

Everything's Better When We're Connected

Everything's Better Series Week 1

1/7/18

Welcome/Intro

If you're new, today's a great day to join us—a new year, we're starting a very short, new series called "Everything's Better"

We're a week into the new year, some of you have already flaked out on your New Year's resolutions—I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, though it's tempting!
others of you are still hanging in with your resolutions

But the reality is, whether you're a resolutions person or not, every one of us at some level would love for the days that stretch ahead on the 2018 calendar to be better in some way than 2017 was

Maybe you'd like a little less drama, maybe you'd like fewer doctors visits, maybe you'd like a little more fun, maybe you'd like a little more progress on some goals or projects
maybe you'd like a little less weight on your body, maybe a few more miles in your running regiment
maybe it would be better if a few key relationships were healthier, maybe you'd like to be a little less frazzled and harried

Most of us look at the calendar ahead or think about the next 51 weeks stretching out ahead of us and at some level we'd love for some THING, some part of our lives, to be better

So we're going to take a couple of weeks to talk about a couple of core principles that help to make everything better—one this week, one next, that if you do these two things, they infuse fresh energy into the whole system to make everything just a little bit better

And today, what we want to suggest is that ***Everything's better when we're connected.***

Abundance happens when we're connected. Flourishing happens when we're connected.

We're healthier, more resilient, more courageous, more spiritually, emotionally, and physically alive people when we're connected

Research has shown that the number one factor that most consistently dictates health and life expectancy in the United States where we have ample food and clean water and basic medical care

Is NOT diet or exercise, as important as those things are, but your relational networks.

If you want to be a healthier person this year, you might need to lose some weight or get a little fitter, but if you want to get to the core of it and the heart of it

the most important thing you could do is invest time and energy into friendships

And what's true on the physical level is even MORE true and applicable on the emotional and at the core, on a spiritual level

Amish have lowest rates of depression in the world. Scientists went to go study it: all about the community, relationships, everyone knows who their people are!

So wired up for community it shapes the chemical balance in our brains!

As a church, our vision statement is Connecting people to God and to each other

because we have seen and experienced and it has been proven by millions and millions who have gone before us

That everything's better when we're connected—connected to BOTH God and to each other

So to start with coming into 2018, I want to ask you to take your connection temperature: how connected are you currently? On a friendship level, who knows you, really?

And on a spiritual level, how connected are you with the God who loves you and the One that ultimately we believe God has sent, Jesus, to restore right connections in every possible direction?

Everything's better when we're connected, and we're going to see that illustrated dramatically in the story we're going to look at today

If you've got a Bible, you can turn with me to Mark 6. If you're new, so glad you're here: 4 biographies of Jesus written by 4 different people all telling the same story from different angles and including different details

Mark is one of those biographies and as we pick the story up Jesus is well underway in his life of traveling and teaching with his 12 disciples

and in chapter 6 Jesus sends out his 12 disciples 2x2 on a missionary journey—because everything's better when we're together, especially faith-stretching trips!

And they go out 2x2 for an unspecified period of time, maybe a couple of weeks

And in verse 30, we're going to pick up as they return from their missionary travels to re-gather together around Jesus

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. ³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

When you've got small kids who are pre-school or kindergarten age, you often have the problem of **refrigerator door real estate over-crowding**.

Because like every other day, your small child is bringing home some sort of picture or drawing or scribbling

And it's both precious AND it will never be mistaken for a priceless work of art except to mom and dad!

But when your child brings home their scribble, THEY are so very excited to show us, aren't they? They are so pumped about what they've done

And there's like a rule that you must find room for it on the refrigerator door somewhere until it starts to look like this!

The 12 apostles or disciples are sent out and then they come back to tell Jesus all about what they've done and taught

And I imagine that this moment for Jesus is a bit like a pre-schooler bringing one of their pictures home to mom and dad

They are SO excited to tell Him what they've done, what's happened!

if you've ever been on a major trip or a mission trip before or something like a camp experience before that was significant for you, you know that initial euphoria you feel!

And Jesus is glad to hear it. Jesus is glad to celebrate it with them. Even though they might not have done everything just right, you can imagine that there might have been a few cringe-worthy moments, right?

"Wait, Peter, you said what? Oh...Wasn't that...creative! Let's just plan on going back to that town and clean that one up!"

But Jesus delights over the faithfulness of his disciples who are in training, works in process, even if it's a little fitful, even if everything's not quite just right

Jesus delights in their fitful faithfulness, even if it's not perfect, and that's good news for you and for me, isn't it?

If you poll people and ask how much they care about what other people think about them, you'll get a wide range of answers including lots who might say they don't care what other people think

But if you see how people actually relate to the people around them, if you see how you and I really actually relate to the people around us, the reality is that the vast majority of us really really really want someone's approval, somewhere:

parent, boss, friends, co-workers, people we respect or admire, Facebook likes, whatever

SOMETIMES we go looking for it in ways that are fine and very appropriate BUT SOMETIMES that hunger for approval robs us real life and we do really unhealthy things to get it, don't we?

OR we get really anxious when we don't think we have it from the people we want it from.

The Scriptures tell us we want that for a reason. We were made for the “Well Done” of God—and since most of us can’t hear that on a regular basis, we go fishing for it from other people as a sort of poor substitute

But Jesus has come to sing over you and I the “well done” of God over you. Everything’s better when we’re not stuck in the cycle of trying to get other people’s approval over and over again

Everything’s better when we’re connected with the God of the universe, when we hear his “well done” over us

Which then frees us to then love and serve the people around us, not use them to prop ourselves up

The disciples are sent out, have some great experiences and some great success, they probably even started drawing some large crowds who were saying to them “Well done! Way to go!”

And where do they go? Do they decide to set out on their own, seeking more approval, more applause, more crowds? Nope.

They return to Jesus and receive the real well-done that they were made for from their master and teacher and Lord

My friends, in what ways and who are you going to looking for affirmation, approval, encouragement? Is it healthy or is it sucking your time, energies, your soul? Is it a blessing to everyone around you or are you striving and straining and posturing and over-thinking?

Does it free you to live courageously, wisely, freely, in faith, hope, and love, or does it drive you to ignoring other people, to over-reacting to any perceived slight?

Are you willing to follow the lead of the disciples, to gather around Jesus, to look to Him to speak the well done of God over you?

Now everything’s better when we’re connected, but it IS possible to hit overload!

And in this story, there are all these people coming and going, likely because Jesus and his disciples are sort of mini-celebrities at this point

So Jesus issues this invitation into rest, quiet, to get away and have a little space, which makes all the introverts in the room breathe a sigh of relief!

But this invitation into a little space isn’t going to last long, let’s keep reading:

³² So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³ But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Quick poll question: how many of you had houseguests over the holidays? How many of you were ready for them to leave a day or two or three before they actually left?

This crowd, that was all over Jesus and his disciples they are like bad houseguests who cannot take a hint!

Here's a little social etiquette pro tip for you today: if someone goes so far as to get into a boat to get away from you, you might want to give them a little space!

The crowd sees them setting out to the other side, they start running around the lake and telling all their friends and family members

So that by the time they get to the other side, instead of a being in a quiet solitary place there's MORE of them there than there was before!

So they land and if I were in the boat as one of the disciples I would have been like "dude, why won't these people go away!" I would have seen these people as a nuisance and a bother!

But how does Jesus see them? **Sheep. Without a shepherd.**

Do you know what life is like for sheep without a shepherd? Vulnerable. Hungry. Wandering. Easy pickin's. Directionless. Helpless

Ever feel like a sheep without a shepherd before? Not sure where you're going, not sure what's next, feeling a little vulnerable to all sorts of things that are maybe outside of your control?

Ever step back and just realize your grasping at stuff to try to make yourself happy, to try to get some sense of purpose or meaning or significance or importance?

Everything's better for us sheep when we're connected to a good shepherd.

Jesus knows this. So he changes course, re-thinks the plan, and begins teaching the crowd many things—he shepherds them, they're getting to know his voice, getting to know his ways

A couple of weeks ago I was meeting with someone who was really wrestling deeply with voices of guilt and shame, voices that were accusing her of all the ways that she'd fallen short

Those voices were telling her that her faith was a sham because of all the ways that she hadn't lived up to it

And she was at an EXTREMELY critical and anxious point in her life, a point where she absolutely needed to know that God was for her and with her

And she needed some help so she was talking to me.

This is one of those moments when you just don't want to mess it up!

Now she and I had known each other for a few years

I knew that she had been in the Scriptures and studied the voice of the good Shepherd for many years.

And at points along the way in her journey she had personal experience of the voice of the good shepherd directing, guiding, and comforting her

So I asked her if the voices she was hearing

sounded anything like the voice of the Good Shepherd. To which she, with great relief and great joy, said, “No. They don’t sound anything like the voice of the Good Shepherd.”

And that was what freed her. That’s what sent those voices packing. And we prayed that in this moment in her life when she needed to know and hear the voice of her good shepherd, she would be able to put away all the other voices she was hearing

And would be able to hear the voice of her good shepherd

My friends, there are 358 days stretching out ahead of us in 2018, and the Good Shepherd, Jesus, stands over every single one, stands waiting to meet you at every single one

Whether you’d call yourself a Christian or not, whether you’re interested in meeting with him or not, whether you WANT to hear his voice or not, he’s there, waiting for you.

And one of the reasons why we study His Scriptures here on Sunday mornings and one of the reasons why we encourage you to read His Scriptures on your own is because we all hear all kinds of voices in our heads—you hear them and I hear them.

Some are creative and generous and loving, others are anxious or proud or stubborn or foolish or fearful

So we study the Scriptures so that we might be able to hear and know the voice of the Good Shepherd, that we might not live our lives like sheep without a shepherd

Because everything’s better when we’re connected to our good shepherd

Now at this point, the disciples post-trip euphoria is turning into a new condition called post-trip grumpiness.

They wanted some down time with Jesus, instead, he’s been teaching this crowd, so the disciples come up with a plan to ditch this crowd and get their down time:

³⁵ By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. ³⁶ Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

How many of you would say that you’re planners? If you’re a planner, you can see this plan and say, “this is a perfectly reasonable plan!” right? **SEND THE PEOPLE AWAY TO GET FOOD!**

They had tried to escape to in order to ditch this crowd, but they’d followed them, now time to go home!

And Jesus had crowds around him ALL THE TIME--it was standard operating procedure at some point to dismiss those crowds and move onto dinner!

So the disciples come to Jesus with a perfectly reasonable plan to disperse these rude people who can't take a hint and need more direct communication!

Let me ask you something, have you ever gone to God with your own perfectly reasonable plan? How'd that go for you?

Our planning isn't a bad thing, it's just seldom the last thing.

The disciples have a perfectly reasonable plan to dismiss the crowd but Jesus isn't going to get on board with their perfectly reasonable plan

He's got something better in mind, a plan that's going to require more connectedness instead of less, more dependence on him instead of less

And through that connectedness, the disciples are going to learn this lesson that we're talking about: everything's better when we're connected

37 But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

The disciples came to Jesus with a perfectly reasonable plan that matched pitch with their location and their resources

Jesus comes back with an extraordinary and somewhat ridiculous invitation to do something that they do not in themselves have the resources to deliver on

And so they do what we normally do when God does something like this to us: they OBJECT!

It would take so much money to go and buy bread for all these people, Jesus, where are we going to get that kind of cash?

And if we had that kind of cash, why would we spend it on these rude people who overstayed their welcome in the first place?

Jesus hears their objection, and so he comes back to them and invites them to think more broadly, outside the cash they've got in their pockets:

38 "How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

The disciples object to Jesus's ridiculous idea to feed all these people, so Jesus invites them to take inventory!! And so they go out and they scout out the crowd and here's what they come up with:

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

Jesus invites them to take inventory and what are the results?? PITIFUL!

EVEN IN COMMUNITY, even if we invite everyone in the crowd to chip in, we don't have the resources in our own strength to overcome this problem

Here's the reality: there's not enough food, it's not just that people aren't sharing, and they can't overcome this through just working together in community

And the disciples DO have a perfectly reasonable plan, just like I'm sure ALL of your plans are perfectly reasonable

But Jesus wants to invite them to participate in his miracle.

Here's how the story unfolds:

³⁹ Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.

So Jesus at this point has stopped interacting with the crowd at all and has turned his whole attention to the disciples, they're going to learn something here

So he has the disciples have all the people sit down in small groups of 100's and 50's and then it continues:

⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³ and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. ⁴⁴ The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

So Jesus prays over the 5 loaves and 2 fish, and he breaks them and gives them to his disciples to put in front of the people

Now, let's talk about what this looks like: you're a disciple and loads you up with a bunch of fishes and loaves in basket

And you go out and distribute them to the people, but how far will ONE basket of bread and fish go to a small group of 50 or 100 people? Not very far!

So you bring your basket to the people and it's GONE just like that! So where do you go after your basket's all gone?

Back to Jesus! He re-loads you, you head back out to a not-so-small group of 50 or 100, how fast is it gone? Instantaneously!

So where do you go if you're a disciple? BACK TO JESUS! And out again, and back to Jesus, back to Jesus, back to Jesus over and over and over again

Anyone remember Mr. Miaggi from Karate Kid? Wax on, wax off, paint the fence sand the floor?

He'd make his student Daniel Laruso do what looked like menial manual labor around his house to teach him the fundamental movements of karate.

And this whole feeding of the 5,000 thing is Jesus as Mr. Miaggi, teaching his 12 disciples the essential nature of connection with himself—returning to him over and over and over again

Because what matters more, your resources or whose hands they're in? Could Jesus have done this miracle with 3 loaves and 1 fish? "Guys, I need 2 more loaves! And can you go catch one more fish for me?"

The resources don't matter, what matters is whose hands those resources are in—everything's better when we're connected with the Good Shepherd

At some point in 2018 you and I will likely come up against something that is more than we can handle currently on our own: a work conflict, family brokenness, financial problems, job struggles, medical concerns, a relationship that sours

And often our instinct when hit times like that is we retreat, withdraw, we hold tighter onto our pitiful little resources to try to figure out how to navigate it on our own

But the counter-intuitive thing that Jesus is inviting us into is the exact opposite.

When the demands on us outstrip our resources the invitation is NOT to withdraw or retreat but to entrust those resources to Him in the context of community

Because your resources, entrusted to Jesus, in the context of a community all trying to work it out together, that's where miracles happen

Just a couple of years after these events, eleven of these 12 guys are going to help launch a movement that will literally change the world forever, the single biggest movement the world has ever seen

Will be led by poor, ordinary, unschooled, under-resourced people from small towns in an odd and small corner of the vast Roman empire

Because it wasn't about their resources or experiences or training or schooling or how much money they had or how many political connections they had—they had none of those things

it was about their connection with the one who has the power to take ordinary things and make them extraordinary

Jesus wants them to remember, remember, remember this. Look at this: How many baskets were left over? How many disciples were there? One for each of them, a lovely take-home memento for each of them!

Jesus is teaching them this wonderful, delightful lesson: everything's better when we're connected!

Connection with *him* is connection with the power and the multiplier effect to do the impossible

And connection with *each other*, as the disciples serve together and as the people sit and receive in small groups, is the way that the Lord designed us do life

So today, to start off a brand new year, we're gathered together here to study this lesson from Jesus

And at the same time, we're doing something *together* to make a difference in our community—have you seen the stack of bags out there??

Jesus fed 5,000 people from just 5 loaves and 2 fish, we're going to kick off 2018 by hopefully feed 5,000 people

because walking in the Jesus way means we do what he does—everywhere Jesus goes, there's life in his wake, he's like a gigantic, perfect funnel for the grace and love of God to be poured out on all people: lost sheep find a shepherd, sick people are healed, the blind see, the crippled walk, hungry people are fed

if the church of Jesus had anywhere near the track record of leaving life in its wake over the past 2,000 years, then the church wouldn't have such a bad reputation in our culture, would it?

So here we are, first, to invite all of us to know and experience and grow in this connection with Jesus

AND to participate in his joy-to-the-world mission, that we might leave life in our wake here, that we might be a funnel through which God could pour as much grace and life into our community as he wants.

We're pulling *together* to do something as a community to pour 5,000 meals into Chatham County

because not only is everything better when we're connected we can ALSO make *everything else around us* better when we're connected

Today's Take-WITH: If everything's better when we're connected...

1. What's your connectedness quotient like coming into the new year?

Do you have a connection with God? What would it look like to cultivate that connection in new ways in 2018? Maybe this is the year that you take a new step, a next step, in your engagement with God.

Do you have a connection with a spiritual community that can encourage you and even challenge you when you need it?

In this story, Jesus pulled a Mr. Miaggi on his disciples to teach them the power and value of connectedness

he took common things like bread and fish and did extraordinary things with them to teach his disciples about connectedness with him and the power of serving together.

But a couple of years after this he does something even more extravagant, even more wonderful, which we celebrate today as we always do the first Sunday of each month with what we call "The Lord's Supper"

On the night he was betrayed by one of those disciples, they're gathered for a great meal together, and Jesus again takes ordinary bread and he breaks it

And this time he says, 'this is my body, broken for you, eat this in remembrance of me'

And then he takes the cup and he says, 'this cup is my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins, drink this in remembrance of me.'

His disciples had no idea what he was talking about, why he was being so dramatic. But in just a few hours, they go from a wonderful meal together to a night of horror

As Jesus is betrayed, arrested, run through a series of mocked and rigged trials, and finally executed on the cross

They spent the next hours in a fog of grief, confusion, hiding from the authorities, totally lost, like sheep without a shepherd

But on the third day, their Good Shepherd rose again from the dead.

He explained to them that the Scriptures all along had said that God's chosen one was going to have to suffer and die in order to reconcile and heal the divide between human beings and God

Jesus is God's answer to the reality that 5,000 years of human history has some elements of beauty and goodness and progress

But much of it can be summed up as we are like sheep without a shepherd, cut off from the God that we were made to know and love

And so Jesus comes, to be our Good Shepherd, and like the best possible shepherd he lays his life down for the sheep

he conquers death, our greatest enemy, so that we might live fearlessly, joyfully, and be a part of God's joy to the world project

This morning, we celebrate Christ's sacrifice and victory for us as we take communion. This table isn't our table, it's Christ's table. If you belong to Christ, then this meal is for you

If you're not yet a Christ follower, we're so glad that you're here. We invite you to sing with us and to consider the good news of what Christianity is all about

God has put on flesh to pour out grace and redemption and mercy and reconciliation to all humanity, all of us like sheep without a shepherd

Stations/gluten-free/grape-juice: move whenever ready, take your time, LEAVE CUPS THERE

BENEDICTION:

PRAYER ROOM

Thanks for bags, if you didn't know, wanted to but didn't get around to it: STILL TIME! We're here, run up to HT or Lowe's, come back, it'll take you 15 minutes!

GUESTS SEE ME

Last service: put away chairs