

SERMON TRANSCRIPT: Opening Worship at #PNWAC25

Bishop Cedrick D. Bridgeforth

We give God thanks for these wonderful musicians who have blessed us in this opening music. Amen. Amen. Amen. For this is the day that the Lord has made. I don't know about you, but I shall rejoice and be glad in it. And now you can sit there and act like you were supposed to be here today. You can sit there and act like.

You know, you've done everything right every single day, and just because of your wonderfulness, you get to open your eyes and move about throughout the day. I mean, you can do that. But see, I know I've been through some things. I know I've said some stuff. I know I've left some things undone. I know I have shown up in ways that didn't always honor the Lord, so I give the Lord thanks, and I'm sorry.

I praise God today for just another day's journey, and as the old folks would say, I'm so glad about it. Yes, yes, yes, yes. If you can't tell already, I am a happy man. I am. I am. I am. And I hope and pray that you are happy too, because there's so much that would have us find a corner, ball up in the fetal position and think that if we wait till sometime in January, over three and a half years from now.

But I'm here to tell you that won't work. Now, some of you know that one of the ministries I'm involved with is AIDS/Lifecycle. It's a seven-day, 545-mile ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles. And it's something I've been involved with for several years. I don't hide that fact. I share it.

I probably tell people more about AIDS/Lifecycle than I do about the Greater Northwest. I've been involved with it for several years. When I relocated to the Greater Northwest, it was one of the things I was concerned about. I was concerned about whether or not my schedule would permit me to do the type of training required to participate in such an event.

I was concerned about whether or not fundraising for California-based organizations while living outside of California made sense for me. And I didn't bother praying about it. I just determined that yes, it did make sense. So I was a part of a team in LA, and when I came up here, I looked around, and I saw that there was a team in Seattle that trained for the AIDS/Lifecycle.

It's called Team Outspoken. Some of you'll get that on the way home, and so I joined the team and showed up for their welcome event at the center there on Capitol Hill. And I can tell you that when I walked up, there were members of the team wearing t-shirts for the team outside the center, talking to each other. You know how y'all do at church when the visitors are coming in and y'all are loving on each other. So, I walked right in, went in, and one of the center employees welcomed me and told me where the team's meeting was. I went to that meeting room and was expecting to be greeted. You know how we do when we show up at a church and we think it says, "We're a friendly church."

But I went in there and sat through the event, and I left wondering why they called this a team. I wondered if this team would ever work for me, if it would ever feel right, and if their approach was too different for me to ever connect. And so, I did the training with them last year, but I rode with my LA team. I did the training with them this year and decided I would ride with the team I trained with.

Some of you are aware that this was the last year of the AIDS/Lifecycle. After 30-plus years, this was not going to happen again. So, I made my way through the ride, and there we were on day seven. The last day of the ride was hot, the route was new, and it was difficult.

And somewhere along the way, I learned it was kind of like the rumor mill. You know how you find out good information, you don't find out in the meeting, you find out in the parking lot. So it made sense that we were in a school parking lot on one of the water breaks, and I learned that the team captains had decided that anybody who wanted to ride in together as a team needed to get to Ocean Boulevard and Idaho Street by 4:15 and no matter what, whoever was there at 4:15 would ride through ride across the finish line together.

So, I made up my mind that I was going to do all that I could possibly do to be at Ocean and Idaho by 4:15. I rushed through every water, stop, every rest break, got to lunch, and wolfed down whatever I wolfed down. I ate the vegan option just so I could get it done because I was gonna be there by 4:15. I was gonna ride in with these people that I had trained with, all beloved. But after lunch, y'all know what happens after lunch. After lunch, I fell behind on the last big climb of the day. We all started out together, but as we made our way up Sepulveda, it just kept going and going, and they kept going and going.

I fell behind, and soon after, they were gone, too far in the distance for me to see them, but I kept peddling. Yes, with all my might now, as we reflect on this text, there are several appropriate, creative and interesting approaches that we could take to this text that we have set for our time together. We have the feeding of the 5,000 or so. And we have it in some version of it in all the gospels, I mean, in Matthew 14. There, it records the event after John the Baptist's death and emphasizes Jesus' compassion.

In Matthew, we see two fish and five loaves. We're told there are 5,000 men plus women and children. Thank you, Matthew. In Mark 6, it focuses on the disciples' initial reluctance to feed the crowd. And Jesus asked the disciples, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "five and two fish."

And in verse 44 of Mark 6, it says, the number of the men who had eaten was 5,000. Y'all know I'm gonna work with that, right? Then, in Luke 9, the version that we're using, it highlights the miracle of the feeding as an act of divine provision in a remote place. And in verse 14, it says that about 5,000 men were there.

In John 6, the miracle is emphasized as a demonstration of Jesus' power and a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. Disciples are actually named in John's gospel, and John is the only version that mentions a boy as the one who provides the two fish and five loaves. We do not have a headcount in John.

Now, we can imagine crowds of people. The text lets us know in a variety of ways. There are approximately 5,000 men, and if we go by today's church math, if there were 5,000 men, there would be at least 20,000 women—18,547 of them, members of United Women in Faith. And there are, you know, eight children under the age of 14.

Did I tell you I'm gonna meddle a little bit this morning? Now, if you are a person of color, a person with differing abilities, known and unknown, or non-binary. You speak English with an accent, not a drawl. You know, drawls are coming back in now. Drawl not draws drawl, right? If you were born in some other place, yes, I said that maybe you didn't go to college, you were adopted, or maybe you were brought up in the foster care system. You don't want children. No desire to marry if you've ever been othered or misgendered or detained because of how you look, suspected, because of how you look or underestimated, because of where you live.

If you fit any of those realities, you know what it is to not be counted, to be discounted. Or to be treated as though you don't count at all, and three-fifths is not good math. For the record, now we could focus on the fish and the loaves. We could talk about how bread and fish show up throughout the Bible.

I mean, each has its own lore and symbolism that connects various aspects of our faith. And our sacraments, customs and rituals. Now, if we focus solely on the bread and fish, we see a miracle unfold, and that alone ought to have us shout yes, but I know y'all are not the shouting kind.

We see thousands of people eat, and we see that there is enough for thousands more to eat when they are done. The challenge in this text is the challenge we face in the church today, for there is tension that we must respect and engage. Now, this is not language that I coined this time. It's language I appropriate from a book I use in the Course of Study class that I teach on leadership, and it's a book by Lovett Weems and Douglas Powe titled "Sustaining While Disrupting."

"Sustaining While Disrupting." Now, in Alaska, when I preached this sermon, I focused on this thought that there is brokenness and blessed it all around us and in us. In Oregon-Idaho last week, I focused, well, I intended to focus on our blessedness and brokenness. Who we follow determines where we go. But what I ended up doing in the middle of the sermon was really focusing on what you think determines what you will do. And today, for the Pacific Northwest, the starting point is sustaining while disrupting; we'll see where we end up.

Sustaining is continuing to do the things that you need to do and must do to keep moving, keep things moving along. It's not busy work, it's not church work. It is the work of the church, you know, building community, connecting people with passions and needs, and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. Not just pushing your latest pet project or pet peeve. Meanwhile, disrupting is deciding to do what you may not know how to do. It's trying some things before you know everything. It's preparing some people while other people decide what they want to do. Disrupting is imagining a world that is to come with a worldview that

is not like the one we now have or once had. Instead, it's trusting your try more than you trust your plan. Mm-hmm. The Pentecostal church shoes would be off.

So, we are called to hold these two realities, sustaining and disrupting intention in this season. We do not have the luxury of choosing one or the other, and the text can help us with this. On one hand, we see a crowd hungry for food.

On the other hand, we see disciples unsure of how to meet the need. We see fish and we see loaves. Now if the disciples continue to just sustain to do what they've always done, the way they've always done it, they will instinctively, they will legislatively, they will religiously send people away.

Oh, but Jesus, Jesus takes the fish in the loaves. He blesses it, he breaks it, then he gives it blessed, broken, given. Let's talk about it. Blessed even in a dry place. Amen. Blessed even when the crowd is larger than you expected. Blessed even when the budget is tight, you know when the money is funny and the change is strange. Still blessed when the team is small. And yes, it's the same team that keeps showing up week after week after week. Still blessed.

Time out.

For those of you who keep showing up, thank God for your ability to show up. Thank God for your heart to serve! And don't spend your energy on those people whom you know. Ain't never done nothing. Just gonna talk about what everybody else does and gonna make a whole lot of promises. And never show up and then gonna talk about what everybody else does. Gonna make an excuse for why they didn't come. Get all involved in the decision-making and everything else. Not going to find one nickel under a couch cushion to bring, to contribute in any way. And then they're gonna be out of town when it's time to do the thing, and then they're gonna want to vote on how we go. Stop wasting time on them. Celebrate the blessing that you get to be. And if that's too much for you, and if you're showing up and you're griping and complaining, please find out where those other people are and go with them.

All right, time in.

See the disciples looked at their resource. I need you to follow me closely here. The disciples looked at their resource of the two fish and the five loaves and said, "We only have five loaves and two fish." Now, that's equivalent to, "We've never done it that way before." That's like, we tried that back when the Barleys were here.

Or we need young people to take over these committees. Uhh, you know, that's equivalent to, oh, you have kids, so you should lead the youth group because they have those kids. The last thing they want to do is lead the youth group.

See, all of that is about the resource. All but the source is where we need our energy and our emphasis. Because when the two fish and the five loaves were presented, the source said, "Bring what you've got."

You give them something to eat. See, God doesn't need much. God just needs what you're willing to give with a good attitude. I might add. See if you bring resources to the source, miracles are possible, and maybe we don't see miracles now because we're just focused on the resource, and we've forgotten about the source.

See, God can work with what you offer. Sustaining, when we're talking about being blessed, is knowing how many people you have. It's, it's, it's, it's how much will it take to feed them and knowing where they can go to get provisions that's sustaining, you know, counting, um, stockpiling, hoarding, waiting for the right conditions, waiting for permission, and I don't know what we call it, buy-in. Realizing whatever this is, is not what will survive. You know me, focused, 'I-centered, singular, insular, protectionist, dare I say perfectionist. Sustaining is unattainable while disrupting. When we're talking about blessed disrupting, it's giving what you have because you know this involves you, but it's not about you. Amen.

It's trusting. It's trusting that there is knowledge and capabilities beyond what you possess or control. You can't know everything and do everything and care for everyone. You know why? Because you are not God. So, stop.

I mean, if you need permission, there it is. Why didn't you, why didn't you, why didn't you, why didn't you, your response? *I'm not God*, say it with me. *I'm not God*. Why didn't you show up to all three of those meetings last night on time and stay fully focused on the agenda? *I'm not, God*, why don't you answer the phone at midnight every time I ring your phone?

I'm just saying. So broken. Broken. Let me, let me, let me, let me move along. Let me hasten, I'm just filling in my help now. All right, so let's talk about broken. Let's talk about broken. And this part is not easy. This part hurts because it's supposed to tell us, think it's not strange, but it's real. But what if, if we look into this text, what if we look in there and what if we find out what, what if broken is the beginning? What if we looked at the breaking as the beginning, not as the end? Yes. See, Jesus took the bread. He blessed it, but before he gave it. See, we, we bought, you know, we, yes, I see it. You know, we, we, we, oh, blessed. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Given to the world. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, multiplying love and grace out in the world.

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. You skipped a step, baby.

He took the bread, and he blessed it. He broke it, he gave it. Now, I have to admit, this creates a theological conundrum, right? 'Cause we don't wanna go around saying, Jesus broke me or God broke us. Now, some may say it after the offering, but that's a different matter altogether. But here's the thing we have to hold onto. In the midst of this, God made all of us in God's image and likeness, so that there is something mysterious about each of us. There's something creative about each of us.

There's something unique about each of us. Yet all of us are made in the image and likeness of God. All of us are fearfully and wonderfully made. Now we say that, but if we really believe that, then when life gets hard, we'd manage.

If we truly believe that no matter what state we're in, we still hold that image of God. I think we'd manage 'cause everything God created. God looked upon it and called it good; that includes you. See, things happen to us in life. Life happens to us. I mean, life gets to life in some time, and it gets hard. I don't know about what goes on at your address, but at the one y'all gave me, Lord have mercy.

I mean, our parents don't love us the way we need to be loved. Our friends don't extend grace when we mess up. Our partners don't handle us with care, our supervisors or bosses or managers or whatever. Okay? Superintendents don't get to know our strengths. Our neighbors don't see us and our lived experience; they just assume things about us.

Our laws and policies don't include our realities. Beloved, I have it on good authority that marriages and relationships end. A dear one dies. A job moves or gives you a pink slip. The promotion never happened. The "I love you" was never spoken. The 'he did do it again,' that 'she never showed up' or 'they didn't have my back.' Broken, broken brokenness, it's real. And an everyday occurrence somewhere in our sphere. It's part of the equation. It's the other side of the coin, if you will, and I'm not trying to make light of it. The brokenness you experience does not disqualify you from being the image and likeness of God. Instead, it demonstrates that you are in the process. Yes. See, when you look at the text, you see that after Jesus tells the disciples to sit, the people in groups distribute the fish and loaves, and more was left after the breaking than before the breaking. The blessing wasn't in the whole loaf; it was in the broken pieces.

See that divorce, and I just have to tell you about divorce. When my parents decided to divorce, that was the best thing they ever could have done for themselves, for us, and the world. Amen. I mean, I'm telling you, it was the best thing. I'm not saying all of them are. I'm just not a person who says divorce is never a good option because my lived experience says otherwise.

But that divorce, that diagnosis, that disappointment, that's not just your pain. It may be someone else's deliverance. It may be. See, scars are not signs of shame. They are stripes of your survival if you live to show them, baby. That's your testimony. See, pretending you're okay, believing you are okay right now, even if you're male, white or white adjacent. Sure. A lot of people are trying to get white right now.

Did I say something wrong? Did I, was it, I mean, it's right here. It's right here. I promise you it's right here. But if you're, you're, you're trying to do all that, it's a sign that you're thinking you can wait this one out or that you are safe to pass while others get trampled on. Ooh. See, beloved, whatever privilege you have, you have to use it to protect and to liberate others.

That's how you will find your own liberation. See, we're not perfect, but we're present. We may be a cracked, tired supply even in our brokenness. Why? Because God is using us. See, and that's the balance we live with sustaining while disrupting. Let me, let me get back to this and this brokenness. How does that look? Well, sustaining, it's, it's, we do what we must do to survive.

When we're sustaining in our brokenness, we do what we must do to survive, to keep going and not to lose hope and to keep everybody together at all costs, even if it means wrangling our integrity. Denying our humanity, going along to get along, but in our brokenness, disrupting, it's when we look for what is not yet and we ready ourselves to bring it into being, even though we don't know quite what it is, because we are blessed and we are broken.

Sustaining is wallowing in your pity thinking. Everyone is judging your journey. Then dressing it up and making it look good even when it isn't. Somebody asked me one time at a party, You wanna play charades? I'm like, I do it every Sunday morning.

Sustaining is denying parts of yourself or your story so that others feel comfortable with your discomfort. Disrupting is deciding to live authentically using the gifts you are given to make a difference, even when those gifts are not celebrated as much as others. It's seeing possibilities and pain and maintaining hope and optimism when the blues will suffice. That's broken. Let me get to given and get out of your way.

Blessed, broken, given, so given. Jesus didn't just bless and break the bread; he gave it away. He distributed it. He offered it up. He said, "You give them something to eat," even when they didn't feel ready. Worthy or equipped. He called them to do something they had not done before, which meant they had to adjust their expectations.

See, this is not about having it all together. This is about offering what you've got—I'm sorry, offering what you have. This is about feeding the hungry with love, offering grace to the forgotten, sitting with the grieving, and standing with the oppressed. See, let the record show that God still calls us to serve no matter where we are on that hillside or in that desert.

Whether we're the crowd that's being seated in these groups, whether we're disciples who are underestimating the situation, whether we're the ones who are out on the periphery trying to figure out what in the world is going on, God still calls us to serve from wherever we find ourselves in the narrative, wherever we find ourselves. In between the blessedness and the brokenness, God still calls us to serve. That's the giving piece. Yes. That's why sustaining while disrupting is an option for us in this season. See, this world is hurting, but the call is still the same. The call is for you to give them something to eat, for you to give them compassion, for you to give them presence, for you to give them hope.

And for those of you who are self-centered and I-focused, you are a part of the you. You may not be wholly beloved, but you're enough. You may not be famous, but beloved, let it be said that you were faithful. You may not be big in the world's eyes, but you are blessed. You experience some brokenness, and you're given every single day for the glory of God every single day.

So, there I was on the last day of the ride. It was hot, the route was new, and it was difficult. The team leaders decided we would meet at Ocean Boulevard and Idaho Street at 4:15 to ride across the finish line together, and it didn't matter who was or wasn't there. That was the plan. I made up my mind that I would do all I could to be there by 4:15.

But as I told you, after lunch, I fell behind on the last big climb of the day. They were gone too far in the distance for me to see them, but I continued to climb. I rode my own ride. Amen. At my own pace. I settled into the idea that I may be alone on this bicycle, but I am not alone in this work, and my goal was to cross the finish line. My desire was to get there with them, but my goal was to cross the finish line. My desire was to get there with them, but my goal was to cross the finish line. I couldn't let what my, you know, my desire, the absence of me being able to fulfill my desire, to get in the way of my goal, right?

You see what I'm saying? See, if my goal is to live faithfully in the arms of Jesus, I can't let the fact that you're looking at me sideways. And so, I kept riding y'all. I decided I'd ride my own ride at my own pace, and I'd crossed the finish line. Why? Because that was my goal. And so, I kept riding and I kept riding.

And then I was sitting at an intersection with some people I didn't know, which kind of felt like the team I was on, if I might add that in there. But one of the, one of the guys from the team I'm on rode up next to me at the intersection, and he says, "I'm so glad I caught up to you." I said, "Well, I'm glad you did too." And we started chatting. And I said, "Well, you know, we not gonna make 4:15." He said, "I know, but maybe they'll wait." And I said, "Really?" He said, "Nah."

We laughed and we rode on. And during that time of riding, we shared, I got to know a little bit of his story. He asked a little bit of mine, y'all. And as we turned onto Ocean Boulevard, he said, "I see them." Oh, it was 4:35. He said, "I see them." And I said, "They waited for us. Wow." And we rode up to them and they cheered for us.

They took pictures with us. Then they asked, "Who's behind you?" And we said, "Frank Paul, Annette. We are still somewhere back there." And they said, "Well, do you know how far?" I said, "No." I said, "I didn't even know he was behind me. See, I thought I was last."

The other guy said, "I don't think they're too far behind us." The team talked a little bit, and they said, "Well, we'll give them 10 minutes. 10 minutes, and then we gotta go." Well, after five minutes, we saw Paul and Frank round the corner, and as we started cheering for them, Annette came around the corner. We took pictures, celebrated, and cheered on a few more teams as they rode past us.

And then we lined up, and we rode in to cross the finish line. And I tell you, as we rode in, there were people on both sides of the street cheering us on. I heard them say, "Let's welcome our riders from Seattle Outspoken as they complete their seven-day journey." I smiled, poked my chest out a little bit, and thought, this is my team.

Blessed and broken, my team.

This story is the gospel in action. Yes. Jesus took the bread, he blessed it, he broke it, and he gave it. Beloved, that's your story too. We must disrupt the status quo. If we had a Hammond, this is where it would start tuning. Yes. We must disrupt the status quo. We must disrupt the language that dehumanizes.

Yeah. Yes. We must disrupt the policies that police our bodies. We have to disrupt the conversations that are about us and not with us. Yes, we have to disrupt the narrative that says when a person is proud of their culture, that they are being divisive. We have to disrupt the teachings that anti-blackness is not a thing, beloved. It is.

We have to disrupt the congregation that insists on the middle of the road for everything. Yes, we have to disrupt the congregation that believes by remaining silent on whether basic civil and human rights are being violated in these United States of America will somehow keep their church or their people in it together or safe.

We have to disrupt the so-called spiritual leader who will not speak the truth of what they see out of fear of someone leaving the church or getting upset. I mean, let me help you with that one. They're gonna tell one of them. And one of them is gonna tell me, and I'm gonna say, heck yeah, keep doing it.

We have to disrupt the rhetoric that says, critiquing policies that criminalize care and compassion is being political. Need I remind you that the church once ruled the world. So politics is in her DNA. And have you heard of this little thing called the Social Principles? You wanna talk about meddlin?

Beloved, you've been taken up in God's love. You've been blessed with gifts and graces. You've been broken by life's battles, and now you're being given. Given to your family, given to your community, given to your church, given to a hurting world, blessed, broken, given. You are a living sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible grace that we can make present in every space we occupy.

Yes, so Beloved, so go now. Ride your own race at your own pace. Yes. Whatever your goal may be, go now. Go as the blessed go, as the broken go, as the given disciples of Jesus Christ, created by God and watch God. Watch God work a miracle through you. Watch God take hold of this world and move it in a way that you can't even imagine.

Watch God move in a mighty and miraculous way. Watch God hear your prayers and respond to them. Know that you're blessed. Know that it's just human to experience brokenness and know that it's discipleship to be given and to give in love. God bless. God bless. God bless.