

Chaos or Community? Building Life-Giving Spaces in Hard Times with Daniel Dixon

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[0 : 00] All right, good morning everyone. My name is Daniel. I'm an elder here at the table, also on our preaching team, and I'm excited to continue our sermon series in John today.

But before we dive into John, I do want to just briefly mention the big sports event happening later today. I have a very confident prediction on who I think is going to win. The real winner tonight around 7, 7.30 p.m. is going to be me because I'm going to be at the grocery store doing a massive grocery shopping trip. The store will be fully stocked because they don't want to run out of anything on the big day, and the aisles will be empty. So just want to give you that piece of life advice. If you don't take anything else from this sermon, take that life-giving advice.

Go to Costco, go to Whole Foods, whatever grocery store is nerve-wracking for you, go there tonight, 20 to 30 minutes after the game starts. All right, so going back to the topic on hand, the Gospel of John.

I recently reread the book, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?* by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. This was his last book, written in 1967. He wrote it alone in Jamaica when he pulled away from his work, from his family, from his life to reflect on the success and the challenges of the civil rights movement.

It feels like that question, where do we go from here, chaos or community, could be a question that we would ask in 2024 and 2025, and in most years in recent memory.

[1 : 49] Dr. King wrote this book at a pivotal time in the history of the civil rights movement. So in 1965, the Voting Rights Act was signed. This was a momentous occasion.

It seemed like the door was finally opening for more justice and more equality in America. But the fall of 1965 through 1966 brought with it disappointment, resistance, and backlash.

We saw riots in Watts and in Chicago, the murder of several civil rights workers in the South, and an increasingly conservative and racist political leadership coming to power in the South.

1966 felt like a year that slammed closed that door that had been slowly opening. In a diagnostic on why this was occurring, King writes, overwhelmingly, America is still struggling with irresolution and contradictions.

That has been sincere, and even ardent, in welcoming some change. But too quickly, apathy and disinterest rise to the surface when the next logical steps are to be taken.

[3 : 10] A few paragraphs later, he says, The fight is far from over, because it is neither won, as some assert, nor lost, as the calamity-ridden declare.

It's from this place of tension, of a fight that is neither won or lost, that King maps out in the rest of the book two options for America.

Chaos or community. Now, it feels like chaos has been a key theme of my life and the world recently. So on a personal note, in the last year, I've gone through the chaos of non-stop organizing, early mornings, late nights, while bombs manufactured and paid for by the U.S. dropped on schools and hospitals in Gaza.

In my personal life, I took 12 weeks of medical leave from work, only to return and receive the lowest performance rating I've ever had in any job, and face the possibility of losing a career I've worked in for six years.

I moved out of the house that I've lived in for eight years, in much less than ideal circumstances, moved into an apartment that didn't have heat during that big winter storm in January, and then adopted a kitten that was on the streets during that same weekend.

[4 : 25] Chaos. Everywhere. And the last month has been full of larger chaotic moments moments that have rippled through D.C., through the U.S., through the world, in ways that I know that our community is deeply acquainted with.

I find myself wondering over and over again, where do we go from here? Where do I go from here? And as we continue our series in John, we're going to see that that question is central to the next chapter we're going to look at.

So just to give a bit of a recap on the last couple of weeks, in the Gospel of John, the author is giving this dramatic story of Jesus' life and ministry. And in John chapter 4, we see this scene where Jesus goes to a well and meets a Samaritan woman.

He crosses cultural boundaries, speaks with her, meets with her, reveals his divine nature and broad daylight to her. She then brings her whole village to him.

He ends up staying there in Samaria for two days, and then in John chapter 5, makes his way towards Capernaum, a city that functioned as his home base throughout most of his ministry.

[5 : 44] Where he's there, he performs a handful of miracles, when he goes to the Sea of Galilee, which is right by the city, and is met by a large crowd. This crowd is hungry.

They want food, and Jesus and his compassion multiplies food for them. He doesn't just multiply enough food. He multiplies so much food that they fill 12 baskets full. He shows them abundance.

After this miraculous act, the crowd wants to make Jesus their king. They start clamoring for him to lead them. And we see Jesus cross across the Sea of Galilee, kind of running away from the crowd.

And then after a series of odd events, including Jesus walking on water during a storm, the crowd finds him again the next day. And that's where we're going to begin our scripture today.

So we're going to be in John 6. So it's a bit of a longer passage. So if you have Bibles, they're hard copy on your phone, you can turn to John 6. We're going to start in John 6, 26.

[6 : 46] As we read through this, I just want you to pay attention to a few things. Pay attention to repetition. If there are words, there are things that you see being said over and over again, pay attention to those.

Pay attention to how people react to what Jesus is saying. And pay attention to your own reactions. What's coming up for you as you read through this? So starting in John 6, 26, Jesus said to them, them being the crowd that has tried to make him their king and has now found him the next day.

Jesus said to them, very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed, but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.

Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the son of man will give you. For on him, God the father has placed his seal of approval.

Then they asked him, what must we do to do the works God requires? Jesus answered, the work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent.

[7 : 59] So then they asked him, what sign will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna and the wilderness.

As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat. And they're referring back to the Exodus, to when God had sent the people of Israel manna from heaven in the desert.

Jesus said to the crowd, truly, I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven, gives life to the world.

Sir, they said, always give us this bread. And then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

We're going to jump down a couple of sections to 648. So starting in verse 48, Jesus says to the crowd, I am the bread of life.

[9 : 10] Your ancestors ate the manna and the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? And Jesus said to them, Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day to live forever. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

[10 : 20] This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever. And he said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing this, many of his disciples said, This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, Does this offend you?

Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before? The Spirit gives life. The flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you, they are full of the Spirit and life.

Yet there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe, and who would betray him. He went on to say, This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.

From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. You do not want to leave too, do you?

[11 : 30] Jesus asked the twelve. And Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.

So I must be upfront that this is a strange passage. As part of my sermon prep, the first thing that I do is read through the passage of Scripture that I'm covering out loud.

So I read it once out loud, just like we just did, and then I do a brain dump where I just write everything and anything that comes to mind. And after reading this section, I stared at my computer for about 30 seconds to a minute and then wrote down, this is really bizarre.

I have no clue where to go with this. Something about bread. Period. It's not a particularly inspirational passage at first read.

Jesus doesn't heal anyone. Jesus doesn't cast any demons out. Instead, he makes broad analogies, confusing statements, and at times seems to be straight up dismissive of the crowd and the disciples.

[12 : 50] Now going back to John's overall context, it's helpful to remember that John, the author, is a drama nerd. He loves theatrics. He's into the theatrics of Jesus' life.

He's telling the story in a way that's intended to be like a performance. We have in John 4 and 5 these triumphant scenes, scenes where Jesus reveals himself in broad daylight, where Jesus performs miracles, scenes where the crowd goes wild for Jesus.

And in John 6, we have, coming in from stage left, drama, tension, and eventually loathing. A good drama has tension to it, dissonance, discord.

For example, in the somewhat popular musical and film, *Wicked*, there's a scene where one of the main characters, Elphaba, who has been rejected all of her life, discovers that the sorceress at a school wants her to be there.

After a lifetime of rejection, her identity is affirmed. It's a high moment for her. Another main character, Glenda, is also at a high point.

[14 : 06] She's popular. She's where she's supposed to be. She's excited to become a sorceress. You have these two characters at high points in your story, and then tension enters when they discover they'll be living with each other and have to navigate that relationship.

Similarly, at this point in the story of Jesus, after several high points, John brings tension back into the story.

And so, as you read through this passage, you are left with a unresolved feeling. That's intentional. That tension leads us somewhere, though. And to help us along in our journey, we're going to look at just one of Jesus' statements this passage.

The very clear and not confusing one about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. So what was it about Jesus' statements that the crowd must eat his flesh and drink his blood that turned so many of them away until it was just Peter and 11 other disciples?

And when Jesus, when he makes those strange statements, the crowd responds to them a few different ways trying to parse out the meaning behind them.

[15 : 25] So the first thing that we need to understand is that in some parts of this passage, the word eat is probably better translated as chomp or gnaw.

It's like Jesus is describing a dog with a bone. These aren't delicate, dainty bites. He's asking them to chow down on his flesh and slurp up his blood.

It's a messy image. It's also helpful to recall that prohibitions against eating flesh and blood were all over Hebrew scriptures and at this time ingrained as cultural taboos.

The last thing just to be to note is that in the Gospel of John there are three Passovers that are mentioned. The first Passover is in John 2 where Jesus flips over tables in the temple.

The second Passover is in John 6 which we just read and the last one is mentioned in the latter half of John. The author is intentionally calling us to think about the Exodus, the deliverance from Egypt, God's provision in the desert.

[16 : 35] So let's explore a few options on what Jesus might have meant here. Option 1. He means that people should literally eat his flesh and drink his blood, aka cannibalism.

Now, this option seems pretty unlikely to me. I do want to approach it with curiosity like a good scholar wondering if this could be possible but we don't really see Jesus advocate this in other parts of the Gospels.

We don't see the disciples turn into vampires or zombies at the Lord's Supper so we can probably rule out cannibalism. But we also need to recognize that Jesus isn't using a far-fetched analogy here.

He's using language that would have elicited strong feelings of disgust, of repulsion from the crowd. Jesus was telling the crowd to do something disgusting, to do something repulsive.

And though we can say that cannibalism is off the table as an option here, it might be helpful for us to imagine how we'd feel if Jesus actually was suggesting something as repulsive to us as literally eating flesh and blood.

[17 : 51] Now, option two is that this is just symbolism. When Jesus says that we should eat his flesh and drink his blood, what he really means is that we should depend on him like we depend on food and drink.

He's talking about a close, tight-knit relationship. He's talking about our spiritual need. But, when we look at the crowd's reaction, this option seems like it might not fully fit either.

At the end of Jesus' teaching, the crowd grumbles, and most of the disciples end up walking away, remarking that this is a hard teaching that they can't follow.

And, although it's true, it is difficult to grasp our spiritual neediness, I'm not convinced that that's what took the crowd from ready to make Jesus their king to leaving him completely.

And, in fact, multiple times Jesus has the chance to clear things up for the crowd, but as we saw through that repetition in the passage, he doubles down on his statement to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

[18 : 56] And so, I'm not sure that symbolism is what Jesus is going after here. And that leads us to option three, new creation and eternal life.

The people want a new king. They're living under a Roman empire that has occupied them. They want a change in earthly leadership.

The people want enough food to meet their needs. life. And Jesus instead says, I'm going to give you myself, the bread of life. I'm going to give you an entirely new way of sustaining yourself, of being filled, of being nourished.

In the midst of the conflict of John 6, it can be easy to miss why Jesus is offering up his body and his blood. A key theme repeated numerous times in that passage is life.

Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus came down from heaven to bring life. Jesus says that whoever believes will have eternal life.

[20 : 10] In fact, Jesus uses that word life 15 times in John 6, makes it the second most repeated word in that passage behind the word bread. So with that in mind, the earlier exchange between Jesus and the crowd goes more like this.

If you can go to the next slide. So we have this dialogue in the play. The crowd. We want a new earthly leader. Jesus.

The bread. That alone won't bring you real, true, fulfilling life. Believing in me can nourish you, can give you new life.

life. In a way that a new earthly leader couldn't. The crowd. We want another miracle. Multiply more food for us. And Jesus.

But that alone won't bring you real, true, fulfilling life. Believing in me can nourish you, can give you new life, can give you a satisfaction that never runs out.

[21 : 15] And that leads us to the difficult choice of this hard teaching. So, if we go to the next slide, this is one of my favorite meme templates.

So, if you can't read it, it has me, I'm cold, my dad, and then two buttons. And one says, basically, you can go see on the corner, it's 90 degrees. And one says, hi, cold, I'm dad.

In this meme template, you have two buttons with choices, both of them compelling in different ways. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I recently became a parent to a 10-month-old cat, and so I had to fit in a dad joke somewhere.

But I can imagine the crowd having a similar reaction to this character. They're sweating. They're unsure of which option to choose. And I feel really sympathetic to the crowd in this story.

they're a group of regular people. They want to be set free from occupation. They want a new king. They want to be fed forever. Those all sound like things that I want, too.

[22 : 28] And the crowd is like America in Dr. King's earlier quote. They are wrestling with irresolution and with contradiction. They're open to some changes, but they're resistant to deeper ones.

And honestly, that sounds a lot like me as well. And so when Jesus is pushing back against the crowd, when they try to make him their king and he pulls away, when he says things that are intended to confuse them, it's because what the crowd is asking for and what Jesus is offering are not the same thing.

And Jesus is making that very clear. See, the crowd is asking for a change in the way that things are. Jesus is offering a way, a change in the way that everything is.

And Jesus doesn't assure them that Rome will be defeated. Jesus doesn't assure them that they'll always have enough food to eat. But Jesus does assure them that with him, the bread of life, they'll have something that will outlast Rome.

They'll have something that will outlast their physical bread. They'll have a new life-giving way of nourishing themselves, of grounding themselves, of orienting themselves.

[23 : 49] But that can be difficult, especially in the world that they lived in and in the one that we live in as well. Okay, so what do we do with all of this?

How does this passage guide us in 2025 as we, just like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked, asked the question, where do we go from here?

Do we go towards chaos or community? First, this passage reminds us that God is a God who nourishes. Jesus calls himself the bread of life, referring to himself as one who nourishes, one who feeds, who sustains.

As a community that follows him, we are called to be a church that nourishes and is nourished, that gives and receives life to each other. And I know that the last few weeks in particular have been difficult for many people in this community and that we need nourishment.

On that note, I want to share a piece of DC history with you all. So if we go to the next slide, this is a photo of an unnamed individual at a place called the Clubhouse.

[25 : 06] The Clubhouse is a beautiful piece of our city's legacy. Started in the 1970s, the Clubhouse was a dance club for DC's LGBTQ population and particularly a place for Black LGBTQ folks.

It was born out of discrimination and white gay bars in the area, and the Clubhouse became known, as Wilmot's founders described it as, a safe place for anyone and everyone.

But along with being a place where people could forget their troubles and just dance, it also played an important role in responding to the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s.

They hosted some of the first public forums in the region to talk about a taboo topic. They were also a place where people could access much needed care outside of the medical structures that would discriminate against them.

I don't quite know what it will look like, but my hope is that we begin to develop similar spaces here at the table, spaces where dancing joyfully with each other and meeting concrete needs go hand in hand.

[26 : 17] The DMV support fund that we started last week is I start to this, but I'm hopeful to see what else our community comes up with to nourish each other in these difficult times.

If we just go to the next slide, there's just one more photo here of the clubhouse manager, Rainy Cheeks, who's in the middle, and some of the clubhouse dancers. The next thing that I think this passage calls us to is to be a disgusting church.

We are called to gnaw, to chomp down on the things that the world pulls away from, to call beautiful and sacred, the things that the world calls repulsive.

I did sort of hesitate on how to go about this section and what terms to use, but think about Jesus' statements about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. It felt important to name that disgust and repulsion, to use those terms, to consider that we might be called to so deeply identify ourselves with things that the powers of this world call repulsive, that they look at us and say that that is a disgusting church and that we carry that label with pride, knowing that there is beauty, sacredness and dignity in our midst.

We look at the broad range of backgrounds in our community of sexuality, of gender, of race, of class, of education, and we chomp down on those things.

[27 : 47] We say that that is what gives us life. If we go to the next slide, when I went to buy some groceries on Friday, I came across this piece of street art over in Petworth near a school there.

It's a little bit hard to read, but it says, God loves trans kids. I think we can find a great deal of life by holding fast to truths like that, by chomping down and gnawing on that truth.

And then finally, like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and like the disciples, we're left at the end with questions. Where do we go from here?

To whom would we go? What is the work to be done? And as we consider those questions, as we discern our path forward, if we are going towards community or towards chaos, I want to ground us in the difficult but life-giving lesson that Jesus gave to the crowd and the disciples.

we don't just need a problem patched. We need a whole new way of seeing things, of imagining our way forward, and that is through the Jesus way.

[29 : 06] This way is life-giving, but it's also difficult. It means that we participate in the new creation that Jesus is bringing regardless of what's going on around us.

When there are crowds in the streets outraged at injustice, we eat the flesh and we drink the blood. When the watchword of the day is complicity and when injustice is ignored, we continue to eat the flesh and we drink the blood.

This feast that Jesus brings is not for the faint of heart. It isn't something that we only partake in at certain times. It is a call to a whole new way of life. In the midst of the chaos, both in my personal life and in the world around me, I'm finding that eating and drinking Jesus is deeply grounding.

The answer to where do we go from here is we go to eat the flesh and we go to drink the blood. This is the work before me.

This is the work before us. This was the work before us in 2020 and in 2016 and in 2012, and that will be the work before us in 2028 and 2032 and for all of our days on earth.

[30 : 20] This is the work that Christians have been doing in Gaza, caring for each other and their neighbors while bombs dropped on their churches. This is the work that enslaved peoples did throughout the U.S., hiding away at night to practice a religion of liberation and forging a path towards freedom.

This is the work that mutual aid organizers have done for decades where they have worked tirelessly to meet people's physical needs. That is the work of eating and drinking from the God who nourishes.

Now, as we come to a close here and move towards a time of communion, a time where we eat the flesh and drink the blood, I want to reimagine the words that we often say on Sundays when we do our announcements.

The table church does the work of believing in Jesus Christ. We chomp down on the flesh and on the blood. Because of that, we value friendship, curiosity, justice, play, and improvisation.

Because of that, we are LGBTQ plus affirming. We are feminist. We believe in dismantling whiteness, and we are becoming anti-racist.

[31 : 40] We do this work when it is difficult, and we do this work when it is easy. We do it when the streets are full of people crying out against injustice, and we do it when complacency and apathy permeate society.

To whom else would we go? But to Jesus. But to each other. And to all who hunger and thirst for love, justice, and compassion.

And