

First Congregational Church in Old Lyme

Sermon: “Gathering the Fragments”

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In our gospel reading for today, the disciples are troubled and stuck, convinced there’s not enough to feed the crowd of 5,000 coming towards Jesus. Philip and Andrew make anxious calculations. They seem to be paralyzed with worry, until Jesus takes the 5 loaves, gives thanks, and breaks the bread. I imagine this is the moment the disciples get unstuck. I imagine they help him distribute the food among the 5,000 people seated on the grass. When they all had enough to eat, Jesus invites the disciples into the next step of his work. When they gather what was left, they get to participate in the miracle. With fragments of leftover bread, they fill twelve baskets.

This is a miracle, but it’s not just signs and wonders to show what Jesus can do. It’s a story about sharing food, about doing our part of God’s work in the world, pitching in to gather fragments, filling baskets. I imagine myself in the shoes of the disciples in this gospel story: I would’ve wanted to hide from the hungry crowd I thought I didn’t have enough to feed. But if I’d let anxiety and compassion fatigue get the better of me, I would’ve missed the miracle: not just the multiplying loaves, but the abundance that can happen when we share what we have. The mutual care of feeding and being fed. The presence of God when we break bread together—

not only at the communion table, but at the soup kitchen, the food pantry, the community garden.

I realize I’m preaching to the choir here. I know folks in this congregation are tremendously generous—with your time, your energy, and your resources. You support affordable housing here in Old Lyme and education in Haiti. You provide sanctuary and connect immigrants with vital legal aid. I especially want to thank you for your many years of partnership with IRIS. The Old Lyme Refugee Resettlement committee is doing tremendous work with refugee families from Syria, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

As I celebrate your generosity, I confess that I’m quite susceptible to the anxiety of not having enough to give. Like the disciples in today’s gospel reading, I often find myself paralyzed in the face of overwhelming need. So often I let a mindset of scarcity, of not-enough energy or money or time, keep me from participating in the abundant life God gives us. And yet, it’s when I feel exhausted and depleted that God replenishes my energy through other people. And I remember again how generative it is when we share—resources and needs, joys and sorrows, what we have and what we lack, what delights us and what grieves us. Life abundifies—yes, I made up that word—when we gather the fragments together and have more than we imagined we could.

Refugees are my greatest teachers in abundifying this life we’ve been given.

Refugees are experts at gathering fragments. They've had to flee their home countries, to leave their houses and loved ones, their jobs and schools and belongings. But their homes are not entirely lost. They carry their memories and cultures, their languages and songs. They gather the fragments. They foster belonging out of loss.

Lamb and okra and *kisra*, a crepes-thin bread that layers as if you could peel and stack a full moon on a platter. Kids whispering into my dog's floppy ears and slipping him popsicles. Spontaneous, contagious dance parties with toddlers and grandmothers and all ages in between. Chasing fireworks, from New Haven to the Guilford green.

This is the July tradition I get to live, thanks to my Sudanese-American friend [Azhar](#). She's always inviting me to celebrate with her and her family and community. Last summer, she had a 4th-of-July gathering in her backyard. Her husband Fouad was the grillmaster: halal hotdogs and hamburgers, drumsticks and corn in the husks. His friend Anwar brought the lamb. Azhar made her signature eggplant-with-peanuts dish. Her friend Ahlam brought the *kisra*. It wasn't just a potluck. The food was made by people who work 12-hour days so they can support their families back in Sudan. They gather the fragments of what they have left and share a feast together.

When I arrived with watermelon and my terrier rescue Nelson, he was a hit with the kids. But the sounds of the first fireworks startled him. He tried to dart away, but he was on a leash. He clung close to me, shaking and whimpering. A girl named Aya took him under her wing: She put her arm around Nelson and placed her hand on his trembling barrel chest and started to sing.

I couldn't make out the words, and I asked, "What are you singing to him?"

"O, just a song I'm making up," she said. "It goes 'Nelson, don't be afraid of the fireworks.'"

Azhar laughed. "She understands how scared he is," she said. "When we first heard fireworks, we thought they were bombs."

The house where Azhar grew up, the garden she planted with her dad, the room where she took care of him near the end of his life, is now destroyed by war. Hundreds of Sudanese-Americans like Azhar came to Connecticut as refugees of genocidal violence. Now, they're doing everything they can to help their families back in Sudan survive a new war. Famine and genocide are happening again in Darfur. It's a humanitarian emergency the world has largely ignored.

I cannot fathom what it's like to witness war destroying your home. But when we gather in Azhar's yard, I feel like I'm getting to visit Sudan as it could be: We chat and we laugh; we remember those who have passed; we grieve and we celebrate together.

As I was leaving that night, I overheard a kid named Ambuka ask his mom, "Can we do a lemonade stand for Sudan?"

Ambuka's question makes me think of the boy in today's gospel reading. Perhaps it was his idea to try and share his 5 loaves and two fish with the crowd of 5,000. Sometimes it takes the unabashed imagination of a child to jolt us out of the not-enough mindset into the kind of abundant life God keeps inviting us into. When we share what we have and gather the fragments of what's left, we have more than we imagined is possible.

To learn more about how you can support and advocate for the people of Sudan, see eyesonsudan.net

To make support a feeding center and clinic for refugees on the border between Sudan & Chad, you can make a donation to Sudan Sunrise (at sudansunrise.org) and designate Darfurian Refugee Relief in Chad

To read more about Sudanese communities in CT, see ["The Way We Gather"](#) (by Ashley Makar)