

UNDERSTANDING THE LOAVES

Mark 6:45-52

Pentecost 10, Proper 12-B, July 29, 2018

The New Testament paints many pictures of the Church of Jesus Christ for us!

Sometimes it pictures the **Church** as “**God’s family**” (Mark 3:34-35); in which we are now living as “**God’s children.**”

Sometimes it **pictures the Church for us as a large “Temple,”** of which we now, according to St. Peter, are “**living stones**” (Peter 2:5)! **How’s that for an oxymoron?**

Sometimes the **New Testament pictures the Church** for us as a **human body, “Christ’s body,”** that is, of which we are now “**living**” members (I Corinthians 12:12-14); **each with a different function but all vitally important as we experience a certain amount of NECESSARY INTERDEPENDENCE upon one another!**

But in the earliest days of the Renaissance, in the 13th and 14th Centuries, many artists, taking their paintbrush to the canvas, their cue from our Gospel lesson today! They PAINTED THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST FOR US LIKE 12 MEN IN A BOAT, WITH BEARDED FACES, AND THEIR EYES WIDE-OPEN, ABSOLUTELY AWE-STRUCK WITH THE LOOK OF TERROR, while their little fishing vessel was bobbing up and down on the high seas like a tiny fishing cork!

Friends, it was immediately after Jesus had miraculously fed the 5000 men, in addition to many women and children (Matthew 14:21), that our LORD THEN TOLD HIS DISCIPLES TO GET INTO A BOAT AND CROSS OVER TO THE OTHER SIDE of the lake. In their attempting to do so, JESUS’ DISCIPLES WERE BEING FULLY OBEDIENT TO HIM! And having dismissed the crowd, Jesus next went up on a mountainside there to pray. Obviously, then there are two questions that follow: (1) First why did Jesus send his disciples away; and (2) Secondly, why did Jesus go up atop a nearby mountain to prayer.

1. Why did Jesus send the disciples away?

St John tells us that it was because the **recipients of his great miracle were so impressed with what Jesus had done that they tried to take him by force and crown him to become their new king!**

They wanted a **Messiah like “this Jesus” seemed initially to be; a Messiah whom** they thought, would have been along the lines of Herbert Hoover when he first ran to become the President of the United States. Hoover’s campaign slogan in 1928 was--that if he became the POTUS that then there would soon be: **“A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT AND A CAR IN EVERY GARAGE!”**

But, having already said this countless time, please allow me to say it again: **“THIS IS NOT THE KIND OF PROMISED SAVIOR OUR JESUS WAS BORN INTO OUR WORLD TO BECOME!”**

YET, TO KEEP THESE DISCIPLES FROM BECOMING TEMPTED TO CHIME IN WITH THE EXCITED CROWD, JESUS REMOVED THEM FROM THAT SITUATION AND SENT THEM BACK OUT UPON THE WATER TO CROSS OVER THE LAKE TO THE OPPOSITE SHORE.

Though it probably would have been the intentional the plan for those **seasoned fishermen to hang as closely to the northern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee** as possible, at Jesus’ command, they were making their way to the opposite shore! Apparently the **evening wind was blowing, so hard in a westward direction, that this fishing vessel, according to St. John, soon found itself blown some 3 to 3 ½ miles out**

there away from the shore; in the middle of the lake, no less, by now, in treacherous waters (John 6:17-19)!

And déjà vu, the disciples were once more “straining at the oars” because the wind was against them.

I am using the phrase, “déjà vu,” because we heard a similar story, just two weeks ago, from two chapters earlier in Mark’s Gospel! But that time, praise the Lord, Jesus actually in the boat with them; sound asleep upon a cushion in the back of the boat! Sleeping in the midst of all that chaos, because this is how utterly, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually that our Lord was exhausted! So much so that now, he is somehow able to sleep through the whole thing! The disciples, by contrast, were “**ALL HANDS ON DECK,**” straining at those oars with all their might, but making little headway! They were angry with Jesus! They were put out with Jesus! They shook him hard, I imagine, and woke him up saying to him: “**LORD, DO YOU NOT CARE THAT WE PERISH**” (MARK 4:38)?

Of course, Jesus cared! How could they question his care for them after everything they had witnessed Jesus doing for them and for so many other people also, up to this point. Jesus wakes up! Jesus calms the storm!

But even more frightened now, St. Mark tells us that they were filled with **GREAT FEAR AS THEY ASKED THEMSELVES: “WHO IS THIS THAT EVEN THE WIND AND THE WAVES OBEY HIM”** (MARK 4:41)?

2. A second question is: Why did Jesus go to the mountain to pray?

Though Jesus Christ was one with the Father, he lived in constant state of prayer with his Heavenly Father, and in times of crisis, Jesus often took leave of his disciples and retreated to the hills or a mountain or, sometimes, even to a garden to pray!

And for what did Jesus pray? I am sure that among the many manifold prayers that Jesus the Son of God could have brought before his Heavenly Father’s throne--his number one prayer was that **he might be empowered to do the Father’s will! And is there ever any better prayer that we could pray when we find ourselves suddenly in the midst of a crisis too?**

The Risen Christ, still today, by his resurrection power teaches us to pray: “*Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:10).

Brothers and sisters, just as Jesus went up upon a mountain that evening to pray for his disciples, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that he is still praying for all of us today; especially when we are faced with days of great difficulty in our lives too.

Just as Jesus told Peter that he was praying for him, telling Peter, “*I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail*” (Luke 22:31-32), Jesus still prays for all of us from his place in heaven today. This is why St. Paul told young Pastor Timothy one day: “**FOR THERE IS ONE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MAN, THE MAN CHRIST JESUS, WHO LOVED US AND GAVE HIMSELF UP AS A RANSOM FOR US ALL**” (1 TIMOTHY 2:5-6)!

ONE LESSON WE CAN CERTAINLY LEARN FROM THIS GOSPEL LESSON THIS MORNING, HOWEVER, IS THAT WE SHOULDN’T EXPECT EVERYTHING TO RUN SMOOTHLY FOR US; EVEN WHEN WE ARE DOING OUR BEST TO OBEY THE LORD! It didn't for these men, at that present time, but neither did everything work to their seemingly favor either--as we read about their life-experiences all throughout the **BOOK OF ACTS!** But while the disciples were struggling in the boat, Jesus was on the

mountainside praying. **Mark tells us that even though the boat was in the middle of the lake, that our loving Savior, in the midst of his praying, could still see them.**
THE ONE WHO COMES TO US

Jesus, who saw his disciples in their great distress, therefore **CAME TO THEM WALKING, MIRACULOUSLY, UPON THE WATER AND IMMEDIATELY, AFTER JESUS GOT INTO THE BOAT WITH THEM, THE WIND DIED DOWN--WHICH ACTUALLY SIGNALS FOR US A SECOND MIRACLE!**

ST JOHN'S GOSPEL says that as soon as **JESUS GOT INTO THE BOAT, WITH HIS DISCIPLES** that they then **REACHED THE OTHER SIDE (JOH 6:21)! AND THIS SIGNALS TO US THEN A 3RD MIRACLE.**

FAILURE TO UNDERSTAND

Mark tells us that when Jesus climbed into the boat the wind died down and when the disciples saw it--they were **AMAZED; AMAZED FOR THEY HAD NOT UNDERSTOOD ABOUT THE LOAVES (v. 52)!**

The Greek verb here that is translated with the English word "understood" means most literally to decipher or to calculate. It means to somehow examine all the evidence and draw some sort of conclusion. Another way of helping us to understand what Mark is telling us here would be for us to think about one of those 800 pieces of a jigsaw puzzle being poured out upon your dining room table, and you then taking several hours to figure out how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together, resulting in a very beautiful picture once the pieces are connected properly!

At the end of the miraculous feeding of the 5000, Jesus told the disciples to pick up the leftovers and they picked up 12 baskets full of bread, that the disciples must have then placed in that boat with them that night when they were leaving. But the disciples failed, unfortunately, to see the significance of those 12 baskets full of bread. They failed to see the power that was made manifest among them in the Person and the Work of Jesus Christ--who was and is much more than a mere ordinary man, but the Son of Man, the eternally-begotten Son of God, the Alpha and the Omega, without beginning and end, who had now taken up residence in the flesh and blood of a human being--Jesus of Nazareth.

Do you get the point that Mark, who was the personal scribe of St Peter, by the way, is making for us here? These leftovers were visibly present before them only because of who Jesus really is!

But the disciples failed to understand this. And the reason, Mark tells us, that they failed to understand this is because their hearts were hardened.

As a result, of the fall of mankind into sin, resulting in "original sin" that we all inherit from our parents; we all enter this world at the time of our physical birth with hearts that are hardened against God and his Word and against one another!

The Greek word here for "**hardened**" is closely related to a word that describes the **several layers of tough-skin that cover an elephant's foot**; although the several layers that cover an elephant's foot it is highly beneficial to the elephant. Although these several layers of skin make the elephant's foot somewhat **INFLEXIBLE AND IMMOVABLE ITSELF**, it provides a covering for the elephant's foot that prevents the elephant's foot from bringing bruised and

punctured by sharp stones and by sharp pieces of debris, tree limbs and the like that may be covering the forest's floor.

Two times in the third chapter of Hebrews, the anonymous New Testament writer of the Book of Hebrews, cautions his readers against hardening their hearts against God. In both these instances the writer is quoting **Psalm 95:7-11**, ***“Therefore if you hear God’s voice do not harden your hearts as your father did when they put me to the test, although they had seen my work. For 40 years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart and they have not known my ways! They shall never enter my rest!’”***

Even though Jesus escaped from the crowd, Jesus met with the recipients again on the following day, because once again they followed him to the other side of the lake. And Jesus told me, ***“You came looking for me not because you saw the signs and believed, but because you ate your fill of the loaves! Do not just work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life that the Son of Man will give to you” (John 6:27)!***

Jesus continued, ***“I am the bread of life come down from heaven to give life to the world! Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh!”***

When our Gospel lesson this morning tells us that these disciples' hearts were hardened, what it is saying to us is that their hearts were still finding it immensely difficult for them to realize the deepest implications of just who this Jesus really was; especially in the miracle in which He multiplied bread to feed 5000.

For if they had realized it, then they would not have been surprised by Him walking on water. For them, the prior miracle that He did in which He multiplied bread was not enough for them to realize just how much power and authority He had.

Their experience, at this point, at least, was somewhat like Pharaoh's response in Egypt when Moses first appeared before him, demanding the release of God's people, who had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years.

When Moses sought to demonstrate for Pharaoh the power of the LORD God of Israel by throwing his staff upon the ground before Pharaoh's feet, to witness it turned into a serpent, Pharaoh only saw this as a simple magician's trick that his magicians could easily reproduce, which they did reproduce, so that his heart remained hardened to true realization of just who this GOD WAS AND IS THAT MOSES WAS NOW BRINGING TO THE PHARAOH'S ATTENTION!

Therefore, the Pharaoh wouldn't let the Israelites go. His heart wouldn't allow the truth about who he was dealing with, to penetrate it. A hardened heart is one that is hard to be penetrated with truth or belief.

Brothers and sisters, I thought today, that I might close my sermon by sharing with you once again, one of those funny stories that we sometimes here about St. Peter and the Pearly Gates. Well, here goes:

Three guys die and go to heaven. At the Pearly Gates, St. Peter says to them: “Whatever you do, make certain that you don't step on a pink cloud!” But wouldn't you know it! No sooner does the first guy go off than he returns accompanied by one of the most unattractive women you have ever seen!

“What happened to you, asked the other two. “Oh!” the man replied, “I stepped on a pink cloud!”

Then the second guy goes off wandering and comes back with an even more unattractive woman! “What happened to you?” they asked. “I stepped on a pink cloud!” he replied.

That’s when the last guy goes off wandering and comes back with the most beautiful women any of them had ever seen before in their entire lives! What happened they asked? And this time the woman spoke up, “Unfortunately, I stepped on a pink cloud!”

Today, if you hear God’s voice do not harden your hearts as your fathers did during the days of their rebellion.

You and I have been welcomed once again into the loving embrace of our Heavenly Father not because God stepped on a pink cloud, but because he so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish but have eternal life! Amen