
Cherishing the Fragments

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We've been doing a lot of hunting and gathering at our house lately. With school resuming, there's been a scramble to unearth pens and pencils, binders, hoodies, uniforms, water bottles, key cards, and calculators. Invariably, a few things have gotten broken after several months at the bottom of a pile or after being used as a play toy by our dog. Others—such as a piece of moldy Gouda I found in someone's backpack the other day—have all but disintegrated. Then, of course, there are those forgotten treasures from years past that show up whenever we undertake this kind of excavation—pictures taken at a photo booth at the zoo when the kids were little; pieces of a broken pinch pot made at summer camp; progress reports and growth charts and medals from a neighborhood fun run. What to do with all the detritus from our lives?

"Gather up the fragments," Jesus once told his disciples. "Gather up the fragments so that nothing may be lost." Though he was talking about leftover loaves and fishes and not crumbled art projects or tattered tennis shoes, his words still give me pause. We live in a society that tends not to value things that are broken, things that are left over or left behind. We're not always enamored of broken people, either—people like the poor, the homeless, the migrant, the mentally fragile, the terminally ill, those who can't "contribute" or "carry their own weight."

For Jesus, though, all of life is precious. All of life is precious, even—perhaps especially—the parts that seem useless or past their prime. Jesus is not put off by brokenness. Like an artist who works in mosaics, he is at his best with fragmentation, bringing healing and hope to the shattered and the discarded: the woman who has been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years; the lepers who have been ripped from their communities and cast into the wilderness; the man left for dead by the side of the road; Lazarus, whose body has already begun to stink; bits and pieces of bread scattered in the grass after everyone has eaten their fill. Jesus takes all of these and works wonders with them—wonders beyond anyone's imagining.

I once 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 find some way to show them that they weren't alone. She attended a wedding one day, where she suddenly got to wondering what would happen to all those beautiful flowers at the reception once the party was over. So she decided to ask. She called various wedding planners and florists to see what they did with the bouquets once the wedding guests went home. Often, the answer was that the flowers just got dumped. The doctor's mind began racing 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 Richmond, VA.

I wonder what fragments of our lives we might offer to Jesus, trusting that he will repurpose them and use them to do for us "things that are more than we can ask or imagine"? How might our city, our country, and our world look different if we viewed no one as expendable, if we joined wholeheartedly in Jesus' quest to make sure that nothing will be lost. There is beauty in fragments; there is strength and nourishment in them, too. If you and I offer the scraps of our lives, the ruins of our lives, to Jesus, then over time he will gather them up and transform them into something healing and redemptive. He will rescue us from despair. He will find within us, and within our world, that which we feared was gone forever. And not a one of us will be lost.
