

Do You Not Yet Understand? Mark 8:11-26

By now, if you have been here at Living Hope for the past months, you are probably starting to feel like the gospel of Mark has gotten a bit repetitive. We've seen a lot of the same themes, haven't we? The story all focuses on Jesus – it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to Mark. And Mark wants us to see, above all, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It begins there at the baptism of Jesus as God the Father speaks this truth about Jesus...it is there at the end as the Roman centurion stands there at the foot of the cross...and next week we'll see it right in the middle when Peter makes his great confession.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And Jesus is doing all sorts of extraordinary things – his teaching is with authority and amazes all who hear; he is healing all sorts of infirmities; he is casting out demons; he is calling a band of followers, disciples to himself; he is walking on water; twice he has fed crowds of many thousands with a few biscuits and fish.

And all of this has made Jesus the talk of the town. Everywhere he goes people are taking notice. Some are approaching him with great faith – the woman with the discharge of blood and the Syrophenician woman asking for scraps from the table come to mind – while many, particularly the religious and political elite of the day, find this man Jesus to be a nuisance – a source of upheaval and insurrection.

Jesus is doing miraculous and extraordinary things that are proving he is who he claims to be, who the prophets said would come – the Son of God. Nearly everyone is impressed – some positively, some negatively. Most of the people, including the disciples, don't "get it".

And yet in the midst of it all, we find people of great faith coming to Jesus and receiving the blessing that their faith deserves.

And this morning's text gives us more of the same pattern. You will remember from Pastor Matt's sermon last week, that Jesus just fed 4,000 people with some biscuits and fish. A Gentile crowd. Jesus is the compassionate shepherd that meets the needs of all people – all the nations – not just the Jews, not just the people of the Fox Valley. You would've hoped that this would have been the occasion for a great outpouring...a great expression of faith among the people. But it isn't.

Do you remember the episode that Mark records in Mark 6 right after the feeding of the 5,000? Jesus sends the disciples ahead in a boat while he dismisses the crowd and spends some time in prayer with his Father. Then he comes to the disciples, walking on the water. And how do they respond? "GHOST!" Their response to a great miracle of Jesus is great fear and unbelief. Mark summarizes like this – "And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened."

Now we've got the feeding of the 4,000 – a bit of déjà vu – and sadly, the response of the disciples is also déjà vu, isn't it? Jesus asks them in 8:17, "are your hearts hardened?" And so let's put ourselves right back into Mark's story this morning and let's learn again about the greatness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.

And we can break out text into three parts quite easily this morning – the interaction of Jesus with the Pharisees, his interaction with the disciples, and then the healing of the blind man. And you could summarize it like this – 1.) A Judgment 2.) A Warning 3.) A Healing

Judgement. Warning. Healing. All three point to Mark's main point – Jesus is the Son of God. And all three are intended to provoke a response of faith and belief and trust from his people. They are meant as a call to arms, a call to allegiance to the King of kings and the Lord of lords. You can't remain on the fence with this man Jesus – you must make a decision about him. Is he who he claims to be? If so, then faith and allegiance are the only proper response.

A Judgment – 8:11-13

First, the judgment in verses 11-13. The feeding of the 4,000 occurred in Gentile territory...and here Jesus is returning back into Jewish territory and he is met by the Pharisees – the religious elite, religious leaders of Jesus' day. Verse 11 says that they come to argue with him, they come seeking a sign from heaven to test him. Why were they so worked up? Well I think it is safe to assume that one of the main reasons was the fact that Jesus had just done such a great miracle of blessing and provision for GENTILES!

Which is the reason why they are asking for a sign from heaven. I don't think they are just looking for a miracle – they have seen all sorts of those up-close, first-hand, in the ministry of Jesus already. No, what they are looking for is some sort of sign from heaven that would authenticate Jesus as the Messiah, the Deliverer that the Jews had been looking for. It is a challenge – these Pharisees are saying – no way you are the Messiah, he wouldn't do what you just did for the Gentiles. Where are your credentials?

The Pharisees are playing religious police. They have just pulled Jesus over on a suspicion of drunk miracle-ing and they are tapping on his window – license and registration. 😊 Just who does this guy think he is? Surely he isn't the Messiah the prophets predicted would come. HE wouldn't do this!

But seriously, what more could they really want? Had not what they seen been enough? It makes you wonder what Jesus could have possibly done to convince them...more than he had already done... And Jesus sees right through them, doesn't he? How does he respond? Look there in verse 12 – “he sighed deeply in his spirit”.

He's exasperated with them, yes. But he is also saddened by their stubborn hard-heartedness. Jesus will never turn away a serious questioner. Nobody in this room should ever feel like you can't go to God with your honest questions, your serious doubts, your broken heart. Cry out to God in prayer. Open your Bible and ask the tough questions, seeking answers. Jesus will never turn you away. God is close to the broken-hearted. God will always answer those who are seriously seeking after truth and comfort and answers.

But that was not the Pharisees. They were not sincere questioners. They came picking a fight. They had seen the healings, the exorcisms and the miraculous feedings. But that still wasn't enough for them. Give them a REAL sign from heaven and then we will believe. Give us a sign Jesus!

And Jesus gives them a sign. No sign. He says there in verse 12 – “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” You want a sign? Here is your sign – no sign. Why no sign? Because Jesus is saying that these Pharisees, these religious Jews of his day, were like that “generation” of Israel long ago that disbelieved in the God of the covenant and so wandered around in the desert for 40 years until they all died off. I think Jesus probably has Psalm 95 in mind – “today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work...for forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘they are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have

not known my ways'...therefore I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest."

Jesus is declaring a sign of judgment against the Pharisees...he is associating them with the generation who demanded signs in the desert though they had already passed through the Red Sea and been fed daily with manna from heaven. They would not believe, they hardened their hearts and went astray. And they received God's judgment and wrath.

Jesus says...this adulterous generation seeks a sign...NO SIGN! And he leaves them there in their unbelief and stubborn rebellion. O may we not be like these Pharisees – may the records of the gospels be enough for us to declare like that centurion – Jesus Christ is the Son of God!

A Warning – 8:14-21

We want to be like the disciples, right? They definitely weren't like the Pharisees...they got it! 😊 Well...not exactly...keep reading...

Because Jesus asks the disciples a series of 8 questions in rapid-fire succession...and they aren't very nice questions...the last one, there in verse 21 is a good summary – “Do you not yet understand?” And these questions too sound a lot like things we would read in the Old Testament prophets, words of judgement and unbelief. “Having eyes do you not see? Having ears to you not hear? Do you not remember? Are your hearts hardened?”

Just what was it that God Jesus all worked up? Well, we are told at the end of the previous episode with the Pharisees that Jesus and his disciples get in the boat and head over to the other side. But then verse 14 tells us that when the disciples were checking their food supply they realized all they had was one loaf...a biscuit really...of bread. And Jesus was there, listening to them talk about bread...and he says, Aha!, this will

be a great teaching opportunity...an object lesson...so he says there in verse 15 – “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.”

And the disciples totally miss it, don't they? Verse 16 tells us that they begin discussing with themselves the fact that they had no bread. REALLY?!?!? How did that discussion go? Eh Peter, how much bread do we have? One loaf. What...whose fault was that? Well, it wasn't mine, I put Andrew in charge of the bread for this trip...he must have miscalculated. Well...yeah...we've been gone a bit longer than I anticipated...and I had those seven baskets full, and I thought those would last us until we could get some more...but I miscalculated... Seriously? What was there to discuss? It should have been – “Hey Jesus, we've only got one loaf, we are a bit hungry, can you quick multiply this for us? 😊

They thought Jesus' comment about yeast had something to do with their bread supply...they totally missed it. And so Jesus rattles off this list of questions to get them thinking straight again. And what was his point? He is issuing a warning. He says to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Herodians. The idea of leaven simply has to do with spreading – a little yeast put in a lump of dough quickly spreads to the whole lump. And leaven in the Bible often refers to sin and evil. So Jesus is warning the disciples to be on their guard against the sin and evil of the Pharisees and the Herodians which can so quickly and easily spread through cultures and individuals.

And if we had to summarize the sin, the evil, of these two groups...my ESV Study Bible says it well – “Leaven is a figurative description of the self-centered self-reliance of both the Pharisees and Herod.” Self-centered self-reliance. This is the exact opposite of what God wants from his children. God wants us to be God-centered God-reliant. The disciples

of Jesus lived in a culture where the religious elite and the political elite were urging them to be self-centered and self-reliant. I'm so glad we don't live in a culture like that! 😊

Wouldn't it have been so much easier if we had lived with the disciples during Jesus' day? Then we could see Jesus and touch him and talk to him. We could watch him do his miracles so that if we ever found ourselves in a situation where we only had one loaf, we wouldn't be self-centered and self-reliant but we would trust God completely, with no doubts or wavering, and we would know that he would provide all our needs in his perfect timing. If only we lived back then!!!

But the essence and heart of sin is self-deification...the de-Godding of God. Pride, self-centered self-reliance is the very nature of sin. And so from the Garden of Eden humanity has been tempted to trust in the religious and political systems of their day. We think that if only we can be good enough or smart enough, then God will have to accept us. But left to ourselves, we will never be good enough to earn God's merit or favor...we can never put God in our debt or tell God "you owe me!" We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We have all been self-centered, self-reliant, proud and spiritually adulterous. We have all been "that generation".

So when the disciples find themselves worrying because they only have one loaf...Jesus starts in with a series of questions intended to get them to see that if they will trust in him and rely on him, he will provide all that they need. "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" Twelves. "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" Seven. "Do you not yet understand?"

Look at the lilies of the field. Look at the birds of the air. I care for them. I clothe them. You are worth so much more than flowers and birds – if I care for them, I will definitely care for you. You only have one loaf? That’s enough for 10,000 people with baskets of leftovers...what are you worried about!? What you really need to be worried about is the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod. They will try to convince you that you can be good enough and smart enough and strong enough to please me. You can’t. You need to be daily...moment-by-moment...humble and child-like in faith if you are to be my disciple.

I wish we had time to think about the leaven of our world today. Because it wouldn’t be Pharisees and Herodians for us today, would it? It would be more like this: Beware of the leaven of Hollywood. Beware of the leaven of Wall Street. Beware of the leaven of Washington. Beware of the leaven of Silicon Valley. Oh the temptations to self-reliance and self-centeredness are everywhere for us today. And the gospel of Jesus Christ says that the only way to come into a right relationship with God is by humbly repenting of our sins and putting our hope and trust and confidence in Christ – in his perfect life and sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection. The Christian life is a life of self-denial and sacrificial loving service. Christ modelled it for us perfectly and we must follow in his steps.

A Healing – Mark 8:22-26

Finally, and briefly, Mark records for us a healing. And I think that Mark records this miracles as a way to illustrate what he has just been saying about the Pharisees and the disciples. Jesus has just been asking the disciples all these questions about their understanding and perception of God’s work in the world. And in this unique miracle story – it is the only one where we see Jesus healing in two “stages” like this – Jesus asks the man after he initially touches him – “do you see anything?”

To which the man responds – “I see men, but they look like trees, walking.” After a second touch from Jesus, the man can see clearly and his sight is completely restored. It is a healing in stages meant to illustrate the reality of the disciples. Of you and me as followers of King Jesus.

We won't have all of our understanding immediately. Faith is a process. Growth in the Christian life comes in stages. We are tempted to scoff at the disciples for their lack of understanding and their hard hearts. But let us not forget that they had already shown their radical allegiance to Jesus. They had left everything to follow him. And let us not forget that they were still with him! They may not understand everything perfectly...their faith is still incomplete and stumbling and child-like...their spiritual sight is as though they see trees walking. But they have staked their all on the Divine Physician who is able to give them complete and total healing.

And so must we. In a world that challenges us to be self-centered and self-reliant...a world full of godless leaven spreading throughout our culture, we need the healing presence of Jesus. And this is the great reality of Christian life – the Holy Spirit dwelling inside us and among us molding and shaping us into the image of Christ. Healing our spiritual blindness. Strengthening our weak faith. Turning us away from self-confidence towards humble reliance upon Christ. Telling us that all of the signs we need for confidence in God being for us have already been given – a perfect life, a sacrificial death, an empty tomb.

Not only that...God has filled your life with signs of his presence and his love and his grace, hasn't he? Even if your life has been incredibly hard, God has still been with you every step of the way. He has never abandoned you. He has sustained and strengthened you. And God's grace and presence in the past should strengthen and sustain you to live the Christian life here and now...it should fill you with great hope for the future.