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## *In Praise of Scraps*

**A Sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener**  
**Proper 12 - Year B**

For more than ten years now, my husband and I have had an ongoing and spirited debate about how to cut strawberries. Our squabble is not about whether to slice vertically, horizontally, or on the diagonal, to hull or not to hull, or what type of knife to use. Rather, it is about how closely we should cut to the fruit's stem. You see, one of our children has an extreme aversion to eating anything green; because of this, I like to give the stem a wide berth. I don't want a speck of anything that remotely resembles vegetation to spoil my child's enjoyment of one of the few healthy foods he truly loves. In my zealotry to get rid of the stem, however, I often chop off a good chunk of the berry's juicy red flesh. This drives Jack absolutely bonkers. *What?* he exclaims if he catches me before I've managed to hide the evidence of my crime. *Look at all that waste! I could have gotten a ton more out of that fruit. Do you even care?* To which, if it's early morning and I haven't yet had my first cup of coffee, I tend to respond a bit snarkily: *No. No, I don't care. The strawberries are sliced and they're in the kids' lunch boxes. As for the scraps, well, they're just that—scraps. I'm throwing them away.*

"Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost," Jesus tells his disciples in this morning's gospel lesson. *Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.* Jesus has just performed perhaps the most famous miracle of his ministry—he has taken five loaves of bread and two fish and somehow made them enough to satisfy the hunger of five thousand people. This is wondrous indeed, though no more wondrous than what happens next, which is that Jesus declares that what is important about this miracle is not just that the crowds have gotten enough to eat in that particular moment. What is important is not just the food that has been consumed by the people right then and there. No, the leftovers, the scraps, they have value, too—indeed, they are part of the miracle. Not only the choicest leftovers, mind you—the juiciest, most tender, parts of the fish and the softest, freshest pieces of bread—not only the choicest leftovers but also the pieces most folks might just toss in the trash: the crusts all the kids want cut off, those especially bony parts of the fish someone might choke on, the oily skin that tastes like old kitchen grease and turns your stomach when you swallow a bit by accident. Jesus draws no distinction among the fragments of food; he makes no comment on their quality. Instead, he simply instructs his disciples to gather them all up so that nothing—nothing—may be lost.

This is a remarkable story on so many different levels. It is remarkable because of what it suggests Jesus can do for our world even when we give him precious little to work with. Not only that, though. Not only that. This is a remarkable story because of what it suggests Jesus can do specifically with the broken, rejected, cast off parts of our lives, those pieces of ourselves and of our world we might be tempted to throw away.

It is a story for our time if ever there was one. We are a fragmented people in a fragmented society. Things all around us have gotten smashed to bits, especially over the past 18 months. So much that once was valued seems to have been marked for the dumpster. Families and friends have been torn apart by illness and death. Scapegoating and neglect of the poor and the marginalized have increased as resources are stretched thinner and thinner. Political and cultural divides, already wide, have been widened more still, leaving many of us wondering if perhaps it is no longer even worth the effort to try to understand the perspective of those who differ from us. The sheer terror of living through a pandemic in which a seemingly healthy young person might run a half-marathon one week and struggle to breathe the next has left a lot of us prey to a certain fatalism. Maybe, we begin to suppose subconsciously—maybe it doesn't really matter how we attend to the most vulnerable parts of ourselves or the most vulnerable people in our midst when even the strong can be felled so easily.

Fortunately, Jesus shows us another possibility. Jesus shows us another possibility. Not only in this morning's story of the feeding of the five thousand but again and again throughout the gospels, rather than pushing away that which appears fragile, tenuous, humiliating, superfluous, or used up, Jesus urges people to bring him the "scraps" of their lives, those leftover and left out parts of themselves and of their world that they and others have rejected. Rather than rooting them out and casting them off, Jesus yearns for people to bring these rough fragments to him so that he can transform them into something new and whole and life-giving. *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy loads, and I will refresh you. The child is not dead but sleeping. Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*

I recently read about a doctor who, as a young medical student caring for desperately ill patients not able to enjoy regular visits from family and friends, set out to try to find some inexpensive way to show them that they weren't entirely alone, that they were not completely cut off from human fellowship. She attended a wedding one day, where she suddenly got to wondering what on earth would happen to all those beautiful flowers on the tables at the reception. So she decided to ask. She started calling around to various wedding planners and florists to see what they did with the various bouquets once the wedding guests left and went home to bed. Quite often, the answer was, *We just throw them away. The bride may preserve her bouquet, some of the bridesmaids and close relatives may grab a stem or two as keepsakes, but most of the flowers just get dumped.* The doctor's mind began racing with excitement as she imagined an alternative. What if she went around to different wedding venues, collected the fragments of leftover floral arrangements and repurposed them to bring comfort and joy to her frightened and lonely patients? Thus it was that Dr. Eleanor Love's initiative The Simple Sunflower was born. This organization now has over two hundred volunteers and delivers almost a thousand bouquets a year to hospital patients in and around Richmond, VA.

What fragments of our lives might we offer to Jesus today, trusting that he will repurpose them and use them to do for us "things that are more than we can ask or imagine"? What parts of our city, our country, our world, might we begin to look at differently in light of Jesus' quest to make sure that nothing will be lost? I know—it can be difficult to fathom how all the pain and fear and anger and turmoil of the past 18 months might ever bear anything even remotely resembling fruit; how the countless broken relationships, missed opportunities, and truncated dreams might ever be redeemed. Once when I was going through a very painful and confusing period in my life and lamenting what I was sure had been a lot of lost time, a wise mentor said to me, "The thing is, Julia, when you find out what it is you're called to do, then nothing in your life—no experience, no matter how painful—will have been wasted." There is beauty in the fragments; there is strength and nourishment in them, too. If you and I offer the scraps of our lives to Jesus, over time, he will gather them up and transform them into something healing and redemptive. He will rescue us from that despair that has all but given up and given in. He will find within us that which we feared was gone forever. And not a one of us will be lost. Amen.