

1 July 2018

## Bread

Mark 6-7; John 6:25-35

The Gospel of Mark was the first gospel written, and it focuses on the story: what happened. It does not devote much space to the theological implications of the story. The Gospel of John, though, written a generation later, is much more reflective. Today we will hear about the feeding of the 5000 in Mark's just-the-facts-ma'am style. But the same narrative in John is followed by this passage. We read John 6:25-35:

*<sup>25</sup>When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' <sup>26</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. <sup>27</sup>Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.' <sup>28</sup>Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' <sup>29</sup>Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' <sup>30</sup>So they said to him, 'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?' <sup>31</sup>Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." ' <sup>32</sup>Then Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup>For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' <sup>34</sup>They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.' <sup>35</sup>Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'*

Last week, we ended with Jesus healing Jairus's daughter – a tremendous miracle, because the girl had already been declared dead. Well, afterwards, he tells the girl's parents not to tell anyone. Guess how well that works. Right. So now he's the most famous man in all Galilee, and it's in the middle of this surge of fame that he decides to visit his hometown, Nazareth, to teach in his home synagogue. So he goes. Now when Jesus teaches, he always gets a reaction. The crowds love him, because he doesn't sound like the scribes. The scribes hate him, for the same reason. This time, though, he gets a different response.

"Would you listen to him? Mary's boy Jesus talking big, as if he knew better than us! Wasn't there some scandal about his birth? Hey, Jesus! I remember when you couldn't walk yet, so don't go playing off your smarty attitudes at us!" And they won't listen. His followers, used to the admiration of the crowds, are shocked. "Heal somebody," they say. "Show them!"

"I can't," Jesus replies. "I can't heal someone who isn't looking for healing. And I can't teach people who think they already know it all. These folks think they already know me, so they'll never see anything else. No prophet is recognized in his hometown."

So they leave Nazareth, heading off to other villages, teaching. After a while, Jesus pulls his followers away from the crowd and says, "So you've been with me a while now, watching the things I do and hearing the things I teach. Now I've got something to tell you. You can do all this, too."

"Us?"

“That’s right. I’m giving you authority to cast out demons in my name, to heal, and to teach.” His friends nod uncertainly, and Jesus adds, “I mean now. Pair up. Go out in different directions. Call for people to turn from their ways; heal people who ask your help. If people receive you, be grateful. If they don’t receive you, move on. Don’t take any money with you. Just trust. We’ll meet back here in two weeks.” And he sends them out.

And they discover that they do have power. Demons obey them, too. People who are ill are healed by their touch, too. The whole country is buzzing with reports of mighty works, from the lowest slave quarters to the palace of the king – King Herod.

I should pause to explain this king. As you know, Judea was part of the Roman Empire, but one of the things the Romans did sometimes was set up a local person to be the “king” of a conquered land. So long as that king did what Rome said and kept the tax money flowing to the Emperor, he could call himself whatever he wanted. King Herod was like that. He was a cruel, selfish tyrant, but Rome didn’t care, so long as he was obedient to them. He could put anyone in prison, even kill them, with Rome’s blessing. So he did. When John – remember that desert prophet who had dunked Jesus in the Jordan River? – when John criticized Herod’s affair with his brother’s wife, Herod just had him locked up and, eventually, beheaded. Anyway, that’s Herod, and even in his palace, away from the crowds, he hears about it when Jesus’ friends go out healing and casting out demons. Terrified, Herod says, “This is John, whom I beheaded! He’s come back to life!” Herod’s not the only one speculating on Jesus. “It’s the return of Elijah!” some say. “A new prophet!” say others. And when the arranged time comes, Jesus’ friends gather again, filled with wonder and new confidence and excitement as they tell Jesus all that they had done and taught.

Jesus takes them off into the hills again, away from towns, hoping for some time alone, but it doesn’t work. The crowds find them. Jesus looks out over the throng – more than five thousand people – and aches for them. They are so aimless, so lost. So instead of the rest he had hoped for, he teaches them all day. As the day draws to a close, Jesus’ friends whisper to him, “These people have been here all day without food. You should send them away now before they start fainting on us.”

Jesus says, “You feed them.”

“What? We don’t have that much food! And even if there were a place to buy it, we don’t have that much money!”

“How much food do we have?”

“Five loaves of bread and a couple of fish,” they say. “That’s a lean meal even for just us.”

“Bring it here,” Jesus says. “We’ll share. Divide them into groups.”

So they do what he says. They break the crowd down into groups of fifty and have them sit in the green grass. Jesus takes the bread, lifts his eyes to heaven, gives thanks to the Father for his gifts, and says, “Now bless this bread, Father. Make it food for all.” And it becomes food for all. Jesus starts breaking the bread and doesn’t stop until everyone’s been fed and twelve baskets of broken pieces have been gathered up. Jesus calls his friends and says, “Quick. Get into your boat and cross the sea. I’ll meet you on the other side.”

Jesus' friends don't understand. They don't understand why, after his most spectacular miracle yet, he wants to slip away instead of using the moment as a stepping stone to greater influence. Plus, they don't understand how he's going to get across the sea if they take the boat. But they do what he says. Jesus dismisses the crowd then goes off alone to pray.

The sea is rough and the wind's against them so the friends are making a slow crossing of it. They're still straining at their oars a few hours later when they look up and see Jesus coming toward them. On foot, and making good time. At first it looks as if he's going to pass them by, but when they see him, they start screaming in terror. Jesus turns aside and joins them. "Hey, it's me," he says. "Don't be afraid." He gets into the boat, and the winds die down, and they just stare at each other.

Now I've mentioned the "scribes" and the religious leaders from the Jerusalem temple, before. It's a little more complicated than that. There are actually several different groups of religious leaders, each with their own distinct teachings and tendencies. The chief priests are from a party called Sadducees – more about them later – but there's a new, hard-line group that's challenging their influence. This party is called the Pharisees, which means something like "Puritans." The Pharisees are uncompromising in their strict obedience to the laws of scripture. In fact, they have whole books of further rules, clarifying those laws, which they also expect everyone to follow. Every detail in life is covered by one of the Pharisees' rules, it seems, including such things as how much and how long to wash your hands before eating.

It's this last rule that comes up next. Some Pharisees are following Jesus and notice that his followers don't all wash their hands in the prescribed way. This might seem a small thing, but for the Pharisees there *are* no small things. So they complain to Jesus. Jesus sighs, "You like scripture, don't you? How about the prophet Isaiah? There's a place where he says, 'This empty people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They teach their own rules as if they came from God himself.' Remember that passage? You're like that, you pathetic hypocritical worms." Then he looks past the Pharisees, at the crowds, and says, "Listen to me, all of you. Stop worrying about being defiled by what you eat. That stuff just passes through. It can't defile you. What defiles you is the stuff that starts inside – like hatred and lies and greed and pride and foolishness. Following God is not about keeping external rules; it's about changing your heart."

After this exchange with Jewish leaders, Jesus goes to spend some time with Gentiles. He heads north, to Phoenicia. While there, a Gentile woman starts following him. "Sir! Sir! Help me! My daughter at home has a demon! If you're Jesus of Nazareth, you can heal her! Sir? Sir?"

Jesus looks at his friends. They may be a little rough on the finer points of the Jewish law, but they're still good Jews, and he can see on their faces their distaste for this Gentile nuisance. They're itching to send her about her business. Jesus looks at the woman. "But you know I'm a Jew, right? I've come to fulfill the Jewish law and prophecies and declare the new kingdom. It wouldn't be right to help a Gentile, would it? That would be like taking food from the children and throwing it to the dogs under the table, don't you think?"

Jesus' friends nod approvingly. The woman's face tightens, but she doesn't get angry or offended or leave. She only kneels humbly and says, "Even the little dogs get the children's scraps, sir."

Jesus catches his breath and looks at his friends. “See that? That’s what I’m looking for, right there. Humble trust.” He raises the woman to her feet and says, “Go home, my daughter. Your child is one again. And God go with you.”

Jesus’ followers can only stare. *What just happened? Did Jesus just say that Gentile woman was what he was looking for? And heal her daughter?* Sure, they’d seen him heal one Gentile already, but that was a special case, and they had thought they were done with that sort of thing. *What is Jesus up to?*

Jesus says, “You know what? There are a lot more Gentiles east of here, in the Ten Cities region. Let’s not go back to Galilee yet. Let’s go to the Ten Cities and heal *them* and teach *them* and love *them*. Maybe we can find more people like this woman.”

“Um . . . master?”

“Yes?”

“Nothing,” they say, falling into step behind him. But they still don’t understand.

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The world Jesus entered was a divided world. The divisions were marked by geography, by ethnic background, by the color of people’s skin and hair and eyes, by how much money they had, and by whether they ate the right foods and washed their hands the right way. And everywhere there were divisions, there was hatred. Romans hated Jews, Jews hated Gentiles. Healthy people abhorred sick people, and everybody hated lepers. Tax payers despised tax collectors, decent people despised prostitutes and, well, decent people actually despised a lot of people. For some reason, decent people seemed to despise more than anyone.

It was a lot like today. So now we come to the table of Christ, all from different places in our divided world. And here, all are welcome. Anyone seeking God is invited to join with us. Our Communion liturgy today is on an insert in your bulletin and is, in part, sung. We begin, singing responsively:

(Tune O WALY WALY, e.g. FWS 2027)

Pastor: The God of Love be with you all. Lift up your heart, lift up your soul.

**People: We lift our hearts, we lift our songs, to God to whom our praise belongs.**

Pastor: It is our joy and it is right, to offer thanks unto your light

**People: And so with gratitude we raise to you, O God, our thanks and praise.**

Jesus walked amid our divisions, crossing back and forth between the different groups, confusing all of them.

He taught in the synagogues, like the rabbis, then went out into the streets and taught there,

He knew the scripture backward and forward, but he just wouldn’t be religious.

He yelled at Pharisees and spoke gently to sick old women.

He healed Jews, then he healed Gentiles.

And everywhere he went, in every land, among every people

when he looked at the crowds, he ached for them, because they were so aimless, so lost.

Pastor: And so we sing and praise your name. The saints and hosts of heav'n proclaim  
People: **That you are Holy, Holy Lord! Hosanna to the Living Word.**

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ  
who fed the crowds.

He raised the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and then kept breaking it until everyone was fed.  
Not the ones who deserved it, or who were from the right nation or right faith.  
He fed the ones who were hungry.”

And so, if you are hungry, if you are aimless, if you seek purpose,  
Come taste and see what the Lord Jesus did for us all,  
how on the night in which he gave himself up for us,  
he took bread, gave thanks to God, broke the bread  
gave it to those gathered at his table, and said:  
“Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me.”

When the supper was over, he took the cup,  
gave thanks to the Father, passed it around the table, and said:  
“Drink from this, all of you;  
this is my blood of the new covenant,  
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.  
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

**All: So we recall your acts in Christ – his life, his words, his sacrifice –  
This mystery in faith we learn: he died, he rose, and will return.**

So, God, let your Spirit fill us as we gather around this table, each of us from a different  
background, different camp, different party. We are women and men, old and young, healthy  
and dying, gay and straight, but all of us aimless without you. Send us out now to break your  
bread with others, to step over the divisions, to kneel humbly before you.  
Now, as before: bless this bread, Father. Make it food for all.

**All: Our Father, praise for all you've done, through Jesus Christ, your only Son,  
As for your Spirit, God may she sustain us to eternity.**

**Amen.**