

Sermon Title: *And Still We Fail to See?*

**Mark 8:11-21**

<sup>11</sup> The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. <sup>12</sup>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.’ <sup>13</sup>And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

<sup>14</sup> Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. <sup>15</sup>And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.’ <sup>16</sup>They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread.’ <sup>17</sup>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? <sup>18</sup>Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? <sup>19</sup>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.’ <sup>20</sup>‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’ <sup>21</sup>Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

For Reflection:

“Plans are made. Plans come apart. New delights or tragedies pop up in their place. And nothing human or divine will map out this life, this life that has been more painful than I could have imagined. More beautiful than I could have imagined.”

— Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*

“Control is a drug, and we are all hooked, whether or not we believe in the prosperity gospel’s assurance that we can master the future with our words and attitudes.”

— Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*

Jesus and the disciples are now back in Jewish territory, back near the Sea of Galilee where much of the gospel of Mark takes place. And once back in Jewish territory, immediately come the Pharisees – coming to see, to question, to disrupt. And so they come and ask Jesus for a sign.

*Sigh. These millennials; these Gen Xers – why do they ask for a sign?!”*

In a great ‘On-Being’ episode a couple of weeks ago Krista Tippett interviewed Cory Booker, a Senator from New Jersey – you should listen to it if you haven’t – a deep well of thinking about love within the political realm: not many sitting politicians are willing to speak about love or would dare hug their political opponents.<sup>1</sup> And one of the things that Senator Booker says in that interview is that every day the world will do all it can to offer you two things: One, to bombard you with anxiety. And the other one is, distraction; *this world*, says Booker, *is so elegantly designed to distract you from your life mission.*

Jesus has just returned to his home turf, to the Jewish area of Palestine, and right away he meets those who are trying to distract him from his mission – to pull him away from what and who he is called to be and instead engage with them in debate or providing some sign. And so, in order to stay on his path, he does not engage with the Pharisees but instead gets back into a boat with his disciples. He leaves his opponents and their mean Tweets and negative FaceBook comments on the sea shore, as to not be distracted from his mission.

---

<sup>1</sup> This interview with Cory Booker can be found at, <https://onbeing.org/programs/cory-booker-civic-spiritual-evolution-jul2018/>

And now back in the boat, the theme of bread and being fed that have gone on the past few chapters of Mark's gospel continues – the disciples realize that they are in a boat moving away from shore, from where all the good markets and bakeries are, with not enough to feed all 13 of them, they have only one loaf.

Jesus becomes aware of their concern. “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see? Do you still not understand? After all you have just seen and heard, can you still not see?”

And so he reminds them:

Remember how we had 12,000 people and only 5 loaves of bread – and after all had their fill, after all ate until they were full, how much was left?

*12 baskets full* – answer the disciples (I imagine them answering like an annoyed teenager, giving the answer they know they are supposed to give their parent).

That's right, 12 baskets. And later we were with a crowd of Gentiles, over 4,000 people that time, and what did we have for this whole crowd except for 7 loaves. Once again, it was enough – everyone at their fill and how many pieces of leftovers were there that time?

*7 baskets full*, they answer again.

7 baskets! And now you are still worried about not having enough? Despite what you have seen and heard, you are still anxious about one loaf.

Why is it so hard to see? So hard to remember when God has been with us in the past – when the Spirit of God has been near to us in the midst of trouble, pain, and loss? And yet, we so easily forget. 18,000 fed til they were full on 12 loaves. If my math is right, that is 1,500 people per

loaf of bread, so I think they should be just fine on one loaf for thirteen of them. And yet they cannot see. Is it that they have so quickly forgotten what Jesus has just done – what they participated in? Is it that they are so consumed by their present problem that they can see nothing else? Is their present hunger hindering their memory, hindering their sight, hindering their hope?

It is so easy to get focused on the current problem – on that singular loaf of bread – on how huge it feels, on how massive the weight of it. It is so easy to move into despair – to think that this is the worst time to be alive in human history; to think that things have never been this bad. How many times have we heard or even said ourselves, that *this is the most divisive time* in our country's history? It is a divisive time, but we did have a Civil War at one point. When this is the worst time ever, what hope do we have?

Walter Wink says the central focus of all these bread narratives in the middle of the gospel of Mark, are about the problem of bringing disciples to the sight that is faith. “What makes it so difficult, such a long journey for the disciples, is not a lack of information, but that they have already been so filled with misinformation. They have already been shaped by the self-interests and collective experience of their own cultural community.” They have been conditioned to only see and not see certain things, and so it takes much time and work before they can see differently. It takes time, work and intention to be able to see differently, to be able to see with hope, with imagination – to be able to see God's presence in the midst of pain and chaos.

Those who have been doing community organizing and working for social change – they have come up with one approach to seeing differently. Most of the time, most folks, we see only the problems and deficits of our communities: poverty, homelessness, food deserts, lack of opportunity, pollution, and so on and so on. Like the disciples, we focus on that problem – that there is simply not enough bread here. And this is the common approach to seeking community change, how are we going to fix the problem(s). Or, even more likely, who is going to come in and fix this problem for us?

But then there is things I learned about in Chicago called, “Asset Based Community Development.” ABCD, that makes it easy to remember. In this approach to change, you begin not by asking, “what problems need to be fixed”, but by asking, “what are the assets in our community?” What do we have going for us? Who are the leaders, the movers and the shakers? What do we do well?” And then, trying to move forward from the place of those assets first: seeking to build on and connect those assets, we move toward change.

For instance in this neighborhood in Chicago where I took this class on Christian Community Development, and I will say – outside of being in Iraq, walking to the Housing Unit where this class was held was one of the most fearful I have been. In this neighborhood as people started organizing through an ABCD method, they noticed that they had many skilled care-givers, mostly those who had become skilled in care-giving by taking care of their own children and later their aging parents. And they also noticed that they had many elderly people in their neighborhood who owned their own homes. These folks wanted to continue living in their homes and neighborhood, but more and more were needing some type of assistance in order to do so.

And through much work and organized efforts together, eventually they were able to put many of those mothers in their community to work as ‘in-home care-givers’ to elderly people in their community. If they would have taken only a “problem” or “deficit” model, they would have only said: we have high unemployment in our neighborhood and sought jobs for people wherever they could find them. Or, they would have said, “we have elderly people needing assistance.” And probably would have brought in people from other neighborhoods and the suburbs to come into their community to care for the elderly among them. They would have missed the asset right in front of them, and with it the ability to build connections and create change right there.

Now think of how it might have gone differently for the disciples if they would have taken as Asset Based approach to their problem. Instead of seeing that they only had one loaf of bread for thirteen of them far from a local bakery, they might have said, “we have Jesus and we have one loaf – that should be plenty!” Or, they might have said, “we have a sea full of fish and a boat full of fisherman – who needs bread!”

And so trying to see our assets and strengths first, rather than only seeing our problems and limitations – this is one way we might begin to see differently, one way we might recognize God’s presence with us. To try and change our gaze.

Another way of seeing differently is a lesson I have learned from a technique in traditional Black Preaching – a preaching technique that helps a congregation see God’s presence and faithfulness over time; it is a method for remembering, for remembering where God has been present in the

past. It is called, “a Roll Call”, I have talked about this preaching device once before. In the *Roll Call* the preacher begins with a present issue or situation and then ties it to similar situation in the recent past, and then ties that to something in the past just before that, and so on and so on until that present day issue has been linked back to the Bible, to Jesus himself, and sometimes all the way to the Creation Story in Genesis 1.

I am going to play us a two minute example of a Roll Call from our brother Otis Moss III, one of the great preachers of our time. Here Otis Moss is preaching three years ago the Sunday after a young white supremacist Dylan Roof killed 9 people at a Bible Study in South Carolina. Hear how he connects this moment to the past – how he helps his people (and us) to see this terrible moment a bit differently.

[Start 6:18; End at 8:28 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqImk7g2RD0>]

And so in connecting Dylan Roof to this long line of terrorist acts, Rev. Dr. Moss is reminding his people that we have lived through this pain before, we have come through this pain before – God was with us through all the Dylan Roofs of America’s past, and God will continue to be with us through this moment of pain and chaos – that God will continue to stand with us despite the hatred of others, whatever form it may come in.

And so through this preaching technique of a “Roll Call”, the collective memory is renewed, the memory muscle is strengthened. This technique does not avoid the problem or ignore the pain at hand, but serves to help us remember that God has been with us in the pain before – that in even worse times than this, God did not leave us or forsake us (even if, in our

pain, we could not see or feel God's arms around us). It helps us step back a bit and see the longview.

And of course this is what Jesus does in his speech there in that boat – he reminds them of when many more were fed, when the problem was even greater than this – and yet, God made a way. When the situation seemed much more dire, God was still with them, everyone ate their fill.

And so, I want to challenge us – to perhaps even dare us today, at lunch perhaps or after church – I want to dare us to share with someone a time when God was with you – when God's presence was with you during a time of chaos or pain or anxiety. It might have been in another person's word or touch, it might have been in a feeling or a card or countless other ways – let us remember together, so that we might strengthen our collective memories – so that we might strengthen our vision to see more clearly, despite the problems and pain of our present moment.

At Hesston College, my Bible Professor Marion Bontrager would say that, after “Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength” and next, “Loving your neighbor as yourself.” What is the next most important commandment?

To tell the story. To remember and to tell the story.

In the midst of our lack of bread. Let us not forget to tell the story.

Where some see only one loaf of bread, may we see a Sea full of fish.

When it is easy to see only the problem of that day, may we recall God's presence yesterday and throughout history.

And when we still struggle to see – let us, with grace, remember the disciples who had to be shown again and again and yet again.

May we have eyes to see. Amen. May it be so.