

## *Crumbs*

Time after Pentecost, Lectionary 18  
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August 3, 2008  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 55:1-5; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Valerie Tutson, a well-known storyteller, offers workshops on the subject of storytelling. One technique she uses is to have people listen to a Bible story, then sit back and imagine they were characters in the story. They are to choose a particular character, then reflect upon and describe what it is they are doing and how they feel. Tutson has used that technique with our Gospel story today—Matthew’s recounting of Jesus feeding over 5000 people with a few loaves and fish.

Usually Tutson finds people imagining themselves as Jesus or one of the twelve disciples or part of the hungry crowd. But in one congregation, after it seemed everyone had stated their role, an eight-year old girl, who had looked as if she’d only been drawing with crayons on paper, piped up: “I was the one who picked up the crumbs. I just kept picking them up, and there were so many, but Jesus told us to pick up the crumbs, so I just kept picking them up.”

Now our Gospel writer does speak of leftovers collected from that miraculous meal, amounting to 12 baskets full. But I suppose those leftovers were larger pieces of bread and fish, substantial pieces that could be saved and eaten later. I don’t suppose Matthew meant those 12 baskets contained crumbs. The little girl, however, was imagining very tiny pieces of bread and fish—pieces easily ignored, overlooked, trod upon, considered unimportant and useless.

Just the other evening at supper at our house, there was only a tiny bit of hamburger barbecue left in the stove pot. Not enough to place in a freezer container for a later meal. Not enough to fill a roll or spread on a slice of bread. I was tempted to throw it away. (My frugality and taste buds, however, won out, and I spooned it into my mouth—yum!)

But this young child imagined something that the rest of the group—all those grown-ups—**hadn’t** imagined. She imagined that Jesus wanted her to pick up the crumbs. That there would be so many, many crumbs. That picking up the crumbs was important. And that maybe the crumbs themselves could be used by Jesus.

My husband Randy has an aunt with whom we are very close. Aunt Kay has cancer of the esophagus. Aunt Kay is dying. She has lived to the farthest reaches of time that most people with esophageal cancer can live. It’s been 4 ½ years since her diagnosis, and the life expectancy of persons diagnosed with that particular cancer at that particular stage is about 5 years. We’ve witnessed Aunt Kay’s ups and downs: The debilitating side effects of chemotherapy. Her glorious remission after the chemotherapy shrunk the tumor. The return of the cancer, the tumor’s steady growth within her throat, and the failure of treatments to hold it at bay. Her

difficult but clear-headed decision not to unduly prolong her life with a feeding tube. The transition from her oncologist's care to hospice care.

The most painful thing to witness has been Aunt Kay's gradual inability to swallow and take in food and nourishment. Here is a woman who loved good food! She was generous with her time and money, and over the years took our family and extended family, her friends and neighbors, out to dinner. There was nothing she reveled in more than to treat the people she loved to a good meal. With Aunt Kay, Randy and I enjoyed meals at *Visaggio's*, the *Accomac Inn*, and *Alfred's Victorian*. (Of course, *Alfred's Victorian* is noted to be a most romantic restaurant for couples. Oh, it was highly romantic at that table—Randy and me . . . and Aunt Kay!) I remember our being with her for an especially delicious meal at the *Hershey Hotel* in its circular dining room—I also remember that I was very pregnant at the time with our first child, pretty much at my due date, and nearly as circular as that room.

But the cancer took away those delightful opportunities from Aunt Kay. By last Thanksgiving at our house, she sat with the 13 of us, only she was drinking a bottle of chocolate-flavored *Ensure*. Four bottles of *Ensure* a day—that's what she would try to swallow in order to take in enough calories, protein, and nourishment to sustain herself. She did request a small bowl of mashed potatoes, thinned well with gravy, and that seemed to slide down fairly well. Then, before she left, Aunt Kay had me pack up a brownie for her. Not all our family likes pumpkin pie, so I bake a pan of brownies as an additional dessert choice. I was skeptical about her trying to eat it. I asked Aunt Kay how she'd be able to swallow bites of the brownie. She replied that she would take it crumb by crumb, and let those crumbs melt in her mouth.

There are those crumbs again! I think of that little girl in the storytelling workshop, imagining Jesus' command that she pick up the crumbs. Can you and I imagine God calling **us** to pick up the crumbs? More to the point, do you and I believe that God can take those crumbs we've picked up and offer life through them? The crumbs are so small. You can hardly see them. How could they possibly do anything for anybody?

After all, Jesus' own disciples, the ones who listened to his teachings and followed him day after day—they were convinced that entire loaves of bread and whole fish had little value. They looked at the resources they possessed, and then at the hungry crowds waiting, and they thought surely their loaves and fish would never meet the tremendous need before them. In fact, the disciples even suggested the crowds disperse, and travel to nearby villages to find food.

Oh, but Jesus was insistent. His was no tentative, "Well, first we could try to share the little we have, and if it doesn't work out, then okay, we'll find a nice way to tell 'em to leave." No. Jesus was insistent: "They need not go away. You give them something to eat." That **something** was the small amount of food the disciples possessed that they were certain was not enough. But they obeyed Jesus. The disciples brought the bread and fish to him, and Jesus blessed the food, giving it back to the disciples to distribute. And it was then that the disciples discovered how well, how fully it fed the hungry.

There have been times over these 5 years when our family has felt helpless as Aunt Kay's cancer progressed. Some days we have considered our crumbs of little value, merely pitiable offerings

of aid. But I no longer believe that is how they were received. In studying Matthew's story about Jesus feeding the 5000, I now believe that when Aunt Kay received our help, it fed her well, it fed her fully, and continues to do so, even in her last days.

Mere crumbs, but we picked them up. We picked them up, and, while perhaps only unconsciously known to us, we gave them to God to bless. Over these five years, my mother-in-law, Aunt Kay's sister, has taken Aunt Kay to her doctor's appointments, been beside her when the diagnosis was made and prognosis truthfully stated, handled her finances, helped her with funeral arrangements, and offered both warm broth and frosty milkshakes that might just somehow trickle down the slowly-closing throat. Her nephew and nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces, have showered her with affection. My husband's weekly phone calls have engaged Aunt Kay in conversation about favorite vacations, childhood memories, and the highly-interesting current political scene of which Aunt Kay has her definite opinions, and is more than ready to discuss them. Her hospice volunteers have been kind and comforting. Her pastors and her closest friends visit her often.

Randy and I just visited her this past Monday evening, and together Aunt Kay and I talked about letting go, making goodbyes, accepting the end of our earthly life. She asked if I would sing *The Lord's Prayer* at her funeral. She said, "I don't want the prayer spoken. I want it sung, because then every single word seems to mean so much more." Word by word, note by note, crumb by crumb—all for feeding the grieving. Then she called me on Tuesday. It's harder to understand her now since the tumor also presses on her vocal cords. But she wanted to let me know me that John 3:16 was her favorite verse of the Bible—this one little verse, a tiny crumb that conveys the truth about God: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Aunt Kay has eagerly received that crumb.

Let us never think our crumbs are useless in this world. Pick those crumbs up and then let them be blessed and used by God: The money you give. The help you bring. The welcome you offer. The courage you show. The forgiveness you grant. The love you bestow. May the crumbs we give in Jesus' name melt in the mouth and taste sweet on the tongue and feed the hungry with life. **AMEN.**

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