

The Significance of Leftovers

Mark 4:30-34; 8:14-21

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For all of the school teachers present today, here is something that should make you feel good about your profession. Of the 90 times that Jesus is addressed in the gospels, 60 times he is referred to as “teacher.” So you are in good company.

You often think of Jesus as a preacher, but no one called him “preacher.” Jesus was called a teacher.

When you see the word, “Rabbi,” that is a Hebrew word that means, “teacher.”

Teachers are among the most important people in the world.

Without teachers, how could children learn to read?

How would they learn right from wrong?

How could we learn to ride a bike, or tie our shoes?

How would a rancher learn to raise cattle?

How could a doctor learn to operate?

How could an engineer learn to build roads and bridges?

We don’t learn to do these things on our own. We all need teachers.

Even people that are inventors build on knowledge that others taught them.

You might not have a teaching degree, but all of us are teachers to one degree or another. What we teach is left up to us. What we are teaching may be good, or it may be bad.

It may be in line with what the Master Teacher taught, or it may not be.

What are you teaching those around you? What are they learning from you?

Jesus taught us to “Go and make disciples.” We cannot make disciples unless we are teachers and we cannot be good teachers unless we understand what it is that we are supposed to teach.

That means that we have to be disciples ourselves, learning from Jesus, the Master Teacher, so we can pass on to others what we have learned. We cannot pass on something we don’t know.

When we look at the relationship Jesus had with the twelve disciples, we see that they were very close. They were together for the better part of three years.

They still found it difficult to understand his teaching at times. For that matter, we miss his point sometimes ourselves.

Jesus taught in parables, and that seemed to confuse the disciples at times. The disciples were not the sharpest knives in the drawer, prompting Jesus to call them dull, which is not a very nice compliment for a teacher to make of his disciples.

Sometimes, they gave Jesus the right answer, but they did not understand how it applied to their lives. It took a while to sink it.

For example, Peter rightly confessed at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was the Christ, but he didn't understand that Jesus would be a suffering Christ who would die on a cross, and a resurrected Christ, who would conquer death.

So, for Jesus, experiential learning was important. The journey was important. When you don't understand, it's vital to journey with Jesus long enough until the mud settles to the bottom and the clear picture emerges.

This journey requires some faith. Jesus wants us to journey with him because that's the way we learn. We learn by doing. We learn by experience. We learn by spending time with Jesus.

When I read Mark's gospel, I think Mark is demonstrating to us that Jesus made experiential learning a trademark of his ministry.

Sometimes it takes months or years to learn things. It took the disciples three years to learn the lesson of the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Mark places this parable very early in the gospel. It's as if Mark wants us to see that it took the entire ministry of Jesus for the disciples to understand this parable.

If he had given the disciples a test about the parable, they might have gotten the answers right, but would they have truly known its meaning? I don't think so.

What Jesus did over the next year or two of his ministry was demonstrate and allowed them to experience firsthand the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. When planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." (Mark 4:31-31).

What does that parable mean?

Jesus wanted to teach his disciples that the Kingdom of God was for all kinds of people, from all walks of life, with all kinds of problems, and that God's love and grace were big enough to cast shade on people from every corner of the earth. But how do you do that?

Jesus loved to tell stories, but it was better if he allowed his disciples to live those stories, to experience them. That made them memorable.

These men that were following Jesus had been taught and conditioned to believe that the Messiah was coming only for the Jews. So how was an outside group ever going to get access to God?

The disciples could not see it. They had to experience that for themselves.

They were on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee, and it was discovered that the disciples had forgotten to bring any food.

Jesus decided this was an excellent time to do some teaching. So as he taught them he warned the disciples of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod.

The disciples were confused. What was the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod and what did that have to do with the disciples forgetting to bring bread?

Was this some kind of riddle?

Later when the Pharisees and Herod rose up in opposition against Jesus and became instrumental in his death, what Jesus said to them began to make sense.

Then Jesus performed two feeding miracles. He fed over 4,000 people on the Gentile side of the lake. That's the miracle you don't often hear about. The one that is most often told is the feeding of the 5,000. That miracle took place on the Jewish side of the lake.

So, keeping both of these miracles in mind, Jesus asked the disciples two questions:

1) "When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" Twelve," they replied.

2) "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven."

He said to them. "Do you still not understand?"

Once again, when the disciples were picking up leftovers after Jesus fed the multitudes, they had no idea that Jesus was using that experience to teach them a spiritual lesson.

It's at this point that we are right there with the disciples. Sometimes, we are just as dull as they are. It's twelve baskets of bread. So what? It's seven baskets of bread. So what?

There are so many mundane things that happen in our lives, so many things we call a coincidence. Yet God can use the smallest things and incidences of our day to teach us a spiritual lesson.

Jesus was a detailed planner and teacher. Nothing was left to chance in what he did or taught. Jesus didn't just go to a village on a whim. Jesus went to places with a mission in mind.

To the disciples, it might have seemed as if Jesus' travel plans made no sense. Just when he had a huge crowd and a following, he would get in a boat and cross the lake and go to the other side.

In Mark's gospel, there are five crossings of the Sea of Galilee. All along the Sea of Galilee, there are different villages. Some are Jewish. Others are Gentile.

On one side of the lake lived some Jews. On the other side of the lake lived some Gentiles, whom the non-Jew thought were ineligible for God's kingdom.

They were hated, despised, low life, the scum of the earth. But Jesus went to their side of the lake and performed the same kind of miracles that he had performed on the Jewish side of the lake.

On the Jewish side of the lake, he healed a man in the Synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit. Later he duplicated his miracle by healing a man on the Gentile side of the lake which was possessed by a demon.

On the Jewish side of the lake he healed a woman who had suffered a blood disease for years, who had enough faith that she believed if she just touched his robe, his power would make her whole. He also brought back to life a little girl that had died.

On the Gentile side of the lake, Jesus conversed with a Gentile woman who had faith that Jesus could heal her daughter. Just in talking with a Gentile woman, Jesus brought down cultural taboos. He not only talked to her but because of her faith, he healed her daughter.

On the Jewish side of the lake, there is the feeding miracle of over 5,000 people.

On the Gentile side of the lake, there was the feeding of over 4,000 thousand people.

Jesus was trying to get the disciples to understand through experience that the Kingdom of God reaches all areas of the earth, all kinds of people, with all kinds of problems. Jesus was declaring hope to people regardless of ethnic origin, regardless of sex, regardless of geographical location, regardless of ethnicity.

It was one thing to tell the story of the Mustard Seed. It was another thing for the disciples to see Jesus plant that seed of love and to see the branches of God's kingdom grow in his ministry.

It's one thing to say that you believe God loves everybody, people of all races, religions, geographical location, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, but it is another thing when Jesus asks you to follow him to places where these people are and minister to them.

So when he asked the disciples questions about the leftovers from the feeding miracles, Jesus had something very important to teach them.

They didn't know there was a reason they picked up twelve baskets of leftovers on the Jewish side of the lake and seven baskets of leftovers on the Gentile side of the lake. Numbers in their day were much more symbolic than in ours.

For the Jews, twelve represented the twelve tribes of Israel and seven was a number that symbolized inclusiveness and wholeness.

In talking to his disciples about a bunch of leftovers, Jesus wanted his disciples and us to see that His Kingdom was big enough to declare hope to everyone.

Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee to meet all kinds of people: new people, undesirable people, and people that were not welcome in his neighborhood.

He met with people his disciples were uncomfortable being around, people that his hometown people hated enough that when Jesus preached that God loved these people in his first public sermon, they threw Jesus out of his own synagogue in Nazareth had thoughts about killing him because he dared preach that the Kingdom of God was going to include these kinds of people.

The question for us is a difficult one, "Have we learned the lesson of the Parable of the Mustard Seed?"

One of the ways we can test what we have learned is to notice what it is that we teach.

Another way is to look at where we are willing to follow Jesus. Who are we willing to minister to and share our love to and with?

Another way is to notice what it is that we practice.

Jesus spent a lot of time taking his disciples to places they would not have gone to on their own so they might experience people they would not otherwise have experienced.

To live the Parable of the Mustard Seed, some of us just need to go across the street to befriend the neighbor that's different from us.

Some of us need to volunteer at the Food Bank or go on a mission trip to meet people we've not met before.

Some of us need to befriend someone from another religion, race, or a different political perspective.

Some of us need to get involved with an agency that helps the poor or the abused.

We must be more open to welcoming people in our church from different schools, regions of the country, economic brackets, and ethnic groups.

It's realizing that the gospel is more important than politics or political parties.

It's acknowledging that we don't all worship alike, but we have the same teacher who teaches us from the same Word of God and that the Kingdom of Heaven is a big place with lots of room and we don't own the space in God's Kingdom.

We don't say who gets in and who doesn't. That's not our job. God is the judge, not us.

Our job is to go and make disciples.

There is always enough of God's love leftover that everyone in the world should be able to have their fill of it, especially if we are willing to share it.

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