

“Nurturing Spiritual Understanding”

Mark 8:1-21 (NRSV)

Mark presents us with two almost similar accounts of Jesus’ feeding the crowds. The only major difference seems to be that in the earlier telling of the story, Mark mentions **5,000 people** (6:30-44), and in today’s reading **4,000 people** are mentioned. **Because of the similarities in the two accounts, literary critics have suggested that Mark is presenting the same event, but in a different setting.** Certainly, it seems passing strange that, for the second time around, having already experienced Jesus’ gracious provision the first time, the disciples would ask, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” (8:4). Previous experience should’ve taught them that Jesus is well able to provide for people’s needs.

Nevertheless, consider the possibility that these two miraculous feedings of the people might, in fact, be separate, different events. Mark consciously notes right at the beginning of his second account that “there was **again** a great crowd without anything to eat” (8:1, my emphasis). Further, the **5,000** were with Jesus for only one day, but the **4,000** were with him for three days. When Jesus fed the 5,000 he ordered them to sit down in ordered groups on **“the green grass”** (6:39). With the 4,000 there was **only the bare “ground” for them to sit on.** In the first instance Jesus offered **one prayer of “thanks”** for the five loaves and two fishes (6:41) which were miraculously multiplied for the 5,000, but with the 4,000 there were **two prayers of “thanks,”** one for the seven loaves, and another for the “few small fish” that were presented to him (8:6,7). Further, in cleaning up after the first miracle, the disciples are noted to have picked up **twelve baskets full of bits of broken bread and fish** (6:43). But after the second feeding, there were only **seven baskets full of remnants left over** (8:8).

Finally, and conclusively, in my mind, the miracles were done for **two different groups of people.** The 5,000 were exclusively **Jews**, but the 4,000 were fed in the Decapolis, southeast of Galilee, a **predominantly Gentile** area. This was a **whole new audience** that needed to be exposed to a similar kind of miracle and its implications. What’s more, the repetition would’ve **helped the disciples grow in their spiritual understanding of Jesus’ ministry and mission.** This was a good teaching technique on Jesus’ part. **“Repetition is the mother of learning,”** we say, and it’s true. The disciples had learned something from the first miracle, but there was more for them to learn from Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

This is really what our text is all about. **Mark wants us to see how Jesus longed for his disciples to grow in spiritual understanding, and to nurture and maintain it.** Study of this passage may also enhance our own spiritual perception.

1. **Jesus' self-revelation** (Mark 8:1-10).

There are at least **three things Christ wanted his disciples (and us) to see** in these miracles. **First, he wanted them to understand that he was the Bread of Life.** As a kind of second Moses, Mark shows Christ consciously paralleling himself with their ancient leader. It was through Moses that God announced he was “going to rain bread from heaven” (Exod. 16:4). In fulfillment of God’s promise the dawn illuminated “a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it? [in Hebrew it sounded something like, “manna”?] For they did not know what it was” (Exod. 16:15). This manna or “what is it?” -- which tasted “like wafers made with honey” (16:31) -- became their staple food for almost forty years and it enabled them to survive in the wilderness. So purposefully premeditated was **Christ’s personal identification with this “manna,” this Bread of Heaven,** that in John’s Gospel, Christ gave this explanation after the first feeding of 5,000:

I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they [eventually] died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh (Jn. 6:48-51).

So startling was Christ’s personal identification with the bread that he served to the crowd on that day that some thought he was suggesting cannibalism (6:52), something the Romans later accused Christians of practicing whenever they celebrated their communion meal! But, in fact, **Jesus was identified with the Bread of Heaven all the way back to his birth in Bethlehem, the “place of bread.”** And on the final evening of his life, Paul reports Jesus Christ took bread and broke it and said, “This is my body which is for you” (1 Cor. 11:24). Thus, **both at the beginning and the end of his earthly incarnation Christ powerfully underscored the great fact that he was the Bread of Life.**

Jesus dearly wanted his disciples to understand this, for reflecting upon this would open them to understanding his ministry. Carefully thought through, the implications of Jesus being the Bread of Life explained many things about his person and mission in life. They revealed our Lord's life-giving power, for the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and the fishes spoke of **Christ's ability to give spiritual and, indeed, even physical sustenance to life**, and the broken pieces of bread pictured **his willingness to be vulnerable and broken in his giving of himself to others**.

Second, Christ wanted his disciples to understand that he wasn't just the Bread of Life for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. That the 4,000 were predominantly Gentiles is substantiated not only because they were in the Gentile-dominated Decapolis, but also because **Jesus said "grace" twice over this second meal.** Pronouncing a blessing over the bread was a normal Jewish custom, but not the second prayer over the fish. (Two blessings over a meal kind of reminds me of the way we used to pray over our meals when I was young: we'd ask a blessing before we began to eat and we'd say another word of thanks after we were finished. When we became teenagers we successfully asked to stop this repetition!) Evidently, Jesus was teaching Gentiles to thank God for every thing they received (William L. Lane, Mark, 1975, p. 274). Moreover, according to the **different Greek words used for "basket" in the two accounts**, in the second event the left-over bread wasn't picked up in the traditional, **smaller bottle-shaped baskets** used by Jews, but in **larger wicker hampers used by Gentiles**. That's probably why there were less baskets left over the second time around.

Further, the multiplication of the bread and the fishes for both crowds was meant to declare that **Jesus Christ was spiritual sustenance for all people.** Jesus was saying that a material supply isn't enough for a hungry humanity. Once when he was tempted to meet his own physical needs at the expense of the spiritual, he responded (by quoting Deuteronomy), "One does not live by bread alone" (Matt. 4:4). And, after the first feeding, in John's Gospel, Jesus chides the crowds who kept following him, looking for more handouts, that they shouldn't "work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (6:27a).

That is to say, **if you are focused only on the material you will shrivel.** You may be hale and hearty. You may eat yogurt and vegetables, and little red meat – no fats, no junk. You work out regularly, indulge your good-looking body with a few designer labels and transport yourself in a nice car.

But your reductionist way of thinking, which has shrunk your life to little more than “things,” will eventually betray you. As the years go by, you will become more aware of your hollowness. When your muscles and your skin begin to sag and your fine clothes won’t look quite “right,” you may learn that “One does not live by bread alone.” The disciples needed to understand that Jesus is the universal Bread. There is no real life apart from him.

Third, Jesus wanted his disciples to know that the supply always meets and exceeds the demand. Christ’s provision is abundant. Notice that, according to the verb tense in the text, it appeared that in this feeding Christ didn’t just break the bread and divide the fish so that suddenly there were huge piles of bread and fish in front of him. Rather **he kept breaking the bread and handing out what was needed bit by bit** (8:6). He ordered the fish to be distributed in the same way (8:7). **Thus we learn that we can constantly bring our needs to Christ, and he will constantly break the bread for us and give us exactly what we need.**

Mark says of Christ’s provision for the multitude, **“They ate and were filled,” i.e., “They ate and were satisfied”** (8:8a, NIV). And in both feedings, **there was lots left over.** When the 5,000 Jews were fed, there were **twelve baskets** left, emblematic of God’s full provision for the twelve tribes of Israel. Here, with 4,000 Gentiles, there were **seven great baskets**, the number of fullness and completion, indicating **Christ is more than sufficient for the whole world.**

The people came to Christ famished. They were so hungry that Jesus feared that they might collapse on the way home (8:2-3). But when their power to eat any more was exhausted, Christ’s power to feed wasn’t. **Whatever our Lord has given, there is always more for him to give.**

With the completion of this event, the disciples had seen two stupendous miracles in which thousands of people were fed. **Yet had they really seen what Jesus Christ had done?** Or had they satisfied themselves – as so many in the crowds did too – simply by looking at the multiplied bread and fish, the feasting thousands and nothing else? That will be answered shortly. But first we notice Jesus’ opponents were simply blind to what he was doing, and they remained blind, it seems, to everything.

2. The blindness of Jesus’ enemies (Mark 8:11-13).

Mark tells us that when Jesus finished feeding the 4,000 he sailed back across the Sea of Galilee to Dalmanutha, somewhere on the northwest side of the sea, probably close to Capernaum. **There he was accosted by the Pharisees who questioned him and wanted “a sign from heaven” to prove his authority and power (8:11).** It wasn't dissimilar to Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness, **trying to get him to do anything spectacular to prove himself.** It was a temptation to take the easy way, apart from the Father's will. It kind of reminds me of Herod in the play, Jesus Christ, Superstar, where he sings, “Hey, Jesus, you're real cool; walk across my swimming pool.” But you know that if Jesus did that Herod still wouldn't believe him! There'd be another test, and then another test.

We're told that **Jesus “sighed deeply in his spirit” (8:12).** He was fed up with “this generation's” unbelief. **Jesus was angry.** He knew the hardness of the Pharisees' hearts. And so “he left them” (8:13) and went all the way back to the other side of the sea.

What a terrible thing it is to have Christ turn his back on you and sail away! But **that is what he ultimately has to do with those who don't really want to get it.** There comes a time when Jesus Christ will give us no more signs, no more help in understanding. But **what about those who want to follow him, yet still don't get it?**

3. The dullness of Jesus' disciples (Mark 8:14-21).

The disciples were dull that's for sure! Physically, Jesus and his disciples were together in the same boat, but their minds were leagues apart. He gave them a spiritual warning, which they misinterpreted because of their material mindset. So, too, the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 seemed to have had little effect in bringing them to a deeper spiritual awareness.

Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them saying, “Watch out – beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” They said to one another, “It is because we have no bread.” (8:14-16)

Duh? I don't think so. **I'm sure Jesus was frustrated with his disciples' slowness on the uptake.** Humanly speaking, he could count on being misunderstood by the Pharisees, but not by his own students and intimates.

How could they misunderstand? **What he was trying to teach them was more than something about filling their stomachs.** Even his reference to “the yeast of the Pharisees... and of Herod” should have alerted them. Ever since yeast had to be left out of the unleavened bread during the Passover, it had become a telltale Scriptural symbol for evil, especially a corrupting tendency that works its way into a situation invisibly. Jesus was warning them about the misguided spirituality of the Pharisees and the power-hungry machinations of Herod.

Some people need extra help to understand. Did you hear this last week about the young man who told the BC Transit officers that he didn’t have to produce his ticket on the SkyTrain (even though he had it) because he was a “child of the world”? The officers tried to reason with him and, after he continued to refuse to cooperate with the law about showing one’s ticket, finally told him to get off the train. When they forcefully took him by the arm to lead him out, the young man accused them of assault. When the case came into court, the judge agreed with the officers and convicted the man of “criminal obstruction” (Neal Hall, “Self-proclaimed ‘child of the world’ gets adult lesson about SkyTrain law,” The Vancouver Sun, Aug. 3, 2011). **Sometimes folks need an adult lesson to get the message.**

There was a man who went into the bank and said he wanted some money. The teller asked him to swipe his access card to verify his account details. But he refused to do it. He said, “Just give me the money; it’s in my account.” The teller said, “If you don’t swipe your card I won’t give you the money.” So the man went to another bank across the street, where the same conversation took place. But after this exchange, the teller reached across the counter, took him by the ears, and banged his head three times on the counter. After which the man took out his access card and swiped it and got his money. The man returned to the first bank and said, “They gave me my money across the street.” “How did that happen?” asked the teller. “They explained it to me!” answered the man. Yeah, right!

So Jesus explained what he was trying to get across to his disciples by banging their dense noggins against a hail of questions. “Why are you talking about having no bread?” Do you still not see or understand? Bang! “Are your hearts hardened?” [like the Pharisees?]. Ouch, that hurts. Bang! “Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” Bang! Bang! “And do you not remember?” Bang! “When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you

collect?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” And they said to him, “Seven.” Bang! Bang! Bang! (8:17-20). Maybe now they got it!

When Jesus suggested that they too, like the pinched and narrow-minded pharaoh of old, and now the Pharisees, too, might have “hardened hearts” he wasn’t suggesting their hearts were hardened to him. They were his followers. They loved him. They were trying to get it. They’d heard him teach the same thing over and over again. Maybe they could even repeat the same words Jesus used, but **they didn’t yet know how to put what he was teaching them into practice**. We experience this as well when we fail to think and act upon what God has revealed to us. It was a case of “use it or lose it.” **They weren’t appropriating what they were seeing and hearing.**

Finally, Jesus asked them, **“Do you [still] not understand?”** (8:20). If the disciples had truly reflected on the spiritual significance of the miraculous feasts, they would’ve advanced far beyond where they were in their spiritual growth. They would’ve seen Jesus as the abundant provider par excellence of all their needs. **Jesus Christ is bread for the whole world**. His provision of bread and fish was to teach them, and all of us, that **there is no real life apart from him**.

He had also asked them, **“Do you not remember?”** (8:18c). Friends, there is no better shield against spiritual misunderstanding and declension than paying attention, perceiving, understanding, remembering and practicing what we have learned. When our hearts are softened, when our eyes and ears are opened, we are set free to do what Jesus Christ wants us to do. We see God’s abundant table spread out before us, and with our help there is enough and more than enough for all. That’s why we come to church: to hear again the age-old stories, to remember and to rejoice in God’s Word, and to apply it weekly, daily, every minute and every hour.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
 Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
 August 7, 2011