

WHY CAN'T YOU SEE?

Mark 8:1-21; Deuteronomy 8; Psalm 95

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In musical theater, the first act often ends with a medley (or *quodlibet*) reprising key motifs and themes from the show up to that point. For example, in *West Side Story*'s "Tonight Quintet," the Jets and Sharks prepare to rumble, Anita dresses for her hot night out, and Tony and Maria sing of their forbidden love. In *Les Miserables* it's "One Day More," in which almost the entire cast is on stage singing together as all the various story lines converge. The song ends, the curtain drops, the lights come up for intermission, and the audience is left hanging in suspense.

Before Gilbert & Sullivan, or Leonard Bernstein, or Cameron Mackintosh, there was St. Mark the Evangelist, who told the story of Jesus in two great acts. Mark 8 is the climactic ending of Act I, as Mark reprises all his major themes, like seeing, hearing and understanding, hardness of heart, seeds planted in good soil, and God feeding his people in the wilderness. In this chapter, Mark clearly differentiates between good guys and bad guys, and most importantly, highlighting the precarious position of the disciples, who have witnessed it all but whose hearts are starting to harden. In this sermon, we'll consider the first three vignettes in Mark 8.

CAN'T YOU SEE WHO SATISFIES YOU? (8:1-10)

Mark 8 begins with a sense of *deja vu*. Jesus has attracted a huge crowd in the wilderness. They're hungry. Jesus has compassion on them and wants to feed them. The disciples have no idea where to find the nearest grocery, or how to pay for it. Then Jesus takes the little bit they have, blesses it, breaks it, and everyone eats their fill. Hasn't this all happened before? Yes. At the end of Mark 6, Jesus performed a similar miracle in a remote place on the opposite side, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Modern critics often contend that Mark mistakenly repeated himself with the second bread miracle in Mark 8. Such criticism, however, misses the big picture of the unfolding narrative as Mark brings Act I to a dramatic conclusion.

When Jesus performed the first bread miracle (Mark 6:30ff), he was still in Jewish territory, in Galilee, where a crowd of 5,000 men gathered to be taught by him. Jesus had compassion on them because they were like an army without a commander.¹ So he ordered them in regiments of 50 and 100, just like the Israelites in the Wilderness. Then Jesus supplied them with provisions

¹ This is how we should understand "sheep without a shepherd." See Matthew Mason's sermon, "Why Aren't You Satisfied?" from March 16, 2014.

and gave them their marching orders. Afterwards the disciples collected 12 baskets full of leftovers, which is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. First because the number 12 is significant as the number of the tribes of Israel. Second because the word used for basket there is *kophinos*, which was a specific kind of lunch basket used by faithful Jews in that time. So the whole episode from start to finish was distinctively Jewish.

By that time, the Pharisees and the Herodians were already after Jesus, so he went up to Tyre & Sidon, where he saved the daughter of a Gentile woman. The woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter by asking if there were any leftovers from the table he had spread for his people in Israel. When Jesus delivered her daughter from a demon, it was as if he opened the floodgates for all people, Jew and Gentile, to be fed the bread of life from his table.

Now in Mark 8, the circumstances are similar to the first bread miracle but they're not identical. This time Jesus is on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, in Gentile territory. Mark describes a crowd of 4,000 people total, rather than 5,000 men. This time Jesus has compassion on them, not because they're an army without a commander, but rather because if he sends them away hungry, "they will faint *on the way*." Hereafter in Mark, Jesus will describe walking with him in terms of being "on the way." In fact, Act II of Mark will be about walking with Jesus to Golgotha, to Good Friday, on the way to the cross.² What's important in this episode in Mark 8 is that Jesus doesn't want the Gentiles to faint *on the way*. Rather, he wants to nourish them so that they can make the journey too.

Consequently, Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and then distributes it to everyone. And once again, everyone eats and is satisfied, and the disciples pick up the leftovers. This time, however, they pick up 7 baskets full, which is noteworthy first because the number 7 signifies universality. Second because the word used for basket here is *spuris*, which was commonly used by Gentiles for shopping. Just as the first episode in Mark 6 was distinctively Jewish from start to finish, this one was distinctively Gentile. Thus, as Act I of Mark reaches its climax, Jesus welcomes both Gentiles and Jews to join him on the way.

I must confess that I'm an information junkie, always looking for something new, and I get bored with the old stories. This is a dangerous habit, because in so doing I can miss the trees for the forest. I see the big picture of what Mark is doing here, in terms of welcoming in the Gentiles. But there's also a message embedded in each of these bread miracles that we need to hear again and again. Back in the feeding of the 5,000, Mark 6:42 reads, "And they all ate and were satisfied." And in the feeding of the 4,000, Mark 8:8 reads, "And they ate and were satisfied." Both stories make the same point, a point that we need to hear again and again: regardless of your ethnicity (or any other defining characteristic), can't you see who satisfies you? It's Jesus. He's the Lord who nourishes and sustains his people in the way.

Of course both miracles foreshadow Christian worship, in which Jesus nourishes his people through Word and Sacrament, through the Bible and the bread and wine.³ The essence of

² Additionally, the first name the early Christians called themselves was "The Way." Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22.

³ These always go together—it's not really the Lord's Supper without the prior proclamation of the Word.

nourishment is sameness, day in and day out. At dinner, we mustn't strain out all the things we've eaten previously, only to consume those which are novel. This would quickly lead to starvation. Likewise, Jesus satisfies us with sameness day after day, week after week. In worship together, as we read his Word there are always new insights, but the core message is always the same: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. That's what we need to keep us from fainting "on the way." Like the old saying goes, "I don't remember very many of the meals I've had in my lifetime, but I'm alive because of a lifetime of meals." It's the same way with the Word. We can't live on bread alone, because we need God's word to satisfy us. Can't you see who satisfies you?

2. CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT HE'S ALREADY DONE FOR YOU? (8:11-13)

Mark 8:11-13 is Jesus' final confrontation with the Pharisees in Galilee. This time the Pharisees test Jesus by demanding a "sign from heaven," which is to say they're looking for compelling proof of his authority. This is not an unreasonable request in and of itself. The Old Testament teaches that we should test prophets and teachers to make sure that they are from God. But again, let's not lose sight of the context. Mark doesn't want us to read this little vignette as an isolated episode, but instead at least as the culmination of all Jesus' encounters with the Pharisees thus far, if not all of Jesus' miracles in full. If we kept track of all Jesus' miracles, we would have lost count back in ch 1. But even if we only track his encounters with the Pharisees, they've already seen him do two amazing and miraculous healings of the paralytic and the man with the withered hand. Either one of those should have satisfied the need for compelling proof.

In Mark 8:12 it says, "[Jesus] sighed deeply in his spirit." The peculiar Greek word Mark used here for "sighed" describes people "who find themselves in situations where they are pushed to the limit of faithfulness."⁴ I note this because it gives us an indication of how much the Pharisees provoked and irritated Jesus. Yes, Jesus 'was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet did not sin' (Heb 4:15). That doesn't mean, however, that he liked it. So in 8:12-13 we get a small taste of his fury, as he curses the Pharisees and then abandons them. "Amen, I say to you, no sign will be given to *this generation*." In the Old Testament, there were moments when "a generation" became so wicked and corrupt that God acted decisively against it. E.g. in Genesis 7, God acted against the wicked generation of Noah's day. E.g. in Psalm 95, God acted against the grumbling, ungrateful Hebrews of the Exodus, whom he rescued from slavery, brought through the Red Sea, and fed them daily "on the way" in the wilderness.

Thus, in Mark 8:13, Jesus left the Pharisees. It's a symbolic parting of the ways, a formal end to Jesus' engagement with them. They'll still come up from time to time in Act II, but never come into focus again. No more signs. They've seen enough and yet they still want more.

The problem with the Pharisees, and the problem with the Red Sea generation, is often our problem too. All too often, we're not satisfied with Jesus. Remember the point of both bread miracles? Only Jesus can satisfy you? But we're not yet satisfied.

Perhaps you're still undecided about Jesus, thinking to yourself: "Sure, he's an interesting and

⁴James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 236.

noteworthy person, perhaps a wise teacher and miracle worker. But is he the Son of God? Is his death really somehow a ransom for us? Did he really rise from the dead? These are enormous questions, and I feel like I need to make a new spreadsheet, weigh the pros and cons, and sort out whether all this could be true.”

Can't you see what he's already done for you? Can't you see how he's already cared for you, and taught you, and showed you himself? Whether you've known it or not, Jesus himself has led you to this particular moment. What more do you need?

Or perhaps you're someone who has already found satisfaction in Jesus, but who's got a bad habit of becoming dissatisfied. You've heard these stories before, but life is still hard, and you still feel like you need something more exciting to satisfy you.

Again, can't you see what he's already done for you? Can't you see all the miracles in your own life and in the lives of those around you? Can't you see his faithfulness and his provision not just in a few small ways, but in every little thing every day? What more do you need?

People often say, “If Jesus were here today, it would be so much easier to believe.” And yet the Bible is filled with evidence to the contrary. In one of the more poignant examples, Luke reports (16:31) that Jesus said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Can't you see what he's already done for you?

3. CAN'T YOU SEE HOW FORGETFULNESS IS UNDERMINING YOUR FAITH? (8:14-21)

In this grand conclusion of Act I, we've already heard the rising crescendo of Gentiles joining the Jews marching on the way, singing that it's Jesus who satisfies. And we've just heard the Pharisees join in counterpoint, singing, “we can't get no satisfaction.” And now we come to a third motif, center stage, as the spotlight falls on Jesus and the disciples.

Pay special attention to the presenting problem in 8:14: it's the *forgetfulness* of the disciples. After all that they've seen and experienced with Jesus, they should have great confidence in his ability to take the little that they have and multiply it 30, 60, or even 100-fold. They have one loaf in the boat, and that's plenty, because Jesus can easily turn it into 100 if need be.

But they're forgetful. Aren't we all? What's the big deal? As a matter of fact, it is a *very* big deal. Because *remembering* isn't just for old folks. It's a discipline that's absolutely central to the Christian life. For just about as many times as we're told to pray and worship in the Bible, we're also told to *remember* or *do not forget*. In fact, remembering and worship go together in the Bible. Thus, remembering isn't optional; it's essential. If you're a believer, then *remembering is your job*.

As usual, Jesus cuts to the very core of the issue, by saying in Mark 8:15, “Watch out, beware the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” This should have prompted a discussion among the disciples about how fear and doubt have a way of creeping into our hearts. Fear and doubt fester inside, growing like cancer, until one's soft heart becomes hard. The disciples have just witnessed the consequences in the Pharisees, who saw Jesus' miraculous signs but still wanted

more. How could they not be satisfied with Jesus? Simple, their hearts were hard, because they had not remembered all that Jesus had done.

Instead of hearing and responding to Jesus' warning, the disciples do what would be almost unimaginable, if it weren't so typical of all of us. In Mark 8:16, "They began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread." Seriously? How could they be so blind, so deaf, so pigheaded?

In response, Jesus asks seven heartbreaking questions, spotlighting the incredible obduracy of the disciples:

1. Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread?
2. Don't you yet perceive or understand?
3. Are your hearts hardened?
4. Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?
5. And don't you remember?
6. When I broke the 5 loaves for the 5000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?
7. And the 7 for the 4000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?

After the disciples respond, a final, climactic question rings out at the end of this vignette. Jesus asks again in 8:21, "Do you still not understand?"

Back in Mark 4, Jesus taught several parables about how his Kingdom will grow, not in spectacular and explosive ways, but rather in the ways that are natural to the world that God made. Seeds are planted and then they take root and grow, often imperceptibly, until harvest time when they come to full fruition. Jesus' Kingdom grows in the same way, and even though he spoke in parables to the crowds, when Jesus was alone with his disciples he explained everything to them. But now that the kingdom has indeed grown from a few small seeds into thousands and thousands of people, with plenty of leftovers to be given to more, the disciples are starting to have eyes but not see, and have ears but not hear. Instead of remembering all that the Lord has done and being satisfied with him, the seeds of fear and doubt have been planted in their hearts. These seeds are starting to put down roots and grow, almost imperceptibly. And the disciples' hearts are starting to become hard just like the Pharisees.

This, by the way, is what makes Mark not only such a great storyteller, but also such a great teacher. As we come to the climactic ending of Act I, we find the beloved disciples hanging in the balance, and we want them to see and hear and understand. We want them to have soft hearts rather than hard. And of course our desires are instructive and ought to be motivational. Mark is teaching us how to feel, not only about those disciples back then, but about us disciples today. He's teaching us how to feel about our own spiritual lives. Go back and re-read all of Jesus' questions, no longer as a story about the disciples back then, but as a challenge to us disciples today. Put the spotlight on yourself and consider, is your heart hardened as well?

The pattern of the Lord's Supper is the pattern of our lives. The body of Christ is broken and shared among us, and it satisfies us. Likewise, we as the body of Christ are broken and shared out

into the world, and it satisfies. Again and again, Sunday after Sunday over the past ten years, the Word of God has been delivered to us and the body of Christ has been broken for us, and given to us, we've eaten of it together, and there have been leftovers. Whether we've acknowledged it or not, it's been more than enough, and it has sustained us along the way.

As we enter a new season as a congregation, sending out the Masons to begin a new church in England, and also sending out some of our other members to begin a new church here in the city, let's not become hard hearted. Remember, and do not forget, all that the Lord has done! We are the Body of Christ, being broken and distributed to satisfy the world. We will not be depleted, there will be leftovers, and we will witness God's faithfulness to continue to provide all that we need and more.