

“Are Your Hearts Hardened?”
Mark 8:1-21
January 19, 2025
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

We continue this morning in the Gospel of Mark.

As our text begins, Jesus continues his journey and ministry in Gentile territory. He has just healed a deaf man. And a large crowd continues to follow him and gather around him.

With that said, let’s turn now to our text: Mark 8:1-21.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Mark writes:

^{8:1} In those days, when again a great crowd had gathered, and they had nothing to eat, he called his disciples to him and said to them, ²“I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. ³And if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way. And some of them have come from far away.” ⁴And his disciples answered him, “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” ⁵And he asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.” ⁶And he directed the crowd to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. ⁷And they had a few small fish. And having blessed them, he said that these also should be set before them. ⁸And they ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹And there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

¹¹The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. ¹²And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” ¹³And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.

¹⁴Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” ¹⁶And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. ¹⁷And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” They said to him, “Twelve.” ²⁰“And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?” And they said to him, “Seven.” ²¹And he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we ask that your steadfast love would be upon us,
according to your promise.
Take not your word of truth from our lips,
for we know that our hope is in your revelation spoken to us.
Help us to keep your commands continually,
to walk in your ways in all areas of life,
and to love your revelation to us.
Grant this now as we turn to your word together.
In Jesus name, Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:41,43-47]

Introduction

The feeding of the four thousand gets a lot less attention than the feeding of the five thousand. And there are ways that that makes sense. It's a miracle, but with fewer people, and more bread to begin with.

Even so, it is noteworthy – particularly when we recognize that it appears to have taken place in Gentile territory, among what was likely a mix of Jews and Gentiles.

That said, this morning we won't be starting with the meaning of the miracle itself. We did that more when we looked at the feeding of the five thousand, and you can find that sermon on our website from last February.

This morning, we'll begin instead with the two conversations that follow Jesus's miraculous feeding of the four thousand. And as we do, we'll consider three things. We'll consider:

- Unbelieving unbelief,
- believing unbelief,
- and believing belief.

That might sound pretty confusing ... but I think it'll make more sense as we get into it.

Unbelieving Unbelief

So, first – the first thing Jesus encounters after leaving the crowd he's just miraculously fed is unbelieving unbelief.

And we see this in his conversation with the Pharisees. We read in verses 11 through 13:

“The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.’ And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side.”

What are the Pharisees asking for? And what does Jesus's response mean?

On its face, the request is absurd. Jesus's ministry, as recorded by Mark, up to this point, has been full of signs – full of miracles. How could they act like it hasn't been? What do they even want?

And the answer is that they want something more. They want something even more powerful, even more definitive. [Edwards, 235]

And in response, Jesus is grieved. Mark records that he "sighed deeply." And he uses a term there that describes distress. [Edwards, 235-236; Ferguson, 120] Jesus is grieved and dismayed.

And then he tells them that no sign will be given to them, or to those like them. And then he leaves them.

Why does he leave? Why does he not give them what they ask for?

It's not because Jesus is stingy when it comes to giving signs of who he is – he's given many signs in his earthly ministry up to this point, and he'll give many more.

No ... in this case Jesus refuses to give another sign ... because he knows that, for these men, no sign will suffice. No sign will ever be enough. Because the problem these Pharisees have is not a lack of proof ... but hearts that are willfully set against Jesus, in unbelief.

Their unbelief is not a naive unbelief, or an insufficiently-informed unbelief. Their unbelief is an unbelieving unbelief. It's rooted in a disposition of unbelief towards Jesus, and so no amount of information will change their unbelief. It's a moral and relational stance, rather than an informational position.

In their hearts, they seem to echo the words of Ford Prefect: "I don't believe it. Prove it to me and I still won't believe it." [Adams, 376]

Jesus knows this. And he's grieved. And he walks away.

And if you are here this morning, and you're not a Christian, then our text this morning challenges you to consider whether you fall into this category as well – whether you're a bit like the Pharisees ... surrounded by signs ... but asking for more ... and maybe nothing would really be enough to convince you.

Because the Bible says that we're already surrounded by signs not only that God exists, but signs of who he is and what he is like.

Psalms 19 says: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge." [Psalm 19:1-2]

Isaiah records the song of the seraphim in which they declare "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" [Isaiah 6:3]

The Apostle Paul writes that "What can be known about God is plain to" all people, "because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." [Romans 1:18b-20]

Creation itself is a sign and a miracle.

The fact that anything exists at all is a sign and a miracle. How can this universe exist? Why does it exist? Out of nothing matter and energy suddenly explode ... from nothing? To make this? Really?

Existence itself is a sign that something greater exists outside of and beyond this universe, and rules over it.

And more signs emerge as we look more closely. NYU philosopher Thoman Nagel highlights this in several ways.

First, for Nagel, who is not a religious man, the existence of consciousness is a sign, a proof even, that there must be more to the universe than time and chance, matter and energy. Consciousness is a profound and incredible thing, and any explanation of the universe that fails to explain both the origins and the existence of consciousness is a failed explanation. And in his careful analysis Nagel demonstrates that the secular materialistic view of the world cannot explain even what consciousness is, let alone where it came from. And so consciousness is a sign that points beyond the material, observable world to something more than what we can see.

Another sign Nagel identifies is value and morality.

And he gives an example sort of like this: If we're driving down the road ... and then see something in the road before us – right in the line of our tires ... we'll respond very differently if that something is a dandelion ... or a small child.

And those different responses will go beyond the physical or legal ramifications involved. We'd insist that we should hit the brakes for a child, in a way that we need not for a dandelion. We'd probably insist that that was the case even if we'd face no legal consequences for what we did, and even if our vehicle was sturdy enough that it would sustain no damage in either case.

We'd say that there is a deep and serious moral obligation to slam on the brakes for that child; that isn't nearly as true for the dandelion. And we'd be right.

But why? Why does a child have more value than dandelion? According to a purely materialistic view of things, they're both just sacks of organic compounds, carrying out chemical reactions ... aren't they? One may be more complex than the other ... one may be cuter than the other ... but what does that really matter?

And yet we know that there is exponentially more value in a human life than in the life of a plant. There's something more than chemical reactions to what a human being is. [Nagel, 101-102; 79-126]

And that knowledge, deeply rooted in us, is also a sign – a sign pointing us beyond matter ... beyond blind forces ... a sign that human beings bear the image and reflect the worth of something – even someone – that is even greater than what we can see.

We could go, but creation in general, and the human heart specifically, is full of signs of who God is.

And signs abound even more as we turn from creation ... to the Christian Scriptures.

It's as we look to the Bible – the Word of God given to us – that we find answers and explanations that resonate with our hearts and with the world around us far better than any human explanation. And that too is a sign.

In the Bible, we find an explanation better than any other for the origin and the glory of humanity and creation. In the Bible we find an explanation better than any other of what has gone wrong with creation and humanity. In the Bible we find an account of the human need for redemption, and the divine provision of redemption better than any other. In the Bible we find an explanation of the origins and the resilience of the Church better than any other.

In the Bible we encounter Jesus Christ: his life, his death, his resurrection, and his promise to restore all things. And he makes sense of this world, and of our own hearts, like nothing else.

Signs, upon signs, upon signs ... in creation all around us ... and in Scripture that is given to us.

And just as Jesus knew that the signs he had given to the Pharisees were sufficient for them to believe ... so Jesus tells us that the signs he has given to us are sufficient for us to believe ... explaining at one point, that if we will not believe the Scriptures, then we would not believe even if someone rose from the dead and testified to us about the same truths. [Luke 16:31]

Because at root unbelieving unbelief is not about a lack of information. It's rooted in a will to not believe.

And if your heart is in that setting ... then no new information will really change your mind.

And if you're honest ... you'll admit that to yourself.

Thomas Nagel did.

Nagel, whose work I mentioned earlier, is a world-renowned philosopher. His short little book *Mind and Cosmos* was a disruptive take-down of the common secular materialistic view of the world. He argues thoroughly and convincingly against the possibility that the universe and life on earth came to be what it is through random causes and effects – striking a huge philosophical blow to New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

If you find yourself drawn in by such thinkers, I really encourage you to read Nagel's book.

But with that materialistic perspective of Dawkins and others so thoroughly critiqued, Nagel explains that that leaves two other options he can see, for explaining the universe we live in, and life as we find it: either the universe was made by an outside personal being – by God, with intention ... or some unseen impersonal force within the universe determines the universe's destination – its telos.

And at that point in his argument, Nagel admits that while he doesn't himself have a convincing explanation for the universe's direction without God, he will only be exploring the second option. In other words, he'll only engage with an atheistic explanation for the universe, rather than consider one that involves God. [Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 26, 58, 95, 121]

And in a moment of refreshing honesty, Nagel writes: "That, at any rate, is my ungrounded intellectual preference." [Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 26]

Nagel rejects the idea of God as an explanation. But he's honest enough to admit that not only is his rejection based on preference – but his preference is not grounded in any evidence or argumentation. It's rooted in his desire.

And in another book titled *The Last Word*, Nagel is even more honest. There he writes openly: "I want atheism to be true." "And," he adds, "[I] am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that." [Nagel, *The Last Word*, 130]

Thomas Nagel admits that when it comes to the question of God, he takes his preferences as his ultimate guide. And when he admits that, we need to recognize that what makes him unique is not how he lets his desires guide his view of the world – what makes him unique is how honest and self-aware he is about it.

Because many follow that same pattern of thinking, though they rarely admit it.

We see it at work in the Pharisees in our text.

The question for you is ... is that same dynamic at work in you?

Is the primary reason you don't believe ... that you don't want to believe?

The Bible says it is. And it calls on you first to be honest about it ... and then to reject an unbelief that's rooted in desire rather than reality.

Because your preference does not shape ultimate reality. The universe is what it is whether you want it to be that or not. God is who he is whether you want him to be that or not. And Jesus Christ is who he is whether you want him to be that or not.

The Bible's call for you is to set aside your preferences ... and engage with reality.

And so, the first pattern Jesus exposes here is of unbelieving unbelief.

Believing Unbelief

But our text this morning doesn't end with the Pharisees. It continues on, with the disciples. And that's really important.

After his conversation with the Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples get into a boat.

Now ... far from being opponents of Jesus, the disciples have given up everything to follow him. They've served in his ministry, pledged themselves to him, and as opposition heats up, they've risked their reputations and even their lives for him. If anyone in Mark's gospel is a believer, the disciples must be ... right?

In a sense, yes, of course.

But then ... in verse fifteen ... Jesus warns them to beware of unbelief.

That's what the "leaven" of the Pharisees and Herod likely is in this case. Culturally, politically, morally, the Pharisees and Herod had almost nothing in common. But the one thing that united them was their rejection – their unbelief – towards Jesus. [Edwards, 238-239; Ferguson, 122]

The leaven of the Pharisees and Herod was unbelief. But how could the disciples of Jesus be at risk of that?

Well ... consider the scene.

Sinclair Ferguson [Ferguson, 121-122] suggests that Jesus's words in verse 15 probably didn't come out of nowhere.

In verse 14 we are told that the disciples did not bring enough bread with them in the boat. Ferguson suggests that this was probably what the disciples were thinking about or talking about. And Jesus knew it.

The disciples had just witnessed a miracle where Jesus had fed four thousand people with seven loaves – that's about 571 people per loaf. And now they realize that they only have one loaf for the thirteen of them.

Now ... the disciples weren't supposed to presume upon Jesus performing a miracle. But surely they should realize that the problem before them wasn't really a problem. Jesus was with them. And if he wanted to, he could feed them. They maybe should have even had a good laugh at the situation after what had happened earlier.

But they don't. Instead they're upset. As Sinclair Ferguson notes, the disciples had seen Jesus's compassion and provision for others in need. But apparently they didn't trust him to take care of them in the same way. [Ferguson, 123]

And so Jesus says to them: "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."

The disciples are in danger of unbelief – not an unbelief that doubts who Jesus is, or what he can do, but an unbelief that he would do such things for them personally.

In form, it's very different from the Pharisees. But in some sense, it is the same. Because at its root is unbelief. It is, we might say, a believing unbelief -odd as that might sound.

After all, the disciples don't reject Jesus's claims of who he is or what he can do – we see that clearly in verses 19 and 20.

Instead ... the form of their unbelief seems to be a doubt that Jesus would do for them what he had done for others.

It reminds me of Heidelberg Catechism question and answer number 21.

The question the catechism asks is: "What is true faith?"

The answer it gives is:

True faith is

not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true
all that God has revealed to us in Scripture;
it is also a wholehearted trust,
which the Holy Spirit creates in me by the gospel,
that God has freely granted,
not only to others but to me also,
forgiveness of sins,
eternal righteousness,
and salvation.

These are gifts of sheer grace,
granted solely by Christ's merit.

“Not only to others but to me also.”

That's the phrase that believing unbelief struggles with.

Believing unbelief might confess the truths of Scripture – it might confess faith in what Jesus has done, and in the promise of the gospel.

But then it doubts that such promises also apply to them personally.

It confesses God's grace and love for all other people who trust in him ... but then doubts that God has the same disposition towards them individually.

The disciples seemed to be able to believe that Jesus could provide bread in a time of need to thousands of people in a big crowd ... but when they need bread themselves ... they give in to frustration, and they seem to assume that they are on their own to figure it out. [Ferguson, 123]

That is the pattern of believing unbelief.

Do you see that in your life?

Do you find yourself able to believe that God can, and has, in fact, helped others in times of trial and difficult circumstances ... but then you doubt that he would do such things in your life?

Do you find yourself able to believe that if others receive Jesus Christ, and rest on him, as he's offered in the gospel, then they will be cleansed – their sins will be forgiven, and they will be right with God ... but that when it comes to you ... God couldn't extend such grace to you ... he wouldn't cleanse you so readily ... where he might make others white as snow, he would withhold his cleansing blood in your case?

In the gospel, God may be a kind and loving Father to others ... but when he turns to you, you're convinced that all he is a stern Judge ... with no affection, no love, no grace towards you ... but only disappointment, anger, and judgment.

These tendencies – these ways of thinking ... they are the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod that Jesus warned the disciples of. They are unbelief. And Jesus here calls you to watch out for them – to beware of them.

Because your doubt of God's love for you is not humility. It's doubt. It's a form of unbelief. And Jesus calls you to reject it, and repent of it, lest it grow ... like leaven. [Ferguson, 123]

Instead, the Lord calls on you to wholeheartedly trust "that God has freely granted, not only to others but to you also, forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation." He calls you to trust that his gospel and his Fatherly love is not just for others – but even for you.

And it can be for you, because "these are gifts of sheer grace, granted solely by Christ's merit."

Jesus calls us to watch out for, and resist, and reject the temptation to believing unbelief – the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod.

Believing Belief

And with that, third and finally, Jesus calls us to believing belief – to minds that confess Jesus as Lord and Savior ... and hearts that accept that even though we don't deserve it ... his love and grace extends even to us. Because he is that gracious and that kind.

And we see that kind of belief, it would seem ... surprisingly enough ... in the crowd, of all people. And a crowd containing many Gentiles, at that.

This crowd hadn't gathered for a spectacle, in a moment. They had come out to a desolate place to see Jesus. They had stayed with him there for three days. They had stayed with Jesus, even after their provisions had run out. They believe that Jesus is able to do great things – that he has come from God. And they believe that in his grace and mercy ... Jesus is willing to love and care even for them.

And Jesus, seeing such faith – seeing such believing belief – is filled with compassion for them, we read in verse two. And seeing their faith, he desires to feed them, which is itself a sign.

The Syrophenician woman, just a chapter earlier, spoke words that must have struck most Jews as absurd – she had said that Gentiles would receive bread from the Table of Yahweh, the God of Israel. And yet ... here, in this miracle, it would seem that her words were already coming true, as Jesus – Yahweh in the flesh – feeds Gentile believers with bread from his hand. [Ferguson, 119]

This is a shocking turn of events: God exemplifying faithful, believing belief from those whom few Jews would have expected, proving again that true faith comes from God, and not from us.

And as time went on, that same believing belief would extend, and be even more clearly exemplified, in the very kind of people who seem to lack it here in our text.

The disciples ... whose hearts seem hard here ... whose eyes seem blind, whose ears seem deaf, whose memories seem so faulty – the disciples who are a picture of believing unbelief here ... will one day be models of believing belief. They will walk in true and deep faith. They will trust that Christ is for them and with them. They will apply the gospel to themselves, and to others.

Then, consider the Pharisees. Though many Pharisees will continue in unbelieving unbelief, others will become pictures of believing belief. The Pharisee Nicodemus will go from questioning Jesus in the night to making himself openly known as a follower of Jesus, after the cross. And then, after

that, the Pharisee Saul, the great persecutor of the Church, will become Paul, the great Apostle of the Church. They will go from unbelieving unbelief to believing belief.

And in both cases – whether the disciples maturing in deeper faith, or the Pharisees being converted to faith – in both cases the power of that change will not lie in the people ... but it will lie in the Lord, who alone can change hearts.

And so, if you're struggling with your own faith – whether you doubt the claims of Christ, or you believe ... but you doubt that it all can apply to you – if you are wrestling in one way or another with the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, one of the first things to do is to cry out to God and ask for his help – to call out, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” [Mark 9:24]

And then, entrusting yourself to the Lord, talk back to your doubts. If they're preferences masquerading as proofs, expose them as such in your own heart. If they are questions as to whether God's promises could really apply to you, reject those doubting whispers, and remind yourselves of the gospel promises God has made to all who trust in him. Because God is not a liar. So cling to his promises, and ask for his help again and again.

Because he can turn the doubting disciple into a bold apostle. He can turn the persecutor into a herald.

He can turn a Gentile crowd into a believing congregation.

God can change hearts.

So when we struggle with doubts, let us turn to him, and call out: “Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.”

And as we do ... may he grant us a deep faith that his incredible promises in the gospel apply not only to others ... but even to us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Adams, Douglas. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in *The Ultimate Hitchhiker's Guide: Complete & Unabridged*. New York, NY: Random
- Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Let's Study Mark*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999.
- Horne, Mark. *The Victory According to Mark: An Exposition of the Second Gospel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The Last Word*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Wallace, David Foster. *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a

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