

## “MISSING THE METAPHOR”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, February 3, 2019  
Mark 8:14-21 at NFBC

*//14 The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. 15 “Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”*

*16 They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.” 17 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” “Twelve,” they replied.*

*20 “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?” They answered, “Seven.” 21 He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”//*

—Mark 8:14-21 NIV

Sometimes Jesus is just plain difficult to understand. And sometimes we are just plain difficult to teach, even when the teacher is Jesus. A common thread for both difficulties is the subject matter.

Think how difficult it is for some people to learn a new language. That’s usually because we’ve already got one language down pat, and we secretly want the new language to be *just* like the old one. And of course it’s not. That’s one reason it’s usually far more difficult for older people to learn a new language rather than for younger people. And babies have the best time of it all.

Think how frustrating it can be to learn how to operate on a computer – at least if you’ve grown up most of your life without computers. One of the difficulties in that case is that the screens on the computers look like something from the real world: a sheet of paper; a calendar; a thing called a desktop. But they don’t have to follow the rules of the real world at all. In fact, you have to pretty much forget the real world’s rules and accept the computer world’s rules of: double clicking; right-mouse clicking; memorizing certain keyboard commands; going on line to look up obscure operations for simple things like numbering pages. And then, just when you think you’ve got it all figured out, the company does an upgrade on your system and changes everything around. So you have a lot of new things to learn ... and unlearn.

So. Have some sympathy for both Jesus and for his student/disciples because the subject matter they were tackling was nothing less than the Kingdom of God and God himself as he was being revealed through Jesus.

“On earth as in heaven” was not just a phrase in a prayer. It was a daily pop quiz in the open air classroom of Jesus and his disciples. There were some very challenging ‘kingdom concepts’ to teach these fishermen and tax collectors, some entrenched assumptions from the ‘real world’ for them to unlearn, and even Jesus showed some frustration when the answer seemed right in front of everyone without his class getting it.

Here in this passage of Mark 8 the lesson everyone’s not getting has to do with the feeding of the multitudes. This lesson is very important and, evidently, very difficult for his students to understand. We can know of the importance because this miracle of feeding the multitudes was repeated. First Jesus fed five thousand and then later he fed four thousand. This feeding of the multitudes is also recorded in each of the four Gospels, though the second miracle is not repeated in Luke and John.

The basic lesson about this miraculous feeding is actually quite straightforward—once you see it—which can be true of a lot of things. How many times have you stared at a puzzle not being able to see the answer, only to have someone show you ... what’s been right in front of you all the time. [ILLUS: matchstick puzzle shaped like window pane with four squares; move three matchsticks to make three squares.]

The lesson is this: If Jesus can literally feed thousands and thousands of hungry people with just a few loaves and fishes, then our real concern when it comes to taking care of people’s needs should not be how many loaves we have; it should be the singular concern of having Jesus with us.

After all, he is Immanuel, “God with us.” This is the heart of his later teaching that *he* is the Bread of life. People worry so much about their food, how much they have, whether it’s whole wheat, gluten free or what have you. Our world is obsessed with proper diet and health food, which is not wrong in itself. But it is wrong if it occupies our whole attention at the expense of our ever receiving Jesus for who he is—the Bread of life.

The disciples have just seen Jesus feed four... no *seven* thousand people. Earlier he had fed ten thousand. But now, as they were getting in the boat for travel across Galilee, they became all concerned about someone forgetting to bring enough bread. Just imagine their check list: Boat? Check. Life preservers? Check. Oars? Check. Jesus, able to feed thousands upon thousands? Check. Bread? ... Bread?! “I thought you had it.” “Well, I thought you had it!” “Here’s a loaf...” “*That’s* not enough...”

They just skipped right over having Jesus with them, the Bread of life, and fretted over the bread they didn't have. This did not go unnoticed by Jesus. And what he says next is more than interesting. He doesn't state the obvious. He doesn't give them the answer to the pop quiz, which they are failing at miserably. And don't forget: they *will* get this lesson, eventually. John is the one who gives us Jesus' teaching of, "I am the Bread of life." And we are getting Mark's scripture here from Peter. And Matthew follows. So of course they "get it" eventually. But here, at this point with the pop quiz, Jesus knows the disciples are not merely overlooking the answer literally staring them in the face. He knows there is something deeper tempting them. Something deeper down is blinding their eyes. And that is what he is addressing by what he says next.

**"Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."**

So now we, just like the disciples, need to ask ourselves what is Jesus talking about? What is this "yeast of the Pharisees"?

Before answering that, we need to pause and appreciate the fact that our being with Jesus makes us ask that question in the first place. If Jesus were not with those disciples and with us, then we could be fretting about all the bread we don't have, right along with all the other things we don't have, or like most people we *do* have but we worry about having it tomorrow. And no one would challenge us for having such worries and such worldly priorities. For it's only normal. Yet all the while our 'normal' hearts would be hardening like stale unused bread when it comes to trusting the goodness of God to meet our needs.

Think about those Pharisees and Herodians. What kind of bread are they offering to the hungry people around them? Take your pick. They come from two opposite directions. The Pharisees offer the people a strict, religious, ultra-conservative, legalistic set of rules for righteousness, a treadmill of dos and don'ts that only the professionals can seem to keep. The Herodians, on the other hand, love to play the political game. They make compromise toward the Romans and toward God and in the process gain localized power and wealth. And there are other groups offering their own brand of bread as well. There were the Sadducees, who played the religion card on the liberal side from the Pharisees. They didn't believe in any resurrection, nor any books beyond the first five in the Old Testament. Then there were the Essenes, which you don't hear about, because their

thing was that they completely separated themselves from everyone else in order to maintain their purity before God.

It's just that these two opposites of the Pharisees and the Herodians can represent them all. And thereby we, too, can be challenged by the whole spectrum found in our day. You might hear an echo of Jesus in such words as "*Be careful. Watch out for the yeast of the Conservatives and the Liberals; the Right and the Left; the legalistic and the lawless; the skeptic and the dogmatist.*" For there is no human formula, no human recipe, that can truly satisfy what the human heart is hungry for. We don't simply need bread. We don't simply need right politics. We don't simply need right philosophy or even science or even right *religion*. (Right religion, by the way would surely be Moses.) These things are important, but not all-important.

What we need is Jesus. He *is* all-important.

All this is embedded in Jesus' word of warning to them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." And when they *still* thought Jesus was talking about the literal bread, he pointed them to their literal eyes and the literal numbers of baskets left over from the literal feedings: Twelve for the first crowd; Seven for the second. Not only do they literally speak of the abundance of God's power to feed these crowds through his Servant and Son, Jesus Christ, but those numbers speak of a sense of completion, or satisfaction, for the Jews first and for the Gentiles afterwards.

There's something bigger than just the literal going on here. Bigger than the miraculous bread. Bigger than the multitudes. Bigger than Israel. Bigger than the whole world! It's big as heaven itself, yet literally on earth!

It's not even enough to say that Jesus is talking metaphorically. He is, but he isn't just using a clever form of speech. He is teaching his disciples and us a whole new language, a whole new way of looking at the world and all reality. The *King* of the Kingdom of God is in our midst. And he wants you and me to take in that truth, by simple faith, . . . like the taking of simple bread . . . and let him feed you forever.

What everyone needs above everything else is to have Jesus. Literally, metaphorically, truly, truly. And not just have him on the shelf or in the house somewhere. We need to have him with us in a way that brings our foolish and worldly worries to a satisfying and joy filled end.