

“Flipped”

Preached by Rev. Ernie Forrester
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
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It is so good to see you! I am not being funny. I was out last week. I was in Valdosta officiating the wedding of a former student, Josh Lowe. Many of you know his parents, Kevin and Laura, so I wasn't here. It seems like a month since I have seen you, so when I say to you, “IT IS SO GOOD TO SEE YOU,” I mean it! Don't worry, only one person at 9:00 knew I was gone!

I want you to see this. This is the shirt from Children's Camp this week. I know you cannot see it well in the back, but it says, “Flip”, and was the theme of Children's Camp this week. I wore this at 9:00, but wanted to show you in this service. The reason is that I know we have some learned folks here. I could almost imagine you realizing what the service is about and seeing the title and thinking, Flipped? Yeah, Ernie has finally flipped alright!!! Seriously, there is a reason for the title and you will catch it in just a minute.

It has been a busy couple of weeks. I had the wedding last weekend and got back on Sunday. On Monday I drove the students to Children's camp in Alabama, spent the night and returned with the bus on Tuesday so Day Camp could use it Tuesday and Wednesday. I went back to Alabama on Wednesday afternoon with the bus so I could serve as chaperone and bring our children home on Thursday. I wasn't there the entire time, but I did get to spend some time with our children. What a GREAT GROUP of children we have!!! They did so well and were so well behaved.

So let me give you a little “heads-up”. You are going to hear about camp, I am certain of it! There are some great stories from camp. Some are funnier than others, but most are really good. The good ones you will hear again and again because they are so good. Now between the stories from camp and the stories from the wedding, I have a ton of new stories, and you know how I love good stories. The point being that the really good stories will be told again and again. That is what we have with the passage of scripture Kathy read just a moment ago.

There are some stories in the Bible that are only told once. They are so well known we might not realize they only have one telling. The Good Samaritan would be an example of that. It is a well known story, but only one Gospel writer took time to tell the story. The Prodigal Son would be another well known story that was only recorded once. The story of the Sheep and Goats is another. All of these stories are told only once, but not our passage today.

It is told four times! It is the *only* Gospel miracle which is told *in its fullness* in *all* four Gospels. Now, why is this story told over and over again? I believe it is because this story captures the truth, the essence of all the people involved; the essential truth about Jesus *and* the essential truth about the disciples *and* the essential truth about God. But I like the way it begins with the crowds following Jesus.

Wherever he went he had huge crowds that followed him. In our passage it says the people saw the signs and wonders, but no matter the reason, they wanted to be wherever they found Jesus.

Do you remember the movie, Forest Gump? In the movie he decides to start running. As fate would have it, people noticed and thinking it was worthwhile many other people began to run as well. Remember how one day he stops running and says he is tired? He starts walking back to Alabama, but what does one of the followers say? “What are we going to do now?”

Forest represents any number of people we have followed over the years. It is human nature. We see someone who seems to have a cause, a mission we can relate to, something they are passionate about and we just start running with them. And unfortunately we find what those following Forest discovered.

When Forest had stopped running, he had nothing to offer, but Jesus offers so much, and in this case was able to “flip” the situation from scarcity to abundance.

Our children were made aware this week of how Jesus flips many situations. The last shall be first and the first shall be last . . . Love those who hate you . . . If you lose your life you find it . . . Rejoice in your trials. There are others, but the message is still the same. Jesus provides.

I need you to know, I struggled with how to approach this topic today. With our current economic crisis being discussed at every turn, and with many of our own families struggling to get by in one way or another, what is this passage going to say and what can we learn?

It can be a little disheartening. I mean our culture gives us a gazillion messages telling us how to fill needs we didn't know we had – the type of car to drive, the kinds of clothes to wear, the brand of jewelry, the size house, computers, modems, and oh by the way, do you have the new I Phone yet?!!! And the truth is Jesus wants to give us so much more.

For those of you that might not remember, I love John the most of all the Gospels. I feel that he presents a picture different from the others and I like that. In this passage he does not disappoint and gives us several differences about this story compared to the other Gospels, but I believe it helps us see this story from a new perspective.

Jesus has been in Galilee healing the sick. The people have noticed the signs he's been up to, so a crowd follows him to the place where he's gone with his disciples. There are so many of them, and Jesus looks at Philip and says, "Where are we to buy bread for all these people? They're hungry. So what are we going to do?" In John's version Jesus asks the disciples, while in Matthew and Mark and Luke it's the other way around. The disciples ask him. In this case, Jesus looks at his followers, looks at the likes of you and me and says, "So what are we gonna do here? How are we going to minister to this group?"

I believe it is a question Jesus asks each of us. What are we going to do to minister to needs? Maybe you need to consider how you might serve? I know some of you are children's workers, youth leaders, or maybe you teach an adult class. Some of you serve as volunteers on Wednesday nights with our exceptional Food Service Ministry, and I know many of you volunteer at the co-ops we support. There are also several who have the gift of generosity and you make sure ministries are funded.

If you haven't found your niche, I think the question for you is, “What are you going to do?” That is the question Jesus is asking. This morning we have mission teams in Appalachia and Tijuana meeting needs, and our New York team just returned. Could

you plug in there? Is there a passion you have in another area where you could be the presence of Christ?

Well Jesus has asked Phillip a question and how does he respond? It is clear that Philip reaches for the usual kinds of categories and expectations. He begins to calculate how much money they need to buy supper for all these folks. He begins to work on logistics. "Half a year's paychecks won't do the trick. Our budget just isn't big enough. Our resources are just too few." It reminds me of the character "Glum" in the cartoon version of Gulliver's Travels. His favorite expression is, "We'll never make it. We're doomed!" But Jesus knows that conventional answers aren't what's called for here. It's not what's really needed.

About that time Andrew shows up. "Well, there is someone here," he says. "There's this kid with some barley loaves and a couple of fish." Andrew has looked at who's around, at who's on hand. He has discovered what's available. And what's available is the lunch of a boy who is clearly not a person of power and probably not widely known. He knows this because barley flour is the flour that poor folks used for their loaves, not what the rich folks used. It's a little detail that only John mentions. Andrew sees that perhaps real needs aren't necessarily filled by the folks that we've often looked to to meet them.

Are we not seeing those same things today? Those things we have depended on so long are just not available and we are struggling. The market is staying down. Will it make a turn? Have we bottomed out? How soon before we begin the swing upward? Those are all tough and important questions.

But Jesus is saying more than that. Jesus is saying that the hunger goes deeper. The way John tells the story, it's clear that Jesus is the One who can end real hunger--of every sort, not just the kind that makes for growling stomachs an hour before lunchtime. Because John changes another detail in the story: He makes Jesus the host of this meal, the one who distributes the food. In the other gospels, it's the disciples who take up the work, and those stories say important things too. But, here for John, there's something else going on. Something else we're to hear and see and know. In this version, it's Jesus who hands out the food.

Because in John, it's Jesus himself who will become the real food; Jesus who will say to us just a few verses later, "I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never hunger." Here in John, as in the other gospels, the crowds eat till they are filled, till their hunger is gone. But in John, Jesus also adds, "Gather up the fragments, that nothing may be lost," because Jesus' real purpose is to keep things from being lost. To keep us from being lost. From perishing is what the word means. His real purpose is to provide sustenance that lasts, that keeps us truly alive, that won't feed us one moment then leave us hungry the next.

And that my friends is what I think is the gist of this story and it starts at the beginning when John notes, "A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick." But let's look at that for just a moment. Do I believe that all 5,000 needed a physical healing? No! Do YOU believe that all of them needed healing? And I seriously doubt that many folks would hang around to see others healed, if that were a reason.

Back in my college days I learned in one of my Psychology classes that our deepest needs are to love, to be loved, and to become, or discover something we can do

that provides meaning and money. You see, I think those crowds followed Jesus because He made them feel loved. He fed them what they truly needed: love, recognition, praise, acknowledgement, gratitude, encouragement. Those are the things he shared with everyone who came into His presence.

I believe our choices today are to decide where we are. Are we part of the crowd following Jesus, wanting what Jesus offers, or are have we moved to a place where Jesus is asking us what we are going to do for those following Him? I don't know where you stand today, but I do know that in the hands of Jesus, little can become much, the few can become the many, and the weak can become strong.

Jesus can flip your life today. Looking for a church home? Want to find a place to serve, to fit in, to belong? Do you have something you need to pray about? Maybe you are tired of the same ole, same ole. Jesus stands ready to meet you where you are and flip that bad situation into a better one. If you have a decision you want to make today, I encourage you to come. I will be here at the front to meet you. As we sing, would you come?