumbs on the Carpet; Who Cleaned Up the Upper Room?”**

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He understood absolutely the importance of the past. From the time he was old enough to understand anything, he heard stories about his people, about how God had led them out into the Exodus to the promised land, that they were God’s people and God was their God. How God had told them to put the blood of the lamb on the doorpost and how the Angel of Death had passed over them. They even made a meal out of it, they made a covenant with God, the first one. They remembered the story. They celebrated Passover, and they had a deep appreciation for their past, of which he was part. He understood the value of the past.

But he believed it was a time for a shift in their thinking and a new way of looking, and he told them often, “You have heard it said....but I say to you....” And there was that day when he stood in a lonely place and he looked up and there were lots of people following him, and he said to his disciples, “Give them something to eat.” And there in that lonely place, he gave them something to eat. He gave them fish and bread, but more than that. Because it wasn’t the menu that was remembered as important, it was the message. Whenever Jesus found people in a lonely place, Jesus always fed people, In a lonely place, he gave them food.

This morning, we’re going to go to two lonely places, and this morning we’re going to receive some food. Let me describe for you a lonely place. Others may describe it in a different way, or find it in a different spot. A lonely place is a place where nothing happens. Someone in the church sent me the story, and I pass it on to you, a true story. The town was Leechfield, Kentucky, a young pastor asked by a funeral director to conduct a graveside service for a homeless man. The deceased had no family and no friends. The service would be held in a new cemetery in the back country, this was to be the first burial in the new cemetery. The preacher didn’t know the area, it was not

familiar to him in that part of the country and he got lost. In fact, he showed up an hour late. There were people there still. He saw the backhoe and the open grave, and the crew digging. The hearse was not there. He figured the funeral director had gone home. The vault lid was in place, however. So he asked the workers to stand with him in honor of the man who had died, and promised it wouldn't take long, apologized for being late, and he read some scripture and gave a short sermon on looking forward to a brighter day. He spoke of the glory of God that is with us, and the workers got into it. "Amen," they said, "Praise the Lord, Glory to God." And that lit the preacher up and he expanded his message to include the whole story of salvation from Genesis to Revelation. He closed with a benediction, thanked the men, walked to his car, was taking off his jacket, inserting the key into the ignition, when he heard one of the workers say to another, "I ain't never seen anything like that, and I've been putting in septic tanks for thirty years."

As we think about that story, I think it's important to think it through. A preacher at a service for a septic tank. You might imagine or think he had wasted his afternoon, speaking to diggers in the hot sun. Nothing happened – or did it? Was a meaningful word spoken? In spite of it, was it heard? Michael Stern wrote a song, that's a sermon, "One World" is the title. "One moment can change a whole lifetime, one life can change eternity. One stranger befriended, one broken heart mended, one child loved, one captive freed, one moment can change a whole lifetime, one life can change eternity." When nothing happens in a lonely place, there is more than what we see. Central to Jesus' message is this: Live in the present. And so he took the bread and broke it. Did his disciples know it was the last supper? He took the bread and broke it. Well, the church knew it. The church turned it into a ritual. The church, years later, the church said, "That bread, that isn't just bread, that bread is the body of Christ." The church, simply by doing that, wanted us to look at the bread and see it as more than bread. Jesus wanted us to look into the moment and see the meaning in the moment, that there's more to the moment than there seems to be, every time bread is broken, every time we break bread together, it is a sacrament. "I am with you," he said. "You are with each other, and when you are, I am with you." There is more to the moment. There is meaning in the moment.

Randy Pausch, a professor of computer science. His job was to teach college students how to use and understand the computer, and he was good at his job. The university that hired him was proud to have him on the staff. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and was told that he had a short time to live, and so he decided to leave something to his children and his students, and so he wrote a speech that has become a cultural icon. He told his listeners, "We can't change the cards we're dealt, but we can play our hand. Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted, and experience itself is a gift." He said, "I probably got more from the dreams I never accomplished than from the ones I did. Be good at something, it makes you valuable. Bring something to the table. It'll make you welcome." Randy died last week. A Carnegie-Mellon professor gave his last lecture, and he tells us, "Death is part of life. Don't feel sad for me. I had the blessing of getting a little bit of advance notice." The last lecture is all about finding meaning in the moment. Important things happen when nothing is happening. We may think we know what our job is, but Randy Pausch will not be remembered as a computer science teacher, he will be remembered for his last lecture.

And Harold Kushner will not be remembered as a Jewish rabbi who preached good sermons, but he will be remembered for the death of his young son Adam, and for the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. And Betty Ford will not be remembered as the wife and first lady when her husband was president. She will be remembered for the Betty Ford Center, which treats alcohol and drug addiction. Things are more than they seem. No meal with friends or loved ones should be taken for granted. It could be the last supper. And even if it isn't, there's something sacred about a meal and the conversation that goes along with it. It is a lonely place when nothing happens, or doesn't. Jesus gives us bread and tells us to find meaning in the moment, saying, "Live today, don't waste it."

Another lonely place is where there are loose ends, where the future is unknown, nothing is certain. On the can of a home air freshener, you find the following promotion. "This product brings the clean, natural freshness of a country meadow indoors. It freshens the air in you home with a clean, back-to-nature scent. You'll imagine summer grass. You'll think of fragrant flowers and you'll be transported into a country meadow." Following the promotion of the product, on the can, in large letters: "Warning: inhaling the contents can be harmful or fatal." That's a big loose end. An air freshener, it has fragrance, you can smell it, but if you do, you may die.

James Moore tells the story of the minister who put an ad in the newspaper asking for someone to come to the church, the church would pay them for a job to fix things around the church and help with routine chores, kind of like Lewis is, back at the sound booth, waving at me now. The very next morning, after that ad hit the paper, a young man showed up at the church and asked to speak to the pastor. The preacher looked at him and said, "Now, before we talk any further, I need to know just how prepared you are to do the work that needs to be done. First of all, I want you to know that the coffee needs to be made by eight o'clock in the morning," which is true in this place, by the way. "Can you do that?" "Yes, sir." "Can you polish the silver that the UMW has locked up in a cabinet, and can you wash the dishes when people forget?" "Yes, sir." "Can you keep things picked up, the lawn mowed?" "Yes, sir." "There'll be electrical problems, unexpected leaking pipes, and the toilet overflows, that sort of thing?" "Wait a minute," said the young man. "I have come here to make arrangements for my wedding. But if it's going to be like that, I'm going to give up the whole thing." You know, he was interviewing for the wrong job, but I can tell you, if he thought marriage didn't include some of that, he ought to think it over.

It's a lonely place when the future is full of loose ends and you don't know, and you know you don't. It's a lonely place when there are all these loose ends. You get a blood test. The doctor calls you up and speaks to you about your LDL number, and it isn't about your attitude regarding Mormons. Or there's something on the CAT scan that wasn't a mouse. Or you get a call from the IRS and they want you to come to Ogden, Utah, and that's not a pleasure trip. Or your fortune cookie has a message that causes you to lose your appetite. It's all about the future, and nothing is known, and all those loose ends –it's a lonely place to be. And Jesus went to a lonely place, and people came to be with him, and Jesus began to think of Moses in the wilderness, when the people had run

out of food, and then he thought about the manna in the wilderness that Moses and the others found, and he knew that there's always enough to eat if we look around, and he believed that the loose ends can be linked and the future can be trusted, and that's why he took the cup and gave it to the disciples and called it the New Covenant with God, telling them, "This God that you've known in the past is the same God who'll be waiting for you in the future, only in a new way."

In a book written by Christopher Hitchens, entitled *God is Not Good*, we find I think one of the most serious challenges to the core of our Christian belief. Hitchens attacks a premise that's so basic when he says, "The action of a man who volunteers to die for his fellow creatures is universally regarded as noble. But the extra claim that he has not really died makes the whole sacrifice irrelevant. Thus, those who say "Jesus died for my sins" when he did not really die at all, make a false statement." Hitchens thinks we have to give up the idea of Jesus' sacrifice for us, or the idea of Jesus' resurrection, that we can't have both. If he lives, he didn't die for us. It seems to me Hitchens takes the Christian faith in an entirely too literal manner and puts himself in a trap. The resurrection of Jesus is about the rising of human hope from death, and the realization that nothing ultimately can destroy the love of God which was found in Jesus. He died, he suffered, yes, but he lives. He lives in us. It was the end, but it was the beginning. It was the last supper, but it was prelude to the next supper. The sacrament was not ended in the upper room, it was just beginning. The loose ends can be linked to the next step.

I think it was Jack Canfield who approached a little league baseball game one afternoon and asked one of the kids in the dugout what the score was, and the boy replied, "18 to nothing, we're behind." Canfield said to the kid, "You must be discouraged," and the boy said to Canfield, "Why should we be discouraged, we haven't gotten to bat yet." We don't need to worry about the future even if we think we're not ready for it, because we get to bat even when we're down, way down. Because we will grow, even if we think we won't. Because we are not alone, even if we think we are. Because new occasions teach new talents, even if we think we'll never be prepared, we will be. The future comes in stages. Loose ends always tie together, eventually. We have to wait to see it sometimes, but they do. Every loose end is linked to the next thing.

John Sanders was talking with his wife one night, after he had come from visiting his father, who was elderly. "This is what has occurred to me," he said. "Children use their parents. They use them to get stuff. Our kids used us to meet their every waking need, and I'm sure I did that with my mom and dad when I was little. It's okay, it's what little kids are supposed to do. They need things, and they turn to their parents to provide them. When you're little, the essence of what we ask is for stuff. When we get older, like grammar school age, we ask our parents for help. You know, help with homework, help putting a bicycle together, help learning how to hit a baseball, or to make a cake. But when we're in high school, we stop asking for things. We stop asking for help, and we ask for space. We're torn between wanting our parents there, and not wanting them there. And so we ask for, no, we demand space. Then we get married and have kids of our own, and we decide our parents aren't as dumb as we thought they were, and we start asking for advice. We want to know what they know. And then we get where Dad and I were

tonight. I don't need things from him. I don't need help, and I don't need advice. At this point, it's like I just need him. I just need to be in the same place. With Mom gone and everything, I just need to watch and listen and soak up everything I can. I feel I'm finally wise enough to recognize that it's less about what I can get from Dad, and it is just getting him. He's not going to live forever. I need to soak up as much of him as I can."

It takes a long time to begin to see how things fit together. It takes a lifetime to know that the loose ends are tied to something, and all of it to the new covenant with God, and a continuity with tomorrow, and all of it we can trust. It's a lonely place, when the future's not known, but Jesus shared the cup of the new covenant with God and told us all loose ends are linked to the future, and the future you can trust. Love tomorrow, do not fear it.

I wonder who cleaned up the carpet after Jesus' last supper, who picked up the bones of the fish at the fish fry in the lonely place. I wonder if, whoever it was, if they thought the meal was just, you know, just about food. I wonder if they realized, when they were picking up the place, that the man who ordered the banquet, that the man who always gave people food, that he gave the best kind of food, meaning in every moment, hope for the unknown future. Live today, love tomorrow. He gave the food that nourishes the soul, and today we get to receive it. We get to receive it again.