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“THOSE GOD USES”

John 6: 1-14

It's good to have Pastor Giuseppe back with us this morning after all his traveling in *bella Italia*. I may have to speak more slowly so that he can get used to hearing English again! Actually, Pastor told me to keep it short. Spoiler alert!: his idea of “short” and mine may be different!

A couple of weeks ago I attended the 50th reunion of my high school graduating class in Northern Minnesota. I couldn't believe how *old* all those people had gotten! I mean, “Really! What happened to them anyway?” I read about one guy whose 60th *kindergarten* reunion was coming up soon. He was worried about the 170 pounds he'd gained in the meantime!

Have you ever gotten up and looked in the mirror in the morning and thought, “That *can't be* accurate!” It's hard to deal with the disconnect between fantasy and reality, isn't it? As one person put it, “In my mind I am still 29, but my back is 54; my knees are 63, and my right hip turns 76 next week!”

On the 4th of July Sunday I was walking alongside of my class float in a parade, passing out beads to the kids along the parade route (I had to get rid of some of those bobbles I amassed from years at Gasparilla parades!) More than once I found myself running to catch up to the float. That's how I feel about life some days. I have to run to keep up with the inexorable, unrelenting passage of time! I'm still stuck somewhere in the past, lollygagging along the path while the years march on. What are we to do? Are we really passé at this stage of life? Are our best years behind us? Do we have any reason to be around any longer? As an elderly woman asked me on a pastoral visit one time, “Why am I still here?” It's a great question! Are you one of those people who scan the daily obituaries religiously, poring over the death notices to see if anybody younger than you died? Are you just “hanging on for dear life?”

What if God still wants to use you? Some people seem to view church life as a jail sentence. They talk about “putting in their time.” I got to thinking about that idea. If working in the church is “putting in time,” then that means that some of us are out on parole now, right? Well, we still have to report to our parole officer, namely God. For that matter, if being retired means you don't have to serve the Lord anymore, what am *I* doing standing in this pulpit today?

Did you know that Grandma Moses didn't start painting until she was 78 years old? How many of you watched the 80-year-old English dancer Paddy Jones get the golden buzzer on *Britain's Got Talent* for slipping and sliding around doing a salsa? And what about 80-year-old Moses whom God dragged out of retirement to lead a million slaves out of bondage? For that matter what about our own June Heinecke? She celebrated her 90th birthday recently. I'll be lucky to croak out a intelligible sentence at that age, let alone sing like an angel!

Maybe you're saying to yourself, "Okay, okay. I get it. But I'm not sure I'm good enough for God to use."

Age is one thing that keeps people from serving God; but the more common deterrent is a sense of unworthiness, of not being godly enough.

Currently there is a debate raging among Roman Catholic bishops in our country about who is worthy to receive the eucharist. They are debating who is righteous enough to take holy communion. Former Catholic priest Stephen Stahley wrote an editorial in last Sunday's *Tampa Bay Times* that hit the nail on the head. When pondering the question of who was worthy to receive the gift of Christ's redeeming presence, his answer was terse: No one, not even the bishops themselves are worthy! Stahley wrote, "The Eucharist is nourishment, sustenance, medicine and spiritual fuel for the demands of human life. It is not a feast for the elite. It is not a prize for the perfect."

Do you feel unworthy to be used by God? Who *is* worthy? When Isaiah encountered God in the temple, he fell on his face and cried out in terror, "**Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!**" And in John's Revelation, when the scroll that holds the outworking of God's plan for history is held out with the question, "**Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?**", John begins to weep because no person is found worthy to open the scroll and bring God's purposes to fulfillment—no one except Jesus.

That's where we all find ourselves, isn't it?—falling on our faces before the Holy One, confessing our sinfulness and feeling unworthy of being part God's plan for the world. And yet, our merciful God uses us. In spite of what we know about ourselves or what we think about what we have to be, God chooses to use us. You see, dear loved ones, God can use anybody.

This morning's gospel lesson, the story of the feeding of the five thousand, is the only miracle recorded in all four of the gospels. The record of John is unique, though, in that it mentions an anonymous boy about whom many children's books have been written. It is on this unknown lad that I want to focus.

Jesus had been to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and returned to what is known today as the Mount of Beatitudes—that sloping hillside on the northwest shore of the lake. We know from the other gospels that Jesus had spent the day

teaching the *people of the land*—those who were despised by the Pharisees for their lack of religious conformity and who had little else to do but come to hear the new rabbi who was gaining a lot of attention. The people who gathered that day were basically the idle, namely, the unemployed poor, the retired, and the infirm. So it was that when he was done teaching for the day, Jesus didn't want to send them on their way without something to eat. That's why the Lord says to Philip, **“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”**

Hearing Jesus' suggestion that the disciples should feed the thousands of people makes Philip go ballistic. All he sees is the impossibility of the request. It's too much, too expensive; and even if it weren't, there's no place to get the bread. “It's just not going to work, Jesus!”

About that time Andrew pipes up. He must have been scouting out the crowd and noticed a boy's lunch. The boy's lunch becomes the sum total of all the known food for the group of 5,000 men (not counting women and children). The boy's lunch of five puny barley rolls and two sardine-size fish is all that can be found.

You know how the story ends. Out of that measly lunch Jesus feeds everybody there and has enough bread left over to fill twelve baskets.

One of the key points of the story is this: Jesus can work miracles to be sure, but Jesus needs something to start with. In this case, Jesus uses what the boy has to offer. What does this mean for us? Simply this: God can use anybody. It doesn't matter who we are.

In our culture today we fawn over our kids—make a fuss over them and sometimes give them everything they want. I love to spoil my grandchildren rotten; but in Jesus' day things were the opposite. Nobody cared much about kids. They didn't bring any money home; they couldn't vote; they didn't have any wisdom to share. Children were pretty much non-entities, more of a liability than a blessing. As a matter of fact, a father could sell his children into slavery to get himself out of debt. They were more like possessions than persons.

Yet it is one of these social nobodies that Jesus uses to provide for the multitude. It was not some rich benefactor, not some acclaimed leader of the synagogue, not some esteemed Jewish ruler, but some no-account little boy whose name nobody knew who becomes the hero to save the day. God uses the unlikeliest of people.

I once read that laser scans of Abraham Lincoln's face masks (made from plaster casts of his face) revealed an unusual asymmetry. The left side of Lincoln's face was much smaller than the right, which would have made him very unattractive. The President's lopsided appearance was even mocked by the people of his time. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne called his face a “sallow, queer, sagacious visage.” Not only that, but Lincoln was known to have suffered from

heart problems, smallpox, and depression as well. Yes, Abraham Lincoln was an unattractive, sickly man, who lost more elections than he won...and yet, if it had not been for him, we may well have no United States today. Lincoln fought the bloodiest war in our history to keep the country united. He was the man of the hour in spite of what he was.

Many times in the Bible we read about God choosing a man or woman of the hour. But mostly the people God chooses are obscure and unworthy. That was the case for David in our Old Testament lesson. David was a nobody, the youngest son of a little clan from the littlest tribe. He had nothing going for him.

The Scriptures are littered with the names of nobodies that God uses—people who have rap sheets a mile long. Listen to some of the great “saints” of the Bible and who they were: Noah was a drunk; Abraham was an old geezer; Isaac was a daydreamer; Jacob was a liar; Leah was hard on the eyes; Moses had a speech problem; Rahab was a prostitute; Samson was a womanizer; Jeremiah was too young; David was a murderer and adulterer; Elijah was suicidal; Isaiah was a streaker; Jonah ran away from God; Peter denied Jesus; the Samaritan woman was divorced multiple times; Zacchaeus was a cheat; Paul was a legalist; Timothy had an ulcer; and Lazarus was dead!

Those are just a few of the great saints of the Bible—and most of them couldn’t get a decent job in the church today! I know pastors who are thrown out of congregations for a lot less than lying or cheating, prostitution or adultery, or murder! And yet, God took these broken people, these rejects of society, and used them to keep a faith alive, a faith of which you and I are heirs! Who would have imagined it?

If nothing else, this seeming preference of the Holy God to use the least and most broken of people ought to teach us something about accepting others. How could we ever dare reject anybody? How could we ever be sexist or racist or xenophobic or prejudiced toward anyone regardless of who they are or what they have done? How could we ever refuse to love *anybody* when those very same people might turn out to be the next Peter or Paul or Mary Magdalene?

In his book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning writes, “Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual, but for the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together, and who are not too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace... Something is radically wrong when the local church rejects a person who is accepted by Jesus... Any church that will not accept that it consists of sinful men and women, and exists for them, implicitly rejects the gospel of grace.”

These “wobbly and weak-kneed” people, as Manning calls them, are exactly the kind of people God uses to bring others close to His love and into Christ’s Church. It is through the least of these that Jesus does miracles, and that little boy

on that Galilean hillside two thousand years ago proves the point. God can use anybody.

God can use anybody. It doesn't matter what others think of us.

We live in a community where gossip travels fast on social media. And the kind of hearsay that travels fastest is usually of the negative variety! There's a lot of fake news out there! Before the Internet became common, I used to tell my parishioners in our small village that I needed to go downtown periodically to find out what I had been doing! Rumblings—that's what some call it. Rumblings are what others think of you, which may or may not be based on the truth.

In the end our public reputation or lack of one doesn't mean much in God's eyes. God doesn't check how many FaceBook "likes" you've gotten before God chooses to use you. God doesn't go to the clubhouse to hear what people are saying about someone before God picks a messenger. In God's eyes it doesn't matter what people think.

The late President Gerald Ford was a lousy golfer who loved to golf. Maybe some of you can relate to that! One of his favorite golfing partners was the comedian Bob Hope. Listen to what Hope said of the famous duffer: "Jerry Ford is the man who made golf a contact sport. He's the most dangerous driver since Ben Hur. Ford is easy to spot on the course. He drives the cart with the red cross painted on top. Whenever I play with him, I usually try to make it a foursome—the President, myself, a paramedic and a faith healer."

What would God say about all of this? Nothing! Who cares what other people think? God doesn't!

In our Gospel lesson Andrew volunteers the information that there is a boy in the crowd with a measly lunch of five rolls and two sardines. Then Andrew expresses what everybody is thinking: "**But what are they among so many people?**" It seems like so little. Yes, there is this boy here, but what he brings to the table isn't enough to make a difference.

Jesus takes the boy's lunch and feeds a multitude with it. He takes what nobody thought was enough and makes it *more* than enough. God used that boy to remind the disciples and us that it's not about what other people think. God uses anybody God wants.

I was surprised in my ministry to discover that God used mostly the unnoticed people of a congregation to bring the biggest blessings. Those who drew little attention to themselves seem to bring the greatest blessings. I don't know why it was, I only know that it was so. Take someone like Dorothy Trompeter, who responded to a vision to help spread the mission and ministry of Nativity Lutheran by leaving a generous legacy to establish an endowment fund, financing countless groups and individuals to bless the world.

How many of you even knew Dorothy? Other than admiring her for her bequest, I haven't heard a single thing about her in the seven years I've been a member of this congregation—and I chair the Mission Endowment Committee! You see, it doesn't matter. God doesn't care how popular people are or what people say or fail to say.

Everywhere Jesus went, there was somebody who had something bad to say about those he associated with. When Jesus let the sinful woman anoint his feet at a dinner party in Simon the Pharisee's home, people muttered, **"If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."** Jesus praised her for her love. And when the Lord invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house, **all who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."** Yet Zacchaeus turned out to be one of the most generous men Jesus ever met.

God knows firsthand how people talk about people. They did the same thing to Jesus. Jesus was accused of being in league with the devil, accused of blasphemy for forgiving sins, accused of associating with cheats and the sexually immoral, accused of being a drunkard and a party animal. His own disciples freaked out when they found Jesus talking to an unsavory Samaritan woman, and Jesus' own hometown relatives threw him out and tried to kill him because they thought he was too prideful and maybe even crazy. But God didn't care what people thought.

What do people say about you? How long is your rap sheet? What mistakes of the past plague you and make you think that nobody would benefit from your ministry? For that matter, what are you doing right now that makes you feel inadequate, inferior, unworthy, even unholy? What do you know about yourself that would make others talk about you if they knew? God sees things differently. As God told Samuel when He told the prophet not to anoint Jesse's oldest son, Eliab: **"Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."**

People can talk all they want about you, but God doesn't care. God looks at your heart. God doesn't care what others think. God can use anybody.

It doesn't matter who we are. It doesn't matter what others think of us. One thing does matter, though: your response! God can use anybody. God uses us if we offer ourselves to God.

The difference between someone God uses and someone God doesn't use is not a matter of education or privilege, community standing or electability. It's not a matter of how much one knows about the Bible or how many years she has been a member. It's not a matter of how much money someone has or how much he wants

the job. It's a matter of being *willing* to let God use us. Here's the bottom line: That boy's lunch would have remained only that boy's lunch if he had not been willing to surrender it to Jesus. What do you have to surrender to the Lord?

No doubt some of you sitting out there have thought about what God might do through you from time to time. Sometime in the past you had a vision, a dream about doing something great for God. You looked around and saw a need and thought, "Maybe I could do something about that. Maybe I could make a difference for God."

Just this week I was reading the latest newsletter of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service about a man and his wife who were watching TV about the horrors perpetrated by Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin, in 1972. Maybe you remember that terrible time. Hearing about the genocide taking place, Rosemary Krenz turned to her husband, Bill and asked, "What's the church going to do about this?" The question inspired Bill to call the Lutheran Refugee Service, only to end up being assigned 25 families to place with local congregations. In the end, they found 450 homes willing to help! I wonder what our own church could do to help the 50,000 children at our southern border, 85% of whom have family in this country, but who need a safe, in-between place to wait to be reunited? Doesn't our Lord say, "Let the children come to me?" God uses the willing.

Often when we get all excited about doing something about this world's troubles, there is another voice that intrudes on our dream and squelches it—the voice that comes up with a hundred reasons why it would never happen, why it couldn't possibly happen, why God wouldn't use you.

Someone has aptly said, "God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called." I believe that God puts all kinds of visions in our heads—things He wants us to be excited about. But we have to step out and say, "Here I am." We have to say, "I am willing. Use me for what you want." We need to say, "Take what I have and make it meaningful in this world."

Are you willing to step out for God? Are you willing to volunteer for Jesus' radical cause?

The little boy in the Gospel lesson let Jesus use his lunch, and Jesus turned that lunch into a feast for thousands. What are you willing to offer?

I have friends who say forcefully, "Black Lives Matter!" ...and they do. And I have friends who counter just as strongly, "All Lives Matter!" ...and they do. Here's how I see it: It's an issue about who is hurting at the moment. My dentist tells me that I need eight crowns. (It's the result of bad genes and my love of candy.) I keep putting off the work, but next month I'm going in to have one done. Which one? The one that hurts! That's the one that needs the immediate attention. You see, in this troubled world, we could have all kinds of slogans. In the north it might be "Brown lives matter!" In Russia it might be "Gay lives matter!" In Israel

it might be “Palestinian lives matter!” In some places it might be “Old lives matter!” or “Jewish lives matter!” or “Police lives matter!” It’s not that any one group is better than another; it’s a matter of who is hurting at the moment.

But I have a different question today: Does *your* life matter? In this hurting world, does your life matter for anything? If it does, can you prove it? If it did maybe we wouldn’t have anybody chanting about whose life matters...Offer yourself to God and see what God can do with your life!

You don’t have to rescue thousands. You don’t have to save the world. There are smaller things within your reach. Bonnie needs help in our food pantry. Can you volunteer one morning a month to help feed the hungry? Our church needs ushers and greeters, Scripture readers and assisting ministers. Can you help a Sunday once in a while to make our worship service better? Our Council needs a couple of members. Can you step in until the next election to help support our leaders? Our church needs a few people to visit our new neighbors. Can you give a few hours to reach out with Jesus’ love? Our Mission Endowment Fund can always use donations to help people like Ruth Ann Hoy to finish seminary. And there is Hospice and People Helping People and the Rez House and all manner of places to bless the hurting in this world. What about it?

Beloved, I’m calling you to make a decision.

An elderly English gent told about riding his bicycle to the liquor store one day to buy a bottle of Scotch. When he came out of the shop, he put the bottle in his bicycle basket and then thought to himself, “If I fall off the bicycle, the bottle would break.” So he decided to drink the whole bottle before he cycled home. “It turned out to be a very good decision,” said the man, “because I fell off my bicycle seven times on the way home!”

It was a very good decision. I hope your decision today is a very good one, too. Will you let God use you?

God can use anybody. It doesn’t matter who you are or what others say about you. It only matters that you are willing to offer yourself to God. Will you be God’s servant?

Let us pray: Lord, You call us to care for the poor and hurting of this world, even in our own church and town and community. How often, dear God, we feel nudged by your Spirit to do something beautiful for You; yet we come up with a hundred excuses why we can’t or why You don’t really want to use us. Forgive us for our good intentions that fall flat. Pardon us for failing to see that all our life’s experiences, all our knowledge, all our wealth and talent have not been given to us just for our own sakes, but to bless our world. Keep us from just hanging on to life and help is to start spending the life You so generously gave us. We ask in the name of Jesus, our Savior.

Amen.

