

“Do You Despair or Share?”

I Kings 17:7-16

Series: DIFFERENT Week 4: Don't Despair, Share

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I remember the first time it came into my house. It looked innocent: yellow batter in a ziplock plastic bag. “They call it Amish Friendship Bread,” Lisa said, showing me the one page recipe. The name should have tipped me off. The Amish seem pious, but not very friendly. “How do you make it?” “You mush the bag.” “Mush the bag?” “Yeah, mush the bag for ten days. Along the way you add flour, sugar and milk. Then you mush the bag and bake it.” “Sounds simple.” If only I knew the evil I was unleashing on my family. All day it bubbled and fermented. Every time I came home from work, the thing oozed out of the bag and crawled across the counter. We put it in bigger bags and each time it escaped. By now Lisa was under its spell. She slavishly fed the thing making it bigger and stronger. Finally, in horror I discovered the fiendish plot behind this friendship bread. The secret recipe says, “When ready, keep one cup for yourself and give three cups to friends in ziplock bags with these instructions” Don't you see? It's a diabolical Amish plot to take over the world. This isn't bread, it's the BLOB.

Amish Friendship Bread taught me a lesson about the way God works. With most recipes you make one or two batches. Maybe you keep one loaf and share another but that's it. Friendship bread is truly unstoppable. If everyone follows the recipe it will yield four batches. If it quadruples every time by the tenth time you will have 1,048,576 bags of starter. By the fifteenth time it will be 1,073,741,824. That's a lot of mushing. We made that bread thirty years ago. By now I'm sure it's gone seventeen times around the world. So why aren't we up to our armpits in Amish bread? One simple reason – a lot of people stop sharing. They hold onto their dough. They keep their bread to themselves.

Today, in our series on how to be DIFFERENT like Jesus we come to a crucial practice: Don't Despair, Share. Paul says in Romans, “Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” (Romans 12:13) In this one brief verse are the two ways we share. The first is **Sharing Inside the Church**. The word in Greek is Koinonia – it means fellowship, communion, sharing. It describes closely connected relationships between God's people. The bond is so strong that your necessities become my necessities. Your needs are my needs.

The second way is **Sharing Outside the Church**. The translation “practice hospitality” doesn't do this verse justice. It sounds like you are making Amish Friendship Bread with your easy-bake oven. The literal translation is “Eagerly seek to love strangers and foreigners.” These are people outside the Church fellowship, people you don't know, people from another culture, nation and/or religion. There is a heated debate over what our government should do about undocumented immigrants. I'm not going to say what the government should do. Yet it's clear what God's people are supposed to do: eagerly love them and share with them.

Share inside, share outside. It couldn't be simpler or clearer. So why aren't we up to our armpits in sharing? We hold onto our dough. We keep our bread to ourselves, for ourselves. We don't share. Instead, we despair. Fear whispers, “If you give this away, there may not be

anymore.” After all, the economy is volatile; costs are going up, the future is uncertain. I need it for groceries, utilities, clothes, the mortgage, car insurance, college fund, retirement savings, taxes. Then there’s all the stuff I buy online, all the costs for the kids sports, the medical bills and doctor visits, the credit card debt. My check is spent before I get it. I have to hold onto what little dough is left. It makes me depressed. It drives me to despair.

No matter how bad we have it, she faces far worse. Three years of drought drives her to utter despair. No water in the wells or streams. Dying livestock. Absolutely arid fields without so much as a stalk of wheat. She cries out to her gods – the storm god Baal who is supposed to send the rain, the earth goddess Asherah whose job it is to grow the crops. Nothing comes. To compound her pain, she is a widow – the most vulnerable, marginal member of ancient society – a widow with a child. No husband to protect her, no family to support her, no social security net to catch her. Now comes the day she’s been dreading – their very last meal. Scrimping, saving, stretching what little food they have only delays the inevitable and unthinkable. It’s so tiny – her last handful of flour, her final drops of oil – enough to make one little loaf of bread. One more morsel for her and her son before they die.

Then, as she collects firewood for the oven, he shows up. A stranger, a foreigner, a wild, wandering Israelite. He serves a different God: Yahweh. He makes a simple request.

He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

I Kings 17:10-11

Give him a sip of water? That’s the decent thing to do. But give away her family’s last meal?

“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.” I Kings 17:12

This is all she has. What gives him the right to ask for it? Yet he makes an outlandish offer. He focuses not on scarcity but abundance, not on despairing but sharing.

Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’” I Kings 17:13-14

What a decision. Should she take the last bites of bread out of her child’s mouth and give it to this stranger, this alien worshiper of another God? Why should she trust Elijah and his God? And yet something moves her to take the risk. Instead of despair, she shares.

She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah. I Kings 17:15-16

Her handful of flour and oil multiplies like Amish friendship bread.

I know what you're thinking: "Sure, I'd be generous and give more to others if God guarantees all the dough in my paycheck and bank account will miraculously multiply." Yet I doubt that. In my experience, the more money people receive the more ways they find to spend it – usually on themselves. It doesn't matter what's in the paycheck or the portfolio, but what's in the heart which determines whether or not you open and share what's in your hand.

The first question is: **Who Do You Trust?** Who do you trust for your daily bread, your warm bed and the roof over your head? We have to place some trust in our careers, our community, our country, our family, friends and finances. Yet where do you place your ultimate trust? Who do you trust first and foremost? Are these things completely trust worthy? Companies lay off employees, governments hurt their citizens, stock markets crash. Even family and friends can turn against you. Do you know why the drought and famine came to Israel? King Ahab of Israel built altars and shrines to the gods of his wife Jezebel – Baal the storm god and Asherah the fertility goddess – the gods this poor widow worshiped. Why did Ahab abandon Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, the True God? The other gods promised health, wealth, solid GDP growth for this fiscal year and the next. The king and his people put their ultimate trust in the gods of this world instead of in the God who made this world.

So what did the True God do? He gave them their wish. The Lord turned them over to the storm and crop gods and they discovered these false gods could not deliver the one thing they promised: rain and crops. You have to trust others. There's no question. The real question is: who do you trust first and foremost? Dwight Moody says: "Let God have your life; He can do more with it than you can." Even our money says, "In God we trust."

The second question: **What is Your Attitude?** Are we scarcity people or abundance people? Do we look at what little we have in our hands and despair or do we look at all God has in His hands and share? Do we trust in what we've got and what we can do or do we trust in God and what He can do? We worship a God who multiplies. We serve a God of abundance.

Richard Stearns had his attitude adjusted from scarcity to abundance. With an MBA from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, Stearns had a stellar career going from Gillette to the president of Parker Brothers, The Franklin Mint and eventually president and CEO of Lenox. He knew a lot about finance and business.

Then in 1987, the largest, single-day stock market crash since 1929 took place. In one day Richard and his wife, Renee lost more than one-third of their life's savings and the money they put aside for their kids' college education. Stearns recalls

I was horrified and became like a man obsessed, each night working past midnight, analyzing on spreadsheets all that we had lost, and the next day calling in orders to sell our remaining stocks and mutual funds to prevent further losses. (Of course that turned out to be the absolute worst thing I could have done.)

I was consumed with anguish over our lost money—and it showed. One night when I was burning the midnight oil, Renee came and sat beside me. "Honey," she said, "this thing is

consuming you in an unhealthy way. It's only money. We have our marriage, our health, our friends, our children, and a good income—so much to be thankful for. You need to let go of this and trust God." Don't you hate it when someone crashes your pity party? I didn't want to let go of it. I told her I felt responsible for our family and that she didn't understand. It was my job to worry about things like this.

Stearns, a devout follower of Jesus, was so focused on scarcity, he failed to turn and trust in God during this crisis. Finally, his wife suggested something which hadn't occurred to him: prayer. They brought the situation before God. Then Renee said something completely crazy.

"Now I think we need to get out the checkbook and write some big checks to our church and ministries we support. We need to show God that we know this is his money and not ours." I was flabbergasted at the audacity of this suggestion, but in my heart I knew she was right. So that night we wrote some sizable checks, put them in envelopes addressed to various ministries, and sealed them. And that's when I felt the wave of relief. We had broken the spell that money had cast over me. It freed me from the worries that had consumed me. I actually felt reckless and giddy— "God, please catch us, because we just took a crazy leap of faith."¹

Richard Stearns left Lenox in 1998 to lead World Vision. Under his guidance this Christian mission tripled in size. Today, in 97 countries World Vision offers disaster relief, clean water, agricultural and community development, AIDS prevention and child sponsorships. This incredible multiplication is due to Christians like Stearns and you who trust God and share the abundance He gives you. Here are three ways to move from despairing to sharing.

Multiply Meals - Rise Against Hunger – October 27 and 28. The same God who provided for that starving widow and child in Elijah's day still wants to provide for hungry children and families around the world. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization says,

Around the world, more than enough food is produced to feed the global population. But after steadily declining for a decade, world hunger is on the rise, affecting 11 percent of people globally. There were an estimated 775 million undernourished people in 2014 – a record low – but that number increased to 815 million in 2016.

How many is 815 million? Two and half times the entire population of the United States. We are partnering with Rise Against Hunger to make 20,000 meals. Malnutrition is the single largest contributor to disease in the world. Rise Against Hunger is working with others to eradicate hunger by the year 2030. You have to be here on Saturday or Sunday to participate in this miracle of multiplication. There is nothing more important than to save a life. Instead of going to the beach or the Poconos or grandma's house, you need to be here – and bring grandma. I will even commit heresy now and say this is more important than kids' sports. When the coach asks why you won't be there to score a goal, say, "My real goal is to give a child another day of life."

¹ Richard Stearns, *The Hole in the Gospel* (Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 213.

Multiply Believers. King Ahab and Jezebel were desperately trying to find and kill Elijah. So where did he go? The last place they expected: Jezebel's country, the heart of Baal and Asherah worship. What did he do? Preach at them? Hand out Bibles? No, he lived with them and even asked for their help. He cared for their needs, healed the widow's son, and offered them food with no strings attached. And what was the result?

Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth." I Kings 17:24

For many years it's bothered me that I spend so much time in the church office. As a result I know very few pagans. So I will be taking my laptop and spending some time working out among the people. Not so I can preach at them or hand them Bibles but so I can get to know them, ask for their help, care for their needs with no strings attached. Why? Because that's the way God multiplies believers. Just as God worked behind the scenes to bring Elijah and the widow together, I believe God will use this time to help others come to faith.

Now you have an advantage over me – you don't spend all your time in the church office and you already know a lot of pagans. Don't judge them. Love them. Care for them. Invite them to worship and your Growth Group. Start a new Growth Group with them. We did a study on how people first hear about Woodside: Website – 45, Preschool – 88, Sign Outside – 93, Invitation of a Friend – 309. God wants us to be a multiplying church: multiplying missions, multiplying ministries, multiplying Growth Groups, multiplying churches. It all starts with you.

Multiplying Sharing. Please take out the Commitment Card in your bulletin. Elijah asked for half of what the widow had left. The good news is God asks us for far less – 10% of our income. It will take trust in God, making sacrifices, focusing on God's abundance instead of scarcity. Yet I and others in the church are living examples that this is possible. God does provide more than you can imagine. And some of you are actually closer to tithing than you realize because you give to the regular offering as well as the Share the Story building campaign. For 2019 I ask you to take a step of faith, trust God, combine the two amounts and continue giving at that level to God's work at Woodside.

If everyone multiplied their sharing we would be able to multiply our ministry even more. We can do more for homeless and struggling individuals and families through Code Blue, Family Promise, Habitat, and the Dinner Ministry, more for prisoners and recovering neighbors through prison and recovery worship services and cafes, more missions to Haiti, DR, Bahamas and in the US, more for children through Discovery Kingdom, School of the Rock, Adventure Club, more for youth and young adults through Ignite, Fusion, and beyond. We can start more Growth Groups, help more churches like Anchor and start more churches like Parkland.

Does your giving Make A Difference? Ask Danielle Large. She says "I was first truly introduced to Jesus by Woodside." She's been different ever since. "I was attracted to God's presence in the people of Woodside." The Spirit of God drew her to youth group, the Higher Ground band and mission trips. With the prayers and support of her Woodside family, Danielle served the whole summer as a missionary in the Dominican Republic. Today she is studying nursing at Eastern University to prepare for her future calling. "Woodside empowered me in the

journey God set forth for me and I am excited to see where God continues to build off this strong foundation.”

During a powerful closing worship service in the DR, a mother came forward with her child. Like the single Mom who met Elijah, this Mom had a child with breathing problems. Her two year old daughter had severe respiratory issues yet the hospital and doctors gave her a run around and refused to help. At the worship service, the young mother, perhaps only 18 years old, proclaimed that Kristin from the Foundation for Peace stood up for her and demanded that the hospital treat this little child. She was rapidly improving. In that moment Danielle says,

I felt deep inside God saying, ‘These are the children I want you to serve. It was a big 'ah-ha' moment for me where I felt like everything made sense. I am called to serve the younger populations and this moment just kind of put everything together for me.

Are you going to clutch your dough?

Or will you open your hand and share?