**March 14, 2021 Mark 8:11-21**

***Bread of Life***

**Scripture:** Mark 8:11-21 NRSV

*(11)The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. (12)And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." (13)And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side. (14)Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. (15)And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out--beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." (16)They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." (17)And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? (18)Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? (19)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." (20)"And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." (21)Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"*

**Notes:**

1. The feeding of the four thousand occurred among ***gentiles***.
   1. **Seven** is a number that marks wholeness and completion.
   2. God is doing something ***inclusive*** of Jews *and* gentiles.
   3. Jesus is extending the ***bread*** to the people.
2. Jesus begins to talk about the ***yeast*** of the Pharisees.
   1. They have completely forgotten the ***provision*** of God.
   2. When we share we find God ***multiplies***.
   3. When we ***divide*** our bread, there is often enough for all.
3. Jesus is comparing ***grace*** and ***goodness*** to the Pharisees.
   1. Jesus is extending ***grace***.
   2. Jesus is proclaiming a kingdom of ***inclusion***.
4. The Pharisees miss the point of their ***laws***.
   1. The kingdom of God is one of ***inclusion***.
   2. the kingdom of God calls for ***loving*** our enemies.
5. What the ***disciples*** didn’t get is what we often don’t get either.
   1. They were ***concerned*** about not having enough bread.
   2. We often forget that our food should be the ***bread*** of ***life***.
6. Every culture has their own version of ***bread***.
   1. We are people of ***bread***.
   2. Are we feasting on the ***bread*** of ***life***?
   3. Allow the Lord to clean our lives of the ***yeast*** of this world as we eat of the ***bread*** of life.

**Script:**

I truly enjoy a good piece of homemade bread. There is nothing better than a slice fresh from the oven; the lightness and aroma are so enticing, add a small amount of butter and maybe some preserves; I imagine this is as satisfying as anything here on this earth.

When the stay-at-home orders began in the spring of 2020, a surprising thing started disappearing from shelves. I’m not talking about toilet paper—though that disappeared as well. I’m not talking about bread even though it disappeared as well. I’m talking about yeast. People who had never baked bread before in their lives found quarantine a great time to start. People bought packets of yeast, jars of yeast, and yeast that came measured by the pound.

When there was no more dry yeast to be found, people began making sourdough starters. You may have seen the images fill your social media. A little flour, a little water, measured out precisely and left in a warm (but not too warm) environment, left to ferment. If you have never made sourdough, what you may not know is that it still uses yeast. Instead of the dry yeast one finds in a supermarket, the sourdough starter harnesses the yeast in the environment around it.

Yeast is single-celled fungi; it feeds on sugars to survive, and gives off carbon dioxide, This is why it’s used to help bread rise. There are numerous strains of yeast, thousands—in fact, you may know that there is one type that can cause infections in humans. There are also strains that cause food to spoil and others that ferment fruit and grains, transforming them into wine and beer. There is no shortage of yeast in the environment around us. It has been used by humans in the making of bread for centuries. Bread is a cornerstone of humanity in many ways. It is a simple yet hearty and comforting food, which is probably why people ran to it when life felt overwhelming during the first weeks of the pandemic. If they could just get some bread, things would feel a little more manageable, a little more controllable.

Maybe that’s how the four thousand-plus people felt sitting hungry in the presence of Jesus on the day a great miracle happened. Maybe that’s how the disciples felt, those who were sitting with Jesus and only remembered to grab one loaf of bread? Maybe that is how they felt in today’s text when Jesus began talking about yeast. Join me and turn to our sermon passage for today found in Mark 8:11-21 as we share in the reading of God’s word.

(11)The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. (12)And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation." (13)And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side. (14)Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. (15)And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out--beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." (16)They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." (17)And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? (18)Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? (19)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." (20)"And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." (21)Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" **Mark 8:11-21 NRSV**

**The feeding of the four thousand should influence the way we read today’s text.** The verses just prior to today’s passage tell the story of a miracle that is somewhat familiar the feeding of the four thousand (not to be confused with the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6). It is a similar story to the feeding of the five thousand, with some important variations. The feeding of the four thousand occurred among gentiles. This detail is important because Mark is once again illustrating that the kingdom of God is for everyone. In Mark 6, the disciples have five loaves and two fish. In today’s text in chapter 8, they have seven loaves and a few small fish.

In Scripture, seven is an important number that marks wholeness and completion. When the disciples clean up the leftovers there are seven baskets full, whereas in the other story there were twelve. The number twelve is for Jewish listeners it would remind them of the twelve tribes of Israel. Seven baskets of leftovers signals completion and wholeness, a sign that God is doing something inclusive of Jews *and* gentiles. The feeding is a Eucharistic act, meaning it is very similar to the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is breaking bread, giving thanks to God, and extending the bread to the people. The people are given grace in this gift of food. There is some foreshadowing here of the ways that God desires to extend abundance to all, and that all are welcome to participate in the kingdom of God.

**Despite the abundance of the feeding miracle, when Jesus begins to talk about the yeast of the Pharisees, the disciples assume he is subtly chastising them for forgetting to bring bread onto the boat.** There is a comparison between the abundance of God and the myth of scarcity. The disciples are worried about having enough bread because they only have one loaf. They have completely forgotten about the provision of God, which they *just* witnessed in the feeding. Though the disciples don’t have enough, Jesus produces an abundance through the power of God. While the disciples (or we for that matter) might not have what seems like enough, it is enough in the hands of God. It is easy to forget about the provision of God in the face of scarcity. Even though the miracle just happened, the disciples forgot about the provision.

We also can become fearful in the face of scarcity, instead of looking for the creativity of God’s provision. Think about the time we spent in quarantine. People were afraid when things began to disappear from shelves. Instead of looking for ways to share, people hoarded. We easily forget about the grace of God’s abundance when faced with difficulty. When we share (like the miracle shows), we often find that God multiplies things not in a prosperity gospel kind of way. These blessings are often very different from what we expect. God often multiplies things by the miracle of our sharing. When we divide our bread, there is often enough for all.

Jesus is comparing the grace and goodness of the bread he has to offer with the infectious nature of yeast the Pharisees and Herod are offering. Jesus’s bread is plentiful. There is no shortage in the kingdom of God. Jesus is extending grace. There is a sacramental nature to this bread. This is Eucharist—the extending of grace through ordinary means, in ways we can’t fully understand. Jesus is proclaiming a kingdom of inclusion. There was a miracle of bread extended to the Jews. There was a miracle of bread extended to the gentiles. The grace of God is extended to all who would receive it.

The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod exists in stark contrast to what Jesus has to offer. Herod, as the king, is in a position of political power that focuses on there not being enough. We know that Herod the Great clung so tightly to his power that he killed his own sons to keep it. In this type of kingdom, there is not enough for everyone, let alone an abundance. We have to fight to get what we want and keep what we have.

The Pharisees focused over and over again on law versus grace. They are constantly trying to trap Jesus as he heals people on the Sabbath or gives to others. When they criticize Jesus’s good acts performed on the Sabbath, they miss the point of the laws they are trying to uphold. Their relationship as people of God is about self-righteousness more than it is about being truly righteous. When they show gratitude, they express glee at not being like those around them, as opposed to humble thanksgiving that puts others before themselves (see Luke 18, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector).

The kingdom of God to the Pharisees and Herod was one of exclusion versus inclusion. The Pharisees were focused on who was in and who was out. They avoided those who were unclean instead of embracing them. Herod and his policies operated in much the same way. While the motivation may have been different, there were people who were in and those who were out.

Having any kind of nation state inherently creates a system of enemies as well. In contrast, the kingdom of God calls for loving our enemies. The yeast, the insidious nature of the Pharisees and Herod was that their harmful ideas and theologies spread so easily. It was easy to get caught up in legalism, in exclusion, in the creation of enemies. It was easy to get trapped in the idea of scarcity, It was easy to begin to think that we must fight for what you want—and kill to keep it.

**What the disciples didn’t get is what we often don’t get either.** Despite the miracles happening right in front of them, the disciples still didn’t understand the radical work of Jesus. They were still operating with the vision of the world rather than the vision of the kingdom of God. They were concerned about not having enough bread when they had just seen a miracle exponentially multiplying bread! They were still susceptible to the ways of the world. Jesus warns them about the Pharisees and Herod because their ways are insidious and easy to get trapped in.

The disciples can be directly connected to us. How often do we forget the miracles? How often do we look at the world through eyes *of* the world, instead of the eyes of the kingdom of God? Do we trap ourselves and others in the burden of legalism? Do we leave others out because we are focused on the law over grace? Do we reject others based on some sort of unattainable standard? Do we believe the myth of scarcity or live in the abundance of the kingdom? Do we look to political war power to save us or to Jesus? Are we willing to kill to keep the power and stuff that we have? Despite saying we want to follow Jesus and be his disciples, we often forget that our food should be the bread of life, and not bread baked with the yeast of religious legalism or political power. We are to consume grace, extend grace, and live in grace.

Every culture has their own version of bread. From tortillas, to naan, to sourdough, and everything in between. Bread is a cornerstone of survival. Bread signifies to us in times of instability that things will be okay.

Bread is also what Jesus used to represent his body to the world as he broke it and extended it to his disciples on the night he was betrayed. It is a symbol of hope, we have something to look forward to, and it is good. It is a symbol of grace, we have a savior who offers us forgiveness even though we do not deserve it. Bread is a symbol of inclusion, to those who so often are rejected by the world.

We are people of bread, but the question still hangs in the air: whose bread are we consuming? Are we feasting on the bread of life? Are we feasting on the bread of abundant grace, love, and hope of the kingdom of God? Or are we allowing the yeast of legalism, fear, political power, and control to feed us these days?

May we learn once again to feast upon the bread of the kingdom of God. May we allow the Lord Jesus to clean our lives and our homes ridding them of the yeast of this world and shed our allegiance to power, legalism, and scarcity as we eat of the bread of life a bread of abundance extended to all.