**Placed for a Purpose: Sermon 1**

**“God Uses Means”**

**Matt. 14:13-21**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus,

“The devil is in the details,” someone has said. And while that might be true when signing a contract or taking out a loan, that’s never the case when it comes to the details of God’s Word. Where God’s Word is concerned, there’s nothing but Good News in the details—abundant Good News, overflowing Good News, with at least a dozen basketfuls leftover. Today’s text is the perfect example. You know the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand. It’s recorded in all four gospels. It’s also the perfect place to go digging in the details for some 24-karat Good News.

Let’s begin with some specific details: five loaves and two fish. St. Matthew tells us exactly what *kind* of food and what *quantity* of food was on hand in that desolate place where a crowd of thousands had managed to track down the Savior. Five loaves and two fish. Those details seem unnecessary. It’s not something we absolutely need to know to appreciate the magnitude of the miracle Jesus performs. It’s actually a bit surprising that the evangelists thought it so important to record that there were exactly five loaves and two fish.

In fact, it’s even more surprising when you stop and consider that Jesus didn’t need them. Jesus didn’t *need* any loaves or any fish. Jesus could have miraculously fed that hungry crowd out of thin air. Simply by saying the word, or snapping His fingers, or blinking His eyes, or raising His hands to heaven Jesus could have conjured up a bounty of bread and a feast of fish. After all, as the Son of God, Jesus was there way back at creation fashioning all the fish in the sea and giving all the grains that go into making bread. No, Jesus needed neither five loaves nor two fish to fashion a feast in the wilderness.

Yet those details are right there, jumping off the pages of our Bibles: five loaves and two fish—unexpected, unnecessary, uncalled-for details. Let’s dig a little deeper into those details. After all, it’s ultimately the Holy Spirit who’s calling attention to those loaves and fish.

It was getting to be evening. The day had begun when Jesus was told about the execution of John the Baptist, His cousin. That solemn news led Jesus to withdraw to a quiet, remote place of solitude. But the crowds followed Him. And when Jesus saw the crowds He was filled with compassion for them and healed their sick. Five thousand men were there, but add in the women and children, and you’ve got yourself a stadium-sized crowd. The disciples were tired and they dropped a not-so-subtle hint that Jesus should send the crowd home for supper and call it a day. But Jesus wasn’t ready to call it a day: “You give them something to eat,” He told His disciples.

The disciples protested with the facts—the details, the hard numbers. You can’t argue with facts. Five loaves and two fish were all they had. It wasn’t enough. It would never be enough. But follow those fish. Look at those loaves and watch what happens. Jesus said, “Bring them here to me.” And the disciples did just that. They took their meager, insufficient, paltry provisions and placed them into the hands of Jesus. Exactly five loaves and two fish were placed into the Savior’s hands.

And you know what happened next. Those meager portions were miraculously multiplied. Jesus equipped His disciples to do the very thing that had seemed impossible only seconds earlier. The disciples gave the people, all of them, something to eat—generous portions that fully satisfied every last man, woman, and child. In the hands of Jesus, what was very little—what was obviously insufficient—became more than enough. Paltry provisions became plentiful. Scarcity became abundance. The meager became miraculous—with twelve basketfuls of leftovers.

This isn’t just a nice story about Jesus feeding a crowd of hungry people. No, these details declare that in Jesus Christ the meager becomes miraculous. These details delineate what happens when we take our insufficient resources and—in faith—commend them joyfully into the hands of Jesus. These details describe an amazing fact about our God: *Our God uses means.* *He takes the ordinary stuff of earth and uses it for heavenly purposes.*

God uses means in the church. He takes ordinary water and combines it with His Word to give us the gift of Holy Baptism. He takes ordinary bread and wine to feed us with the very body and blood of His Son in the Lord’s Supper. He takes ordinary men and calls them to be His ministers who deliver His gifts to His people. He takes ordinary people and calls them to be servants in His Church. He uses all our labor and toil to bring needed care and love to brothers and sisters in need. He uses the ordinary dollars and cents we place into His hands to extend His kingdom around the world.

God also uses means in the state. When it comes to our communities and neighborhoods, God uses government for our good. He uses politicians, police, and even the votes you cast to provide peaceful and secure communities where families can flourish, where evildoers are punished, and where those who do well are commended. Those men and women we so often call “public servants” are actually “God’s servants,” whether they know it or not (Rom. 13:4).

God also uses means in the family. Ordinary fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, are used by God to accomplish extraordinary things. God uses fathers to protect and lead the family, God uses mothers to comfort, teach, and nurture the family. God even uses children to teach parents a thing or two about sacrificial love.

God uses means—the ordinary stuff of earth—to accomplish heavenly purposes, and to carry out His divine design for life in a fallen world. Do you believe that? Often we don’t believe it. We just don’t trust that God will provide. We’re like the disciples with their loaves and fish. All we can see is what we *don’t* have. As we survey the situations in our congregation, in our nation, and in our own families, all we can see are the problems, the lack of resources, needs that we can’t meet, strength that’s insufficient. Like the disciples, we’re often ready to give up and go home—to check out and tune out all the hurting, hungry people God has placed in our path, and to retreat from our God-given responsibilities.

Beloved in the Lord, don’t retreat; repent. Confess your sin. Admit your worst. God uses means. He has used the stuff of earth to open the gates of heaven for you and for all believers. Our sin is a problem we can’t fix. Our good intentions and our own strength are insufficient.

So God chose to use means to save you—the human flesh and blood of His sinless Son, Jesus Christ. Nails made of iron. A cross made of wood. A crown of thorns. These are the details of God’s love for the whole world. These are the details by which the devil has been defeated and your sins have been forgiven. These are the means God chose to use to make things right between you and Him—to bear away your sins and clothe you in His perfect righteousness.

The same blood that was poured out for you at the cross is also poured out for you here today in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus the Good Shepherd has—right here—prepared a table before us. Our cup runneth over. It’s a meager meal by all appearances—meager amounts of bread and wine. But through these earthly means Jesus miraculously feeds you with His holy body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins, and to strengthen you for the holy work He has prepared for you in the church, in the state, and in your own family.

The devil is not in the details today; today the Gospel is in the details. We have much to learn from those five loaves and two fish. Those loaves went from the disciples’ hands into Jesus’ hands, where they were miraculously multiplied. But the loaves and fish didn’t stop there. Jesus didn’t distribute the food directly. He used His twelve disciples to do the distributing. He was teaching them to serve—showing them how they would be the means of delivery for His gifts in the church. As the church’s first pastors, they would form the foundation of the one, holy, Christian and apostolic church. In that church, Jesus would be the source of every blessing. The disciples would simply bring His food to His people.

There’s so much more to say about our God—our God who uses earthly means to do miraculous things for the life of the world. He has chosen to use you. You are precious to Him. You can place all you are and all you have into His hands. For those hands are the hands that blessed and healed. Those hands show the marks of His love. Those hands will raise your body from the dead on the day of resurrection. Those hands will welcome you and embrace you when you depart this earthly life of loaves and fish for the eternal feast of salvation which Jesus Christ is preparing for you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.