Mark Lesson 25 (2022)

**“DO YOU STILL NOT UNDERSTAND?”**

*(Subtitle: A sense of God’s Living Presence)*

Mark 8:9b-21

Key Verse: 8:17

“Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?’”

We’ve been studying the Gospel of Mark this year and are almost halfway through. I hope you have been inspired and enjoying it. I surely do. Today’s passage is the last lesson in Mark’s Gospel this year because we will be studying Christmas passages after Thanksgiving Sunday next week. We will come back to our Mark’s Gospel study early next year. I hope today’s passage can give us a semi-conclusion of our study in Mark.

Jesus had been away from Galilee with his disciples and gone to the non-Jewish territory, where he ministered to many people, including the Syrophoenician woman’s daughter and a deaf and mute man. He spent several months exclusively with his disciples, just being with them. Listening to and talking with Jesus while traveling with him must have been great blessings and beautiful opportunities for them. In today’s passage, Jesus warned them against the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod. I realized that we tend to overthink the hypocrisy of Jewish religious leaders whenever we study this passage. Yet, we should be careful because Jesus’ primary concern was not about the hypocritical Jewish leaders but his disciples' lack of spiritual understanding. That’s why the message title is *“Do You Still Not Understand,”* not *The Yeast of the Pharisee.”* Jesus kept saying to them, “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear?” (17-19a) This morning, let’s consider what his disciples failed to see and didn’t understand. Why is it so important to see? And what is that we should see and understand?

Look at verses 9b-10. “After he had sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.” This statement indicates the end of Jesus’ mission trip in the non-Jewish territory. Now, he is back in Galilee, Dalmanutha. (Map#1) There Jesus was confronted by the hostility of Jewish religious leaders.

Look at verse 11. “The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked for a sign from heaven.” According to Matthew, the Sadducees came along with the Pharisees to test Jesus. (16:1; 15:1-2) Probably, they were the ones who came from Jerusalem earlier and questioned Jesus for his disciples’ non-confirmative behaviors toward their traditions. (7:1-23). To their question, Jesus challenged them that they were the ones who were disobedient to God by setting God’s command while upholding their religious traditions above God’s words. It surely offended them. They didn’t like it at all because it threatened their status quo. We know that the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians had been plotting against Jesus and how they might kill him (Mk. 3:6). They had also been accusing Jesus that by the power of Satan, he was driving out demons. (3:22)

Now, they came to test Jesus again. To test him, they asked for a sign from heaven. They probably said, “Teacher, what sign can you show us to prove your authority that you are really from God?” Wait! Will they acknowledge Jesus’ authority if Jesus showed them spectacular signs, like changing stones into bread or flying over them, like a spiderman? (Pic#1) No, they had no intent to acknowledge his authority, no matter what sign Jesus showed them.

Look at verses 12-13. “He sighed deeply and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.’ Then he left them, got back into the boat, and crossed to the other side.” Jesus sighed deeply because of their corrupt hearts and willful rejection. He would not give them any more signs. In Matthew’s account, Jesus said, “A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” (Mt. 16:4) We know that the sign of Jonah refers to the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, which both Matthew and Luke mentioned several times (Mt. 12:30, 40, 41, 16:4; Lk. 11:29, 30, 32). Apostle Paul also described Jesus’ resurrection from death as the prime proof that he was the Son of God, the Messiah. Romans 1:4 states, “and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

But Mark, along with John, didn’t mention the sign of Jonah. We wonder why. It’s not that Mark denies the importance of Jesus’ death and resurrection as the Messiah. It’s probably because Jesus’ physical presence, words, powerful miracles, and compassion were a sign from heaven, which they could not have missed if they sincerely wanted to know the truth about Jesus. But they missed it. Why? It’s because their hearts were hardened and calloused. (4:4, 15) As a result, they could not see the presence of God’s kingdom through Jesus. In other words, they locked themselves in spiritual darkness. It reminds me of what C.S. Lewis said about hell, *“The doors of hell are locked from the inside.”* (Pic#2)

 The focus shifts from the Jewish leaders to Jesus’ disciples in the following verses. In verses 14-21, Jesus challenges his disciples to deal with their spiritual blindness. While the Pharisees became permanently blind due to their hypocrisy, his disciples became blind occasionally and temporarily due to worries, anxieties, fear, or greed. (3:18-19)

 Look at verse 14. “The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.” They seemed to forget to bring bread for lunch because they were rushing into the boat. And when they realized that they had forgotten to bring bread, they were worried about lunch. Probably, they started blaming one another for neglecting the responsibility of preparing lunch. James and John might have said to Simon Peter, *“Simon, why didn’t you bring bread?”* Then Peter responded, “*Why didn’t you guys do it? Do I have to do it all the time?*” Their minds became preoccupied with the worries of life.

 Seeing what they were talking about among themselves, Jesus took a moment to teach them a spiritual lesson. Look at verses 15 and 16. “‘Be careful,’ Jesus warned them. ‘Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.’ They discussed this with one another and said, ‘It’s because we have no bread.’” When Jesus talked about being careful and watchful of the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod, he meant their bad influence of willful rejection of Jesus due to their hardened hearts and the sin of hypocrisy. Yet, the disciples didn’t have a clue. They assumed that Jesus was talking about bread. They misunderstood Jesus.

Jesus indeed warned his disciples about the evil influence of Jewish leaders, the Pharisees for their legalism, the Sadducees for their liberalism, and the Herodians for their secularism. But that’s not the point here. He meant that spiritual blindness or hardened hearts of the Jewish leaders could also be the problem of his disciples, if not permanent, at least temporarily.

Read verses 17 and 18. “Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember?” These verses show Jesus rebuking his disciples for their spiritual blindness or hardened heart. They had been with him for a long time. They had experienced Jesus’ divine power and compassion for people through his numerous miracles and teachings. Yet, after all his effort to show them who he was, the level of their spiritual understanding and faith in him was no better than that of the crowd. As they saw Jesus being rejected by the top Jewish leaders, their hearts were hardened with fear. Their hearts were hardened with worries and anxieties about their life security and future. They were ordinary people like us.

How did Jesus help his disciples to overcome their spiritual blindness? Look at verses 19b-21. “‘And don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?’ ‘Twelve,’ they replied. ‘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?’” According to their answers, they remembered the fact correctly, yet they didn’t understand the spiritual meaning behind the facts.

What did they fail to understand and see? What do you think it was? The spiritual reality is that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, always with them. Let’s consider it a little more.

Mark’s account opens with the statement, “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” (1:1) However, we’ve noticed that in Mark, Jesus never used the title **“the Messiah”** or “**the Son of God”** for his identity. If someone called him “the Son of God” or “the Holy One of God!” he told them to be quiet. (1:25) Jesus used only the title **“the Son of Man”** for his identity. Yet, Jesus performed so many miracles, including those only God could do: He demonstrated God’s compassion for all kinds of sick, broken-hearted, and marginalized people. He cleansed the unclean lepers, healed people with paralysis, opened the eyes of the blind, drove out demons, and even raised the dead. He also walked on water. Didn’t he say to them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid,” when they thought he was a ghost, looking at him walking on the stormy sea? (6:50) His feeding of the five thousand with five loaves in Galilee and another four thousand with seven loaves near Decapolis demonstrated God’s compassion for all people, which reveals that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, who is with us all the time, no matter what circumstances we may be in.

Why didn’t Jesus use the title “The Messiah” or “The Son of God” for his identity? According to Mark, it was a messianic secret, meaning that Jesus didn’t want people to misunderstand him based on human expectations. He didn’t want to force people to prematurely confess he was the Messiah. Instead, he wanted people, including his disciples, to be moved and inspired to know that he was the Messiah.

The disciples had forgotten not just physical bread but the spiritual reality that Jesus, the Messiah, who can provide for and protect them, is always with them and will never leave them alone in any circumstances. They were with Jesus, who is God’s living presence with them. But due to their fear and anxiety, they failed to recognize the spiritual reality. That’s why Jesus challenged his disciples by asking them the same question over and over, “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?” (17) “Do you still not understand?” (21)

When we fail to see the spiritual reality, it’s impossible not to harden our hearts with many worries, fears, and anxieties. My senior pastor in Chicago used to tell us the importance of having a sense of God’s history. I agree with him. I also think that having a sense of God’s history means believing in God’s living presence, which we need very much in our time.

Having a sense of God’s living presence in our day-to-day life is the core of Christian faith, living faith.

Let me close the sermon. Our reality in today’s world is not so promising. After almost three years of the pandemic, we still face many challenges. The global economy has become worse, and living expense is skyrocketing. Our future, including our children’s future, seems unstable and unpredictable. Even though we confess that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord, we often allow our hearts to be troubled with fear and anxiety of any kind. It’s easy to harden our hearts. Someone said, *“Worrying won’t stop the bad stuff from happening; it just stops you from enjoying the good.”* We know worrying is no good. It affects every aspect of our life, physical, emotional, mental, relational, professional, and spiritual.

How can we not harden our hearts and stop worrying too much? We need to see and recognize the spiritual reality, God’s living presence with us now through Christ Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:6. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Sometimes, we are unaware of our worries, fears, and anxieties. However, the first step to overcoming worries, fears, and anxiety is to pay attention to them and bring them to God our Father. Sounds paradoxical. Yet, being anxious is different from paying attention to and managing our anxieties. In other words, we need to search inside ourselves and cultivate our inner selves because the real problem is not outside but inside our hearts.

No matter what circumstances we may be in, we should never lose a sense of God’s living presence within us through the Holy Spirit. That’s how we experience God’s kingdom in our lives now and forever. If Jesus asks us today, *“Do you understand and see it?”* what is your answer? Do you believe in the spiritual reality and sense God’s living presence in your life? ***“Do you see? Do you understand?”***