

A RECIPE FOR LIVING A MORE PEACEFUL LIFE
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Text: John 6:1-21

Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

We all know the story of the feeding of the five-thousand. But did you know it's the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels? That says something, I think, about how important it was in the life of the early church, way back in the first century. But even so, that doesn't mean the story is the same in all four gospels. In fact, there are a number of differences between them.

So probably what happened was, there were different versions of the story floating

around in the ancient world, and each gospel writer had access to a different version as they were constructing their own narratives. And what we end up with are four stories that follow the same basic outline but differ on some of the details. And of the four, John's story stands out as the one that's the most different—the one with the greatest number of unique elements, elements that don't appear anywhere else.

That's what I want to talk about this morning. I want to look at the three main

things that separate John's feeding of the five-thousand from all the rest. And then I want talk about how each one adds something to the basic idea of the story that God provides for us even when times are tough and things seem hopeless.

The first element is the little back-and-forth between Jesus and Philip as they're sitting there on top of the mountain, and they see this huge crowd approaching from down below. Jesus turns to Philip and says, "Where are we going to get bread for all these people to eat?" And Philip replies, "What are you talking about? Even if we had half a years' worth of income, we still wouldn't have nearly enough money to buy that much bread."

It's a perfectly reasonable response, one that probably most people would give. Unfortunately it's not the answer Jesus is looking for. According to John—and only according to John; you don't hear this in any of the other gospels—Jesus is testing Philip. He asks him where they're going to get bread because he wants to see if Philip can look beyond what's possible for human beings and grasp what's possible for God. And Philip fails because he can't make that imaginative leap. He can't open his mind and see things the way Jesus does.

So that's the first element that's unique to John—Jesus testing Philip. The second element is the distribution of the food. In all the other gospels, Jesus gives that job to the disciples. He tells them to go around with the baskets. But in John, Jesus hands out the bread and the fish himself, which may seem like a small difference, but it makes an important point. It emphasizes that Jesus is the gracious provider of this meal. It all comes freely from his hand.

So that's the second element that's unique to John—the distribution of the food. The third element is the command Jesus gives the disciples after everyone has finished eating. He tells them to "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost," which might ring a bell somewhere

in the back of your mind because it's very close to what Moses told the Israelites to do with the leftover manna God sustained them with in the wilderness. "Let no one leave any of it over until morning," Moses said, the point being that they shouldn't try to ration the manna; they should go ahead and eat as much as they want today, knowing that God will provide more tomorrow. So by echoing Moses' command and having the disciples gather up all the fragments, Jesus is teaching them that just like the Israelites relied on God for their daily bread, they can rely on him.

So that's the third element that's unique to John—Jesus' instruction for cleaning up after the meal. And when you put that element alongside the other two, you can start piecing together what John is saying through this story.

The first thing he's saying is that the way we look at things is not the way Jesus looks at things. We look at the world and see what's not possible for us. Jesus looks at the world and sees what is possible for God. So we see scarcity where Jesus sees abundance. We see hunger where Jesus sees a banquet. We see disaster where Jesus sees opportunity.

The second thing he's saying is that it's God, and only God, who provides for us when the chips are down and the situation looks hopeless. It's God, and only God, who finds a way when there is no way as far as we can tell. It's God, and only God, who turns a moment of crisis and hand-wringing into a celebration.

And the third thing he's saying is that we shouldn't let our worries about tomorrow keep us from being faithful today. God gives us the resources we need, not so we can gather them up and save them for a rainy day, but so we can use them and in the process learn to put our trust in God and live one day at a time.

Now put all that together and what you have is a recipe for living a more peaceful life—a life where we don't have to stress about how we're going to pay our

bills, how we're going to keep a roof over our heads, what we're going to do if something bad happens because we know we're not in this alone—because we know God is here with us, and God will take care of our needs.

That's a fundamentally different outlook than most people have. And I'll be the first to admit that I struggle with it myself, especially as I get older, and retirement doesn't seem as far away as it used to. I often lie awake at night wondering what's going to happen to me when I can't work anymore? Is my pension going to be enough? Is my savings going to last? I have a hard time letting go of the idea that everything is in my hands, everything is on my shoulders, everything depends on my efforts.

But that's not true, John is saying. What is true is that there's a God who loves us beyond our knowing, who understands our lives, and who meets us in our struggles. And that God is faithful to the end—and then some. Even in death, God is there for us. Even when we leave this world behind, God continues to love us.

So I know it seems like a reckless thing to do, I know it goes against everything common sense tells us, I know it's not a reasonable response to all the pressures we face, but we can lay down our burdens and let God carry them for us. This story is an invitation to do so.

Does that mean we can sit back and relax and not lift a finger for the rest of our lives, while God does all the heavy lifting for us? Does that mean we can dump all our responsibilities onto God and cash out our 401(k)s and go on a permanent vacation?

No. It means that when life gets overwhelming, we should remember the promises we hear in scripture and try to take them seriously. It means that when we're lying there at night catastrophizing, we should remember all the things God has done for us in the past and try to believe that God will keep doing them in the future.

It might be difficult at first, but the more you try, the easier it'll become. And little by little, you'll grow into that way of thinking,

and you'll feel the comfort of God's presence right there with you every day. Amen.