

***No One Like Jesus: Get It Already!***

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***October 16, 2016***

***Deuteronomy 29:2-4; 1 Corinthians 2:1-8; Matthew 15:29-16:12***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 15:29-16:12. This is the word of the Lord. "Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish." He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children. After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan. The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away. When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

At the tail end of high school, I was called into the office for a special assignment. I'd taken two years of Japanese at a local college, so I was asked to tutor a young woman who'd just moved to the US. I'd spend an hour a day helping her understand English. Because I was young and stupid, I thought it would be easy. She had years of English back in Japan. No sweat.

Boy, was I wrong. We worked for weeks, but she didn't seem to improve at all. She was reluctant to try anything. We poured over workbooks and she would nod like she understood. But when it came to using English in a practical situation – nothing. I couldn't figure out what was wrong. The thought occasionally went through my mind: why don't you get it already?

As I learned later, in Japan, you don't try to speak a foreign language unless you *know* you can. Most Japanese have eight plus years of English in school, but because practicing it is discouraged, it's rare to find someone who understands it. It wasn't her fault at all. She was doing what she had been taught her whole life to do. It wasn't going to take instruction to help her learn English; it was going to take an entirely different mindset.

Today's passage reminded me of that experience because the events we just read about are a master class in missing the point. I'm dumbstruck at just how everybody doesn't get it – not Jesus' enemies, not Jesus' friends. It's sometimes said that the disciples are really the “duh-ciples,” and it's true here. They are getting the information, but they have the wrong mindset to understand what Jesus is doing. But as we study this passage, the failures of the disciples and the religious leaders might help our walk with Christ if we realize what went wrong.

At first, you might have had *déjà vu*. The story of Jesus feeding the 4,000 sounds an awful lot like the feeding of the 5,000 we read together less than a month ago. However, there are important differences. He's in Gentile territory now, not Jewish lands. When Jesus performs miraculous healings, the people praise “the God of Israel” – when Jewish people worship, it simply says that they praise God. Moreover, the baskets used to pick up the pieces of bread are particular to pagan lands, not the specifically Jewish baskets named in the feeding of the 5,000.

Also, when Jesus performed this miracle in Israel proper, twelve baskets of bread were left, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel under His authority. In the Gentile lands, there are seven baskets left. The number seven in Hebrew thought represented completion, wholeness, and perfection, just as God created the universe in seven days. In this miracle amongst the pagans, even the bread left hints that Jesus will bring people from every nation into His Kingdom, not just Israel. These two mass miracles prove Christ has come to save all who would come to Him, regardless of where they come from.

But maybe the most surprising thing is the disciples' attitude about feeding the crowds. They are still clueless! They have no idea how they are going to feed everyone, even though Jesus has done it before right in front of them. Were they paying attention? And the Pharisees and Sadducees are even worse. He feeds the thousands – again. He heals the multitudes – again. And then they're like, “Yeah, we're going to need a sign from heaven.” The disciples always seemed surprised by the miracles, but they don't ignore them. The religious leaders aren't interested in the signs Jesus does, though. They don't want to be convinced. They just want a sign from Jesus they can use to bolster their public position – “Did you know Jesus did a sign for us? We're so important.”

Jesus goes on the offensive. They know what the weather's going to be like from the skies, but they can't figure out the signs all around them? Jesus isn't going to play their game. They will get a sign, the one that could save them and anyone who believes it. Like Jonah, who was saved from the belly of a great fish after three days, the Messiah will die and return to life after three days. If they do not believe that sign, no other will convince them.

Jesus tells the disciples, look out for the yeast of these guys. And they don't get that either. They're like, "Is Jesus upset we forgot the bread?" And Jesus is like, "No! Why do you have so little faith? Why don't you understand? Haven't you been with me this whole time and seen everything? Don't you get the metaphor?" And *then* the disciples say, "Oh, *yeah!* You mean the bad teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees infect everything they touch. Oh, yeah, sure, I mean, we got that."

All of this proves our first major point of the day: *miracles strengthen existing faith, but miracles do not automatically produce faith.* Why does it work that way? Because of what faith is. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith for us: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for [and] the conviction of things not seen."

Faith is two interrelated things working together. First, it's assurance of things hoped for – it's the unwavering trust that those things that are not yet a proven reality are in fact still going to happen. I am assured my paycheck won't bounce. I do not know it for certain, but I am assured it is true by Sandi, and I trust her. The second part is the conviction of things unseen. Faith is the unwavering persuasion that some things I have not seen are still there. I am convicted there will be a meal after the service. I haven't seen everybody's offerings yet, but my previous experience tells me it's true. These two things are sides of the same coin, very similar to each other, both working together.

Miracles strengthen the faith we have. Why? Because miracles, in some small way, give us something we've hoped for. Miracles give us a brief glimpse at the thing we have faith in. When we already believe, miracles prove that our assurances aren't false and our convictions are not in vain. They are confidence builders. When we believe in God, when we trust in Jesus through faith, all sorts of things around us become signs that He is good and loving and desires a relationship with us.

So why doesn't it work the other way? Why don't miracles produce faith? How can His enemies deny what He does right in front of them? And more important, how is it that Jesus' closest friends who see miracles day after day are so distrusting that Jesus will do more of them? Is Jesus that unconvincing? No...the crowds follow Him around everywhere, glorifying the God of Israel – a foreign God to them! – because of all Jesus has done.

Miracles don't automatically produce faith because they're miracles. They don't happen in our world without God's intervention. No matter how many miracles you see, if you don't believe in God – or you don't believe that God could or would do or is doing a particular miracle – you must come up with some other explanation.

In this mindset, Jesus can't heal the blind because that can't be done. Jesus can't feed thousands with a couple loaves of bread because that can't be done. Ancient people knew as well as we do that some things just don't happen, even if we see them with our own eyes. Unless faith has already begun, or that faith is strong enough to take in miracles for the intervention of God in our world that they are, miracles are unexplained phenomena, not God's hand at work.

I have a friend, Todd, a college professor – he was once a close friend, he was in our wedding. I met him at college, and back then, he was a believer. He no longer believes in God, and that makes me sad. But the reason that he gives is telling. To his mind, he stopped seeing evidence of God’s presence after about the age of 22 or so. This gentleman had experiences he thought were God’s hand, but after a long enough time, with enough time and distance, he figured they weren’t. He didn’t keep seeing, so he stopped believing.

And sadly, that happens to more people than we’d like to imagine. We must put out of our minds the idea that it would be easier to believe had we seen the miracles the disciples saw. Belief has never been as simple as seeing God at work. Instead, faith is trusting that God *is* at work and is who He says He is – kind, loving, compassionate, and merciful. Faith is knowing that He *is* living and active and present precisely in those moments when He seems far away. Faith is confidence that God will come to your rescue, in this life and the next.

Something important this brings up for us is our second point today: *our faith is a free gift from God, not something we create, earn, or deserve*. This is precisely what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this [faith] is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one may boast.” Our salvation happens because of God’s decision to bring us into His family, and that decision is made clear by the faith He implants in us. We exercise that faith, but our faith exists solely by God’s choice and His incredible mercy on us.

It also explains the unexplainable in this passage. The disciples, for all their faults, do want to believe. Their faith is slim, but it is there. They just don’t have enough of it to comprehend the entirety of Jesus’ power. This doesn’t excuse their lack of faith; Jesus implies that they could exercise it more than they do. But they cannot create more faith out of thin air. They aren’t stupid, either. They are on the other side of history, the side of history where full-bodied, full-bloom faith is rare because the counselor of truth, the Holy Spirit, is not yet a constant, guiding presence in their lives. God has not yet given the disciples faith enough to see the truth. Yet He will – and we’ll see that in next week’s passage.

The Pharisees and Sadducees are in a different position. They believe God exists; they believe they are His chosen people. Yet they don’t have faith. They don’t think they need it. The Sadducees believed they were saved by being Jews; the Pharisees added on their rules, by which they became their own saviors. They don’t need to trust God because they think God owes them. A faith in the unseen salvation of God based solely on their trust in Him? They don’t have that, and they certainly don’t have it in God’s Son.

And moreover, they don’t want it. They are blind to the miracles because of two things: God has not opened their eyes to what He is doing, and they themselves choose to close their eyes. The yeast of the Pharisees that Jesus warns about is their stubborn belief that they can save themselves. Like yeast, it permeated everything they taught, even the good and truthful things about God they got right.

The situation between the disciples and the Pharisees is still true. We are not saved because we chose to believe. We are saved through God's grace alone. That grace implanted faith in our hearts that we feel and know right now. It is by God's mercy you have that assurance and conviction. And so today, if your faith feels big and bold or barely hanging on by a thread, give thanks to God for it. Ask God to increase it and for Him to give you whatever you need to act on the full measure of faith God has given to you.

Final thought for the day: *don't be discouraged by your lack of faith or understanding, for the history of God's people proves He does mighty things through people who nurture the smallest grain of faith.* Moses, a man guilty of murder, is so lacking in faith that he asks God to send anybody else but Him. Gideon is a coward who needs constant reassurance, even though God makes His presence known to him. Elijah asks God to kill him rather than to face the threat of constant persecution from the wicked queen Jezebel. Yet God uses all of them to save His people. It's a constant refrain through Scripture – God works despite the human frailty and sinfulness of His people who nevertheless keep believing. Hebrews 11 is a gigantic summary list of all the things God's people have done through faith – not through their own ability, but by relying on God to come through.

So Bible study has you feel like you're playing catch-up all the time? Keep studying. You read your Bible and you're stymied? Keep reading. Have a hard time waiting for God to come through? Keep trusting. The one thing that the disciples had going for them was what the word "disciple" means – they kept following. Literally. Step after step, they kept going. They rarely understood, they were filled with fear when they should have been filled with joy, they blow it time and again. But for three years, they stuck with Him. And in the end, for all who stayed the course, they saw Jesus resurrected, received the Holy Spirit, and began ministries that have changed the world.

When I was at my theology conference last weekend, something really warmed my heart. There were about seventy attendees at the small church hosting the conference. We worshipped together at 9:30am and had snacks at 10:30am. But what so surprised me was that at 11:00am, we all came back for Bible study – and I mean all of us. Nobody left. Everyone stayed because this small Presbyterian congregation wanted to grow in faith together. They had a 7:00pm service that has virtually the same group of people coming to nurture their faith.

I don't relate this story to make us feel guilty. Instead, I want us to think...how much might my faith grow if I nurtured it? What if instead of thinking, "I have to go to church," what might it be to think, "I get to move closer to the God of the universe today and experience His love as I learn about Him!"? God will use the faith we have as we continue to grow in it. What's stopping us? Only our own issues...our laziness, our distractions, our own interests. But those can be overcome. I encourage us all to pray about it, and then see how we might grow as we ask God to be making room for more faith in our hearts.

It's my prayer for us today that we might not be more "duh-sciples." May God bless us with abundant faith, and with the courage to put it into practice. May God put miracles in our midst, and may we have the faith to see them for what they truly are – and to see our God who is behind each and every one.