

“Fragmented but Blessed”

John 6:1-15

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“Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.”

- John 6:15

Prayer of Preparation

O God, feed us your Word that we may receive the Bread of Life and so trust in your love to bless and encourage us. Amen.

Sermon Message

Gut feelings. I would imagine we all have them. Gut instincts. Gut responses. Gut issues. When a story is gut-wrenching, we find it to be extremely unpleasant or upsetting, don't we? When a person spills his guts, he is speaking truthfully and sharing everything. In fact, if you were to say, “She has a lot of guts,” you would be describing a person with a lot of courage, conviction, and resolve. We know this is important, deep down in our guts.¹

We sometimes call our gut feelings instincts. Instincts are a form of knowledge that we have when we find ourselves in difficult situations, or when we sense something good about to happen. We are relying on something else other than our minds, or facts, or theories. Our instincts can serve us well, though, they are not always airtight.

Over the years, as a pastor I have had to rely on gut instincts. Overall, I would say that these instincts have served me well. They have pointed me in a good direction. They have also given me clues to proceed with caution, when necessary, even when things appeared to be clear.

On the other hand, when I fail to listen to my gut, I typically regret it later. Not always, but there are those moments when I say to myself, “Why didn't I listen

¹ See *Homiletics Online* “We Are Food” (August 1, 2021) at www.homileticsonline.org.

to that nudge, to that intuition?” And then there are those moments when I simply must trust God, or as the apostle Paul says, “Walk by faith, and not by sight.” I must throw myself upon God’s mercy and let God be God.

There is, of course, nothing that can replace the facts, but there are times when our gut is telling us to pay attention – a kind of gut-check.

Gut Feelings Now

If I were to tell you my gut feelings now, I would say that my gut tells me that the road ahead for the foreseeable future in this country is going to be unstable, if not fragmented, on just about every level.

But not just my gut, but simply by observing how people are treating each other. I don’t think I am too far off base to say that as Americans we no longer share a common moral framework anymore, but a framework that is fragmented; the norms which have played such an important role in keeping us together seem to be eroding – civility, respect, honesty. In fact, if I could quote the famous poem by William Butler Yeats in “The Second Coming,” it is as if “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”

Indeed, in his recent book on these matters, entitled *Not in It to Win It*, Andy Stanley, the pastor of North Pointe Church in Atlanta, writes how there is no longer a center or a middle in the United States, religiously or politically, but two competing sides that attack each other with contempt in a culture war via social media, cable news, radio, and podcasts, all the while funneling millions of dollars to lobby and keep the fight going, all in order to win. It creates an endless cycle of action and reaction, to the point where we are being pulled apart.² And it’s exhausting, says Stanley.

In fact, someone asked me the other day what it is like being a pastor today, and I tried to tell him that it is like this boy standing between two boats coming apart.

But there is something else which I find more worrisome, and this is where my gut kicks in, and it is that we now have a situation where only about two out of ten people trust their government now, be it the different branches of government, or be it religious or educational or health care institutions, or institutions in general.

² Andy Stanley, *Not In It to Win It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective 2022).

Trust is missing. (In fact, religion ranks near the bottom, which does not surprise me.)³

Yet trust is the glue that holds us together. Without trust, we fall, as families, as communities, as schools, as churches. Without trust, there is a loss of legitimacy. Without trust, we tend to dismiss those who might not agree with us.

It is why as another friend of mine has stated that, instead of extremes on the ends fighting all the time, we need an extreme center or a way of serving as a bridge across deep differences, even within Christianity. The Methodist tradition has typically provided this. It has done so because we as Methodists have traditionally placed love as highest virtue which characterizes the Christian life, in keeping with Christ's commands (Jn. 15:13, Mk. 12:28-31) and Paul's admonition that of faith, hope, and love, love is the greatest (1 Cor. 13:10).⁴

Especially in light of all the action in Supreme Court ruling overturning Roe, I invite you to be in prayer for our country as the debate over this issue and others threaten to undo the fragile fabric of trust that holds us together. Yes, I invite all of us to be mindful of how we are to speak the truth in love, as Paul says in Ephesians (4:15) and ask the Holy Spirit to help us hear one another as we shared on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11); and that even here, we do what we can to heal the wounds of those who find themselves in difficult situations, or shamed by overheated rhetoric, or deceived by self-righteous posturing.⁵

Instead, as Christians, we need to model what Jesus did in the wilderness when he was tempted, which was not about flaunting the love of power but demonstrating the power of love (Mt. 4:1-11).⁶

When commentators talk about our nation becoming three nations, one blue and one red and one tired; one rich and the other poor, and so on – we need to understand that Christ calls us to be healers of God's grace, as well as ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:20).⁷

³ See Derek Thompson, "Why 80 Percent of Americans Don't Trust the Government" (April 1, 2002) in *The Atlantic*.

⁴ Scott J. Jones, *The Extreme Center* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002) www.theatlantic.com.

⁵ See Andy Kinsey's sermon "Prodigal Spirit" from June 5, 2022 at www.franklingrace.org.

⁶ Tom Smail, Andrew Walker, and Nigel Wright, *The Love of Power or The Power of Love: A Careful Assessment of the Problems with the Charismatic and Word-of-Faith Movements* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1994).

⁷ See David French, The French Dispatch, "This July Fourth Meet Three Americas" (July 1, 2022) at www.frenchpress.thedispatch.com.

So I invite you to pray in the gaps of the broken middle and do all you can to lower the walls and build bridges.

Christ the Center

For what we read in our passage today is how Jesus lowers the walls and builds bridges among people, and takes what might appear as insignificant fragments or pieces of food to feed thousands, to create community, to bring people together.

It is a story where the disciples don't see how they are going to deal with the problems of a huge crowd who have different expectations of Jesus and who are hungry on the one hand, and where Jesus doesn't see a problem but an opportunity to display God's glory on the other.

Jesus stands in the center of it all and he knows in his gut that this is a God-moment, even as he knows in his gut that some folks who have gathered have other ideas in their minds as to who he is (Jn. 6:11).

After all, the people who have approached Jesus are there because they have witnessed him healing someone; they are coming with a sense of expectation that he could help them. But Jesus has other things in mind, as Jesus usually does. He is about to reveal God's abundant love for them.

And so, as someone with organizing skills, Jesus tells the crowd to sit down, most likely in small groups, which is itself a miracle! (Think about organizing over 5,000 people!)

He then takes what Andrew and Philip give him from a small boy on the scene, five small barley loaves and two small fish, and does what any rabbis would do on the Passover: He takes the bread and blesses it and then he gives it to the people. Even the leftovers are used, the fragments and pieces, nothing is wasted. Twelve baskets full of pieces of bread! A sign of God's abundance.

But notice how Jesus' instincts kick into action when the people, having been fed, try to make him king by force (Jn. 6:15). After being at the center of the crowd and all the action, Jesus withdraws from the crowd (Jn. 6:15).

It is an interesting move: Jesus instinctively knows that the people there are no longer keeping him as the true center but instead are trying to use him and make

him into someone he is not – no longer seeing him as the bread of life, whom God gives to the world, but as a king who will give them what they want.

The trust is gone. The miracle over. The crowd becomes a kind of mob. And all but the fragments of the bread remain.

Now, mind you, the pieces Jesus broke and gathered remain blessed. They are, after all, signs of God's abundant love, but they are also signs of how Christ's own body itself has been broken and blessed for us, acting as a bridge over troubled waters, as a center whose life is everlasting life (Jn. 3:16), and as a gut-check to what truth is really is – or better, to who truth really is.

To Jesus, our true Lord and God... Amen...