

Bread for Our Journey

I have a great sandwich for you to consider this morning. Get your Bibles out and look with me at today's Scripture reading in Mark 8:1-21. Then look at what comes before it. Mark 7:31-37 record the healing of a man who was deaf and mute. Now look at what comes after it. Mark 8:22-26 record the healing of a blind man. Then look at Mark 8:17b-18, which is right in the middle of Jesus' teaching section: Jesus says, Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?"

Everything in between these two healings deals with one thing and that one thing is spiritual discernment or perhaps a better word would be comprehension. We are invited to hear, to see, to understand what is going on in this word.

The main body of Scripture we are looking at today is known as the miracle of the feeding of the 4000. Mark 8:1-9a, say,

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance." His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?" "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand men were present.

It is curious that two miraculous feedings come so close together in Mark's gospel. We saw a very similar story in Mark 6. Some scholars have found this so odd that they have suggested that two different oral traditions arose and were eventually placed in Scripture as separate events, when in fact there was only one feeding. If this were true, it would tend to undermine our whole understanding of the reliability and authority of the Bible. **We don't need to go there.**

The better way to go is to compare the two stories and see what we learn from the similarities and differences. We are challenged to have

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our ears, eyes and hearts open to God's word and not be deaf or blind to what it has to say to us, so we can speak clearly of its meaning to others.

The similarities are obvious: Jesus and His disciples encounter a large group of people in a remote place. Jesus teaches the people there. Time goes by and there is a need for the people to be fed. The disciples doubt. Jesus takes charge. Meager provisions are multiplied to meet the needs of the many. Basketfuls of leftovers are gathered. There is nothing remarkable about the similarities.

The differences, however, are interesting. The first and perhaps most significant difference is the difference in the make-up of the crowd. Dr. David McKenna writes: "Continuing His homeward journey, Jesus has come to the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He has not yet left the region of Decapolis. The composition of the crowd, then, would either be Gentile or mixed with a sprinkling of Jews. By contrast, the five thousand men plus women and children who were fed earlier on the other side of the lake were exclusively Jewish." This alone gives us reason for two miraculous feedings, not just one. Like the multiple fillings of the Holy Spirit we see in the book of Acts (first to the Jews, then to the Samaritans, then to the Gentiles), this multiple feeding recorded by Mark and Matthew, helps us see that God's provision is not just for the Jews. God's grace is available to all who call upon His name. In Psalm 36:7-8, the psalmist declares: "How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights." There are Jews and non-Jews and **God cares for them all.**

The second difference according to McKenna is a difference in need. In the feeding of the 5,000 the main emphasis is on leadership and teaching; Jesus "had compassion on the people because they were lost and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." He taught them many things. The concern that led to feeding the people was raised by the disciples, who wanted to send them away to buy their own food. In this earlier story, the people were in no real danger; missing a meal or two is not generally life-threatening. Jesus uses the feeding to illustrate to His disciples God's provision for those who go out to minister in His name. But in the feeding of the 4000, the people have been with Jesus for three days and Jesus is concerned about their physical condition. Jesus initiates the action. The point here is that Jesus does, in fact, care about the physical needs of people and is able to meet those needs. There are spiritual needs and physical needs and **God cares for them both.**

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A third significant difference I see between these two stories is the difference in the numbers. It is interesting that in the feeding of the 4000 the numbers of people were less (4000 instead of 5000), the provisions were more (7 loaves instead of 5, a few small fish instead of just two), and the basketfuls of leftovers were fewer (7 baskets instead of 12). The logic doesn't add up. If you feed fewer people with more provisions you ought to have more leftovers not less. Of course one could argue that this second group of people were without food longer and were therefore hungrier and ate more.

But, I suspect the better explanation is that greater faith reaps greater reward. It was a stretch in both cases, but it was more of a stretch to feed 5,000 plus their families with 5 loaves and two small fish than it was to feed 4,000 with seven loaves and a few small fish. It also required greater faith and greater risk the first time because at that point the disciples of Jesus had never seen anything like it before. **The more we stretch to obey God, the more we will be able to accomplish and the more we will be blessed.**

The last part of our Scripture passage this morning deals with application: Mark 8:10-21 say,

"He got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

The first thing we notice in this section is that we are sailing once again. Jesus and his disciples had hiked up north and visited the coastal towns of Tyre and Sidon, then they took a long swing south and east through primarily Gentile territory and came back west to the southeastern shore of Galilee. It was there the feeding of the 4000 takes place. But, then, Mark tells us they got into a boat and went to Dalmanutha, which means they sailed across the lake and back into Jewish territory on the west bank. No sooner had they landed, however, than a group of Pharisees came out to meet them and began to badger Jesus. They've heard of Jesus' miracles and they want to see one for themselves. "Give us a sign," they say.

Jesus rebukes them and tells them that those who look for miraculous signs will not see any. I think the idea here is that those who look for signs for the sake of seeing signs will not be given any. Or, if we are looking to see signs before believing, we will not see any. **Belief precedes miracles not the other way around.** It's not "seeing is believing," but "believing is seeing," especially for those who should already be trusting God.

After this rather unpleasant exchange with the Pharisees, Jesus leaves the Jewish side of the lake and sails back to the eastern shore. On the voyage back across the lake, Jesus starts a conversation with His disciples. He says, "Beware of the leaven or yeast of the Pharisees and Herod." It's interesting how we are apt to interpret things according to our own agendas and through our own guilt. The disciples' reasoning went something like this: "He's talking about yeast which is associated with bread and we left so fast to come back across the lake that we forgot to buy anymore bread. He must be scolding us for our lack of provision." We can also assume that the finger pointing started as the disciples tried to shift the blame from one to another. Mark simply says, "Jesus knew what they were saying, so he asked them, "Why are you discussing about not having any bread?"

At this point the reasoning of Jesus is clear and the cluelessness of the disciples is crystal clear. "Don't you remember?" He says. "After participating in the feeding of the 5000 and then the feeding of the 4000, how can you be worrying about bread? Where are your heads? Where is your understanding?" Their discernment, their comprehension is lacking. Jesus persists in driving the point home: "How many basketsful of pieces did you pick up after the feeding of the 5,000 and how many after the feeding of the 4,000? Doesn't that tell you something?"

Now, the question raised by this morning's Scripture is: "Are we any smarter, any more tuned in, than the original disciples of Jesus?" Can we see what they were missing?

The focus of this whole passage is on hearing, seeing, and comprehending the identity of Jesus Christ. The leaven of the Pharisees is the multiplying evil of unbelief and rejection of Jesus as the Savior. The question is what are you and I going to do with Jesus? The truth be told neither you nor I were at the feeding of the 5000 or even at the feeding of the 4,000. But we have other memories.

Perhaps it was that moment at Church Camp, a Men's Conference or at a Ladies' retreat, or at a certain church service or special meeting when the power of the Holy Spirit came upon you and you said, "yes I will follow Jesus." Perhaps it was an answered prayer or a certain coincident that was too coincidental to be just a coincident. Maybe it was at the birth of your first child or at the deathbed of your grandparent or your healing from a serious illness. Maybe it was that time when you were lost and all alone and God sent someone to show you the way home. Or, could it be that it was in seeing that one magnificent sunset or sunrise that you knew the finger of God had brushed against your cheek? Do you remember? Do you remember when Jesus came and gave Himself to you? Do you remember the light of faith coming to life within you? Do you remember the sense of being forgiven and the feeling of cleansing that washed over you? Take a moment right now to remember.

The other thing we need to do this morning is pound in some stakes to identify the holy ground on which we've tread. We need to memorialize those times in the past when God touched us, so we can return to those places when we are weak and tempted. Like the disciples of Jesus, we sometimes find ourselves afraid, self-condemning, confused, terribly lacking. We need to remember that the Lord has provided for our needs in the past and He will provide for us again. Pound in a few spiritual stakes and never let them go.

One other possibility is that for someone here this morning, this right now is your moment. You are tired of your sins and ready to turn from them, tired of your skepticism and ready to forsake it. The Holy Spirit has whispered the words of Jesus within your heart. He has said, "Come, follow me," and now is your moment to respond, to say "Yes" to Jesus, and to invite Him into your life as Savior and Lord. Today is a day to remember or perhaps a day to make a memory! Either way, today is a day to find bread to sustain us on our spiritual journey.

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Mark 8:1-21

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