

The Bread of Life

Mark 8:1-21 (ESV)

January 5, 2003

“Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?...Do you not yet understand?” These seven questions, along with the other five Jesus asked in today’s reading, mark his incredulity and exasperation at his own disciples’ absolute failure to be his disciples. They simply did not get it. Do we? Despite all his teaching, preaching, and pastoral care, despite his healings, exorcisms, and raising the dead, despite his walking on the water and calming the storm, despite his feeding first of the five thousand and now of the four thousand, and despite everything else he had done, they did not know who he was. It would seem that all was for naught.

Strangely enough, there is great and wonderful good news for us hidden deep within these words of apparent despair. The very fact that Jesus asked the questions indicates that he fully and rightly expected more than he was getting from them and more than he has yet gotten from us. It is within the realm of God’s intentions for humanity, in terms of our relationship to him through Jesus Christ, that we both perceive and understand, that our hearts *not* be hardened, that we have eyes and see and have ears and hear, that we remember, and that we understand. This is great! This is who we are. This is why we were created. This is how we were made. This is what we are about. This is what it means to be human. These are God’s plans for our lives.

Unfortunately, the very fact that Jesus asked these questions indicates that we are *not* fulfilling God’s purposes for our lives, particularly in terms of our relation to him in and through Jesus Christ. In fact, the disciples’ total and abject failure to understand who Jesus was despite their constant and close contact with him indicates not only their personal failure but also and more importantly the sheer human impossibility of turning to God on our own. We were made by God and for God to be in relationship with God, so that at that level it is a God-given human capacity. However, since we have turned away from God and have become self-centered, it is no longer within our human strength or capability to turn back to God or to center our lives on God again. Having sinned, we are free to keep sinning, but we are not free simply to stop sinning on our own power or strength.

But then, that is why Jesus came. If we could do this on our own, we would not need him. If we could turn back to God, Jesus did not have to die. If we could

overcome our own sin, we would not need forgiveness. But since we cannot do this, Jesus came to do for us what we cannot do ourselves. The good news is not only that we have unfulfilled capacity for both perceiving and understanding, for our hearts *not* being hardened, for having eyes and seeing and having ears and hearing, for remembering, and for understanding. And the good news is certainly not that we are incapable of doing any of this on our own. Instead, the good news is that when we have exhausted every human potential and strength, when we have done all that we can and it is not enough, when we have run as far away as we can, Jesus Christ comes to us, finds us, calls us to himself as his very own, and give us these good gifts for which we were made but of which we are not capable on our own. That is, in, through, and by Jesus Christ alone, we are given perception and understanding, believing hearts, seeing eyes, hearing ears, remembering, and understanding. The very things for which Jesus asks, the very things he seeks for us, are exactly what he gives to us, for he alone can and does give them to us. Thanks be to God!

Where can we get these? One of the ways that Jesus gives us these gifts is through today's reading. When the crowd had gathered and been with him for three days, Jesus refused to send them away hungry. The story deals with bread and fish, but it is about much more than bread and fish. The crowd came to Jesus to be fed, and he fed them, even as he feeds us today. They ate and were satisfied. Are you hungry? The echoes of the communion service in the account of the feeding of the four thousand point clearly to the reality that Jesus Christ himself is the very bread of life, that Jesus Christ gives himself to satisfy our hunger and thirst, and that Jesus Christ himself is the one thing we need to live. This is true perception. This is true understanding. This is true faith. This is seeing, hearing, remembering, and understanding.

How jarring it is that immediately after this feeding of the four thousand the Pharisees showed up asking for a sign! What would it have taken? Apparently, miracles are not sufficient to produce faith. Of course, the reality was that the Pharisees were not looking for a sign. Their minds were already made up. They did not want to believe in Jesus, and they succeeded in that. As Dr. John Leith used to say, the only people whom Jesus could not help were the ones who did not want his help. Their refusal to believe saddened Jesus. But he refused to be drawn into producing signs for them. He understood that God was not his servant; instead, he was the son and servant of God. No sign would have convinced the Pharisees. Faith has to do with trust and love. These are not strengthened by demands for proof, but are, instead, destroyed.

But the problem was not just the Pharisees. How strange that his own disciples soon worried about not having enough bread in the boat to eat even when they had Jesus in the boat with them! Not only could he have provided loaves for

them as he had for the crowd but also he was the very bread of life himself. The very first verse of the gospel says that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. But this is exactly what the disciples did not yet realize. We can see Jesus shaking his head and weeping!

Are we in danger of making the same mistake as the disciples? Do we worry too much about the things of this life, as good and useful as they are in themselves, while ignoring or missing the important things of that greater life? It would be easy to ridicule the disciples for their stupidity until we realize that we suffer from the same human condition. With only our natural human hearts and minds, no one understands who Jesus is. God alone gives the faith and understanding that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. That faith is not a human accomplishment. It is a precious gift.

The church is a gathering of those who believe in Jesus Christ as Son of God, Lord, and Savior. We are called out from a world which does not so believe. The point here is that we do not exist as the church by our own intelligence, faith, or understanding. We exist by the pure grace and goodness of God. There is nothing in us to distinguish us from others. God alone has gathered us here. There is no superiority within us. There is no looking down on outsiders. There is no closing ourselves off. And there is no keeping this gospel to ourselves. For this church is not our church. This church is the church of Jesus Christ to do with as he pleases. In fact, this all suggests that we have been gathered here for the very purpose of telling others of the grace of God and gathering them here to be with us.

So, the church has been gathered out of the world, not for special privilege but for special service. It is precisely because the church does not exist on the basis of our understanding but on the sheer grace of God that we are called upon to announce and share that grace with all people. We are not to keep the world out but bring the world in. Jesus Christ is bread of life not only for the church but also for all the world, and we are to set that bread before the world. If people do not respond to the grace of God or do not appear to us to do so, that is between them and God; it is none of our business. But if people are never invited here to hear the word of the grace of God, that is between God and us, and I shudder to think of trying to explain to him why we did not bring in more people. We have made a beginning; now is the time to open the floodgates. Today is the day, and this is the year, for Grace Covenant to share the gospel, to serve human need, and to grow as never before.

Jesus asked the disciples, the church through all the ages, and also us, "Do you not yet understand?" This hard question cuts two ways. Clearly it is a warning and a word of judgment. The church is not self-sufficient. Church members have no ground of our own goodness to stand before God. We are here by God's mercy and God's mercy alone.

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And yet, this very question is also a gracious invitation. “Do you not yet understand?” If not, are you willing to listen to Jesus a little longer? Will you finish the gospel story with him, through betrayal, cross, and resurrection? Will you follow him along the way? Will you receive from him a new heart, eyes to see and ears to hear? Will you thus perceive, believe, and then understand, by his gracious gifts alone, that Jesus is the Christ, the very Son of God? Come and eat your fill of the bread of life!

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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