

5 July 2015

Bread
Mark 6-7

After Jesus heals Jairus's daughter – a tremendous miracle, because the girl had already been declared dead – 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 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 immersed 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, even he hears about it when Jesus' friends go out healing and casting out demons, Herod says, terrified. "This is John, whom I beheaded! He's come back to life!" And 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 – maybe five thousand men – 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. "It was going to be 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 little rules. 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 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 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 doing?*

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.