

Lessons from the leftovers

One morning, when I was a kid, I poured too many cornflakes for my little stomach to handle. We had this rule in our house growing up – you had to finish what was on your plate before you could be excused. So I struggled for what seemed like hours to finish those cornflakes. But eventually I just couldn’t swallow another soggy bite. So my mom had mercy on me – sort of. She put those cornflakes in the fridge so I could finish them later.

I was happy to find the next morning that the cornflakes were gone. Thank goodness I wouldn’t have to eat them! But later that day, mom offered us some cookies she had baked. And when I bit into one – well, let’s just say they didn’t taste quite right. And then I realized it: Mom baked the leftover cornflakes into the cookies.

I learned some lessons from those leftovers. First, mom taught me to be a good steward – not even let the cornflakes God gave me go to waste. Also, I learned that if I wanted decent cookies in the future, I’d better finish my cereal!

This morning, Jesus has some lessons from leftovers he’d like to teach us all. Our reading is the familiar account of the feeding of the 5,000 – and one detail that John focuses on is how Jesus had his disciples gather the leftovers after the miracle. Sure, we can learn from that to be good stewards – not let any of God’s gifts go to waste. But there are other, more important lessons he wanted his disciples to learn as they each filled a basket with left-overs – lessons about their needs, their trust, his ability to provide. Let’s learn those lessons from the leftovers right along with them this morning.

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

⁷ Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ⁹ “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴ After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Remember how last week you heard a busy Jesus say to busy disciples, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest?” And they got into a boat and sailed across the lake...but the crowds followed them around the lake by foot and found them.

John picks up where we left off. On seeing the crowds, Jesus asks Philip, **“Where shall we buy food for these people to eat?”** The other gospels tell us that Jesus then went on to spend all day teaching the people, leaving the disciples to spend all day pondering Jesus’ question. Mark says that when the day was nearing a close, the disciples came to Jesus with an answer. They said: “Lord, it’s getting late, and we’re in the middle of nowhere. Send the people away so they can go buy themselves food.” In other words, their first answer to Jesus’ question was: “Where shall we buy them food? No, let them do it. That’s their problem, not ours – they should have packed a lunch.”

And so we’ve got our first lesson, even before the left-overs, and it’s this: Your neighbor’s problem *is* your problem. God’s command to love requires that attitude: See someone in need, desire to do whatever you can to help. But don’t we instead often see in our hearts the disciples’ self-centeredness? Especially when the mess is one a person has gotten themselves into: “His problem, not mine.”

But we have a Savior who says: **“Where shall we buy food for them?”** A Savior who in love chooses to make others’ problems his own. And thank God, because we’d be lost if it were any other way! The problem of our sins is the mess we’ve gotten ourselves into! And he could justly have said, “Their problem, not mine.” But he didn’t! In love, he made our problem his; he saw our need and filled it. He literally made our sins and the punishment we deserved his own on the cross, and by dying took both away.

And he invites us to join him in showing that same kind of love, in helping others in their needs, when he says, **“Where shall we buy bread for these people?”**

But there was more to it than just an invitation to show love. John says this was a test. ⁶ **He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.** Isn’t that interesting? Jesus created a problem – preaching and teaching all day until stomachs were growling and getting food was impossible. All the while, Jesus knows he’s gonna be the solution to the problem – he’d miraculously fill their need. But he asks the question as a test: Would the disciples look to him as the solution?

Where does Philip look? ⁷ **Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”** You could say Philip looks to the bank account. He does the math – 5000 men, not to mention women and children. After crunching the numbers, he decides that even if they had \$30,000 lying around it still wouldn’t be enough to give them more than a bite a piece.

How about Andrew? Where does he look? ⁸ **Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, ⁹“Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”** Andrew looks to the resources on hand. They’d done an inventory check, a search for food in the crowd, and found a little boy’s lunch. But for so many?

Here’s another lesson before the leftovers – about ourselves. Where do we turn when confronted with a problem? What do we tend to trust to supply our needs? Jesus, or my bank account? Jesus, or my own resources?

Be honest – where do you look to feel secure about your future? Your Savior’s care, or your savings account or social security check? Maybe this will help you see the truth of what you’re trusting: If you lost all your sources of revenue overnight, would you still feel secure? Or would you be worried?

When you’re confronted with a problem – whether it’s a crisis in your family or your health goes downhill or a struggle with temptation– is your first recourse prayer, or is it problem-solving? Go to Jesus in his word for strength, or look to your own first, and him as a last resort? Maybe again tell-tale sign of lack of trust: Face problem confident, or anxious?

Disciples didn’t fare well on Jesus’ trust test – but neither do we. So you know what Jesus in his love for us sometimes does? Just what he did for those disciples that day. He gives us an impossible problem. One beyond our wisdom to fix or our strength to carry. A need beyond our buying power, or one that completely depletes our bank account. So we learn that those things we tend to trust just aren’t trustworthy.

And then he shows us who is. He does what he had in mind all along: Becomes solution to the problem. Fills the need. Jesus instructs the disciples to seat the crowds – maybe so everyone can see what happens next? Then he **took the five loaves, gave thanks,** and started handing it out to the disciples to hand out to the crowds. And he kept handing out. And he kept handing out. And he kept handing out. Then he does the same with the two little fish, miraculously multiplying it. Until they **had all had enough to eat** with plenty of leftovers to spare.

So Jesus has them collect the leftovers. And do you see what a powerful lesson they’re learning as they do? With every piece of bread they pick up, they’re learning about Jesus’ power to provide. With every piece of fish, his love and willingness to do so. As each of their 12 baskets was filling with food – way more than there even was to begin with! - Jesus was filling their hearts with trust in him. Teaching them that he’s the kind of Savior you turn to as your first resource, not last; that he’s the kind of Savior who’s able to keep his promise to take care of you, even when finances fail; that even when your problems are beyond your strength and wisdom, not beyond his strength to carry you through them, and his wisdom to use for your blessing.

That’s a lesson he’d teach us through these leftovers, too. But it’s a lesson he teaches us even more clearly at the cross. The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome: **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** God didn’t give us his leftovers. God gave us his brightest and his best, his own dearly loved Son. Gave him into this world, gave him to death on the cross. All to provide for our greatest need – forgiveness, for all the times we fail to trust and for all our other sins. And it’s yours – in abundance. Would this God who was so generous with you in your greatest need suddenly become stingy with all of your lesser needs? God who gave up his power to solve your greatest problem, sin, fail to use his power to help you in any others? Of course not! This is a God who is worthy of your trust.

John has one last lesson from the leftovers. Did you notice how the crowd reacted to them? ¹⁴ **After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”** ¹⁵ **Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.**

It seems like a good reaction at first – they see the sign and conclude Jesus is the Prophet with a capital “P.” That’s a title for the Savior God promised to send. Unfortunately, they wanted

to crown him king not because he was the Savior from sin, but because he was a Savior who could get them stuff. But that'll be the focus in the Sundays to come, as we continue in John 6.

For now, just see Jesus' love. In providing the earthly needs even of a crowd that was only concerned about their earthly needs. Won't he do the same for you, who know the real reason he came? See his love in refusing to be the kind of Savior they wanted, and taking the lonely path to the cross so that he could be the Savior they needed – that we needed. He'll always be that for you – just the Savior you need. So in every problem and every need, trust in his perfect care. Amen.