

Do You Get It?

Fresh from his encounter with the unbelieving Pharisees, Jesus took a boat ride with his disciples. Mark tells us that the disciples had brought only one loaf of bread with them. I wonder if the loaf might have been from the leftovers when Jesus fed the 4000! At some point during the journey Jesus warned his disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod. Jesus was probably thinking about the encounter he had just had with the Jewish leaders. They demanded a sign, but Jesus would not acquiesce. Yeast is an ingredient used in making bread and its effect in a lump of bread dough was well-known.

Yeast causes bread dough to rise but what is interesting is that to the Jewish mind yeast was a symbol of evil. The yeast was contained in a leftover piece of dough kept from an earlier baking. The leftover dough would ferment between the time it was saved and the time it was worked into a new batch of dough. The dough was then set aside and in a few hours the yeast would multiply and fill the entire loaf.

What was it about the Pharisees and Herod that the disciples needed to avoid? Could it be their unbelief? Or could it be lifestyles that tend to squeeze God out of the picture? It is uncertain exactly to what Jesus was referring and the disciples didn't get it. They whispered back and forth wondering if Jesus was concerned that they had brought only one loaf of bread. Isn't that amazing! After all the disciples had experienced, how could they ever be worried again about having enough to eat? Jesus was incredulous! "Don't you see?" "Don't you understand?" "Don't you remember?" "When I broke the five loaves for the five-thousand, how many basketsful did you pick up?" "When I broke the seven loaves for the four-thousand, how many basketsful did you pick up?" Why don't they "get it?"

If Jesus were to have a conversation with you some day, what do you think he would say to you? When you are overcome with concern about whether you will lose your job, or if you don't know how you are going to make ends meet, or when you feel stressed out from all the pressures that you face in life, what would he say to you? Would he remind you how he has answered your prayers in the past? Would he remind you that he has always supplied all that you need? Would he look at you and shake his head and say, "Don't you get it?"

Questions:

1. What did the disciples not understand?
2. Why would yeast be considered a symbol for an evil thing? What are some of the properties of yeast that support your answer?
3. What keeps people from "seeing," "understanding," and "remembering?" What causes the hearts of some people to become hard?

I Can See, Kinda!

Blindness was a fairly common thing in the ancient world. It could be caused by a number of things; infection, poor hygiene at birth, constant exposure to the bright sun, or even injury. There are several very interesting things about this account that we should notice.

First, we should remember that this account follows closely the discussion Jesus had just had with his disciples about yeast. It was obvious that Jesus' followers were having a very difficult time understanding the real meaning of Jesus' actions. Jesus was frustrated with them, but I think he also understood at least partially why they were having such a difficult time. Faith is a gradual thing. It does not happen all at once.

Second, the blind man's healing was gradual. After Jesus touched him the first time, the man could see, but not clearly. After a second touch, the man's sight was completely restored. What could this mean? Was this man's blindness so bad that it took double the power to restore him to sight? Was the partial healing tied in some way to the amount of faith the man had? Or, is the partial healing tied in some way to the discussion Jesus had with his disciples in the boat?

It is hard to believe that Jesus would not have enough power to heal the man complete with the first touch. Could healing a blind man be more difficult than raising a person from the dead? It could be that the man's faith was not strong enough at first for complete healing, but when he experienced the partial return of his sight, his faith soared and allowed Jesus to fully heal him.

Whatever the meaning of this event, this is a great teaching moment for the disciples and for us. We are not able to understand Jesus' teachings all at once. Our material minds throw all kinds of roadblocks in our way. But after we are with Jesus for a while, after we listen to his words, and after we are confronted by his life, the message begins to focus. We begin to see, to understand, and to believe more deeply. It is a process that takes a lifetime committed to the search. Maybe this healing was an object lesson for the disciples that they should not be discouraged but that they should continue searching. If they seek, they will find!

Questions:

1. Why do you think Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village before he healed him?
2. Why did Jesus spit on the man's eyes? Why would this action have been important to the blind man? If Jesus had lived in our times and in our culture, would he have spat on blind people to heal them? What is the cultural equivalent to spit?
3. Why did Jesus not want the man to go back into the village?

“Who Do You Say I Am?”

Jesus and his disciples had a lot of time to talk. Wouldn't it have been great to spend an afternoon walking and talking with Jesus and his disciples? Chances are that you would have been challenged by Jesus' piercing questions. This seems to be the way Jesus taught those who were closest to him. Do you understand? What does this mean? Who do people say that I am?

It must have caused his disciples to pause a bit as they thought about all the people they had heard talking about Jesus. Some claimed that Jesus was John the Baptist back from the grave. Others called him Elijah. Remember what Malachi wrote about Elijah returning before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes? Still others were calling him one of the prophets. That would put him on a par with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and other of the great prophets of the Old Testament.

But then he asked them the big question, “Who do you say that I am?” Talk about putting them on the spot! The first big test has come. What would they say? How about you? If Jesus were to visit you today and ask you the same question what would you say? Would you say, “You are my Savior?” If you did, what would that mean? Or would you say, “You are my Lord?” If you said that, what does “Lord” really mean? Would you say, “You are my life?” How is he your life? Do you get the point? Words are easy to say, but the truth is difficult to live by.

The disciples answered correctly that day. They said in response to Jesus' question, “You are the Christ.” But I wonder if they really understood what that meant to their personal lives. Did they understand the demands on their lives such a statement implied? Did they understand how Jesus was the culmination of God's plan? Had they read the prophets? Did they really understand what would happen to their Master?

I am not sure that the disciples did understand or even could have understood at this point. They did, though, understand enough to know that Jesus was the one that they must follow. They must stay close to him. They need to hear his words and learn!

The same is true for us, isn't it? We are still learning what it means that Jesus is Lord. We are still discovering the deep meaning of salvation that comes through Jesus. We understand more and more the reality that Jesus is our lives. It is a journey and the road is not always smooth but he gives us the time and help we need to know him.

Questions:

1. What was unique about Elijah's departure from the earth that caused people to believe that he might someday return?
2. What was there about John the Baptist that caused people to link him with Jesus?
3. How did Jesus' ministry resemble the ministries or Old Testament prophets?
4. What does the word, “Christ” mean?

The Things of God, Not of Men

Are you a control freak? At least a little bit? There are few people who like the feeling of being out of control. There are very few people who feel content not having some idea of what they plan to do in the future. And then there are the real control freaks who want to control their lives **and** the lives of those around them.

Take Peter, for example. Jesus taught the disciples about his impending death and resurrection but Peter would hear nothing of it. He had already worked things out in his mind and his understanding of what was going to happen in the future did not include Jesus dying! Peter rebuked Jesus for planting such an idea in the minds of the disciples. How could he talk about his death? They were on the verge of taking the city of Jerusalem. Jesus would be Israel's new King! Rome would be pushed out of Palestine, and once again the fortunes of Israel would be restored!

Jesus followed Peter's rebuke with one of his own. He said to his friend, "Get behind me Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Wow! What a rebuke. How wrong would Peter have to be for Jesus to call his friend and trusted disciple Satan?

Peter's problem was that his mind was too centered on worldly things. "The things of men" would lead a person to want to assume a more powerful position, to rule more people, to become greater, to at all cost protect one's life so that every thing planned could be accomplished. But the things of men are not the things of God. Being a disciple means that you must deny yourself, that you must take up your cross, that you lose your life, that you change your ambitions, and that you stand up proudly for the one who saved you. The bottom line is that you learn to see life and success from a totally different perspective.

Peter was not completely wrong. The Kingdom was coming, but not like he had imagined. Peter would be called to be a leader in the Kingdom of God, but a servant leader, not one who controlled others by position, power, and authority. God would save his people, but not exactly the people that Peter imagined. And Jesus would sit on a throne, but that throne was not located in the city of Jerusalem.

Peter's experience should make us all think. Do we really know what God's mission is here on earth? Do we truly understand what the Kingdom of God is and what it means? Do we know our place and responsibility in the Kingdom? What do you have on your mind – the things of God or the things of man?

Questions:

1. What does Jesus' command to take up one's cross mean to you? Do you fully understand the implications?
2. What did Jesus mean when he encouraged his disciples to "lose their lives?"
3. Of all the demands of discipleship, which one causes you the most difficulty? Why?

Seeing Him As He Is

Experts say that we form an impression of other people within the first three minutes of meeting that person. Impressions are formed on the basis of looks, facial expressions, demeanor, and other external things. It would have been interesting to hear the disciple's impression of Jesus up to this point. They knew he was someone special. They knew that he taught with authority. They were impressed with his miracles. And they must have been very encouraged by his life. But, did they really know the man who had been sharing their meals and who had struggled with the same human limitations as everyone else? Did they know that God, the Son, was in their midst?

Part of the mystery about Jesus was revealed to his three closest disciples. A week after Jesus rebuked Peter; he took Peter, James and John with him on a trip up a high mountain. I wonder what the conversation must have been like as they were climbing. It doesn't seem as though Jesus had prepared them for what they were about to witness. When they arrived at the top something happened to Jesus. Most translations use the word "transfigured" to describe his appearance. Literally Jesus was "transformed." Our English word "metamorphosis" comes from the actual Greek word that was used in this passage. Jesus changed into another form. It was not just his outward appearance that was altered; he was completely altered. Along with Jesus appeared Elijah and Moses, the great prophet and the great law-giver. The three talked together and the disciples Jesus brought with him witnessed it all. Can you even begin to imagine what they saw? The disciples were awestruck. Peter proposed building three shelters on the mountain for each of the three great ones. Mark tells us that Peter didn't really know what to say because he was so frightened.

A cloud appeared and enveloped them and there was a voice in the cloud that the disciples would never forget. "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" Wow! Imagine hearing the very voice of God. If these disciples had any doubts about who Jesus was, surely this dispelled them all. This is really the Son of God!

Suddenly the cloud and the great ones of the past were gone. This incredible moment had passed and the disciples and Jesus made their way down the mountain. The three who had accompanied Jesus were ordered to share what had happened with anyone. Only after the resurrection did they tell the story of the day that they were eyewitnesses to glory.

Questions:

1. What kind of transformation do you think Jesus have?
2. Who was the "Elijah" who was to come?
3. How do you think the disciples were changed by this event?

From Mountain Top to Unbelief

What a descent! From an unbelievable experience on a mountaintop to arguing people below – what a come down! It is impossible to stay on the mountaintop all the time. There are those moments in our lives when we think we could not feel closer to God if we tried. Our spirits soar, our thoughts are noble, our faith is strong, and joy fills our hearts. Unfortunately, those moments in life are few and far between. The time comes to come down off the mountain.

I think I am able to read a bit of frustration into Jesus' words to the arguing crowd. "What are you arguing about?" They tell him the story of the man whose child is afflicted with seizures. The man brought his son to the disciples but they could not drive out the evil spirit. You can only imagine how the teachers of the Law jumped in at that moment. Paraphrasing Jesus, "You are all a bunch of unbelievers! I don't know how much longer I can put up with this!" The boy is brought to Jesus and immediately falls into a convulsion. Jesus spoke with the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood. It often throws him into the water and fire to kill him, if you can do anything, please help us."

"If you can?!"

There he stood – The Master of the universe and this man is asking, "If you can?" Are we different today? How deep is our faith? How fervent are our prayers? How vibrant is our trust? Are we so certain that we would have responded differently?

Jesus' answer is thrilling. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Everything? Yes, everything! Incredible. If anything should drive us to our knees it should be that our prayers really do make a difference. Prayer is not an exercise in futility. Prayer is not just a vehicle for praise and worship, as important as those things are. Prayer is an opportunity to change the world, to change the outcome of history. That day a boy with an evil spirit was made whole because his dad mustered all the faith he had and asked Jesus to help his son.

Questions:

1. What is your understanding of God's providence and prayer? Do you think that prayer really makes a difference? How? Can you change God's mind?
2. What do you think about the teachers of law and the disciples were arguing about?
3. What did Jesus mean when he told his disciples that "This kind can come out only through prayer?"
4. How should this story change your prayer life, or should it?

Ambitious? For What?

There are a lot of dead end roads on the way to success. Some people believe that the more money a person makes, the more important he or she is. People, sadly, often gauge their own self worth by their bank accounts or material possessions. Dead end! Some think that success is tied to achievement in their professions or occupations. Dead end! Some consider that obtaining a position of power and respect is the formula for success. Dead end! Still others believe that success is down the road of education. Dead end! It is so sad to see the lengths to which we will sometimes go to find success.

Jesus' disciples were no exception. One day they were arguing about who was the greatest among them. Could it be that Peter, James and John felt that they were more significant because they had been asked to take the trip up the mountain with Jesus where they witnessed his transfiguration? Maybe the disciples who had been successful businessmen felt that they deserved a place of honor. Jesus took this opportunity to correct their thinking.

The greatest in God's Kingdom will always be the one who serves. The very last will be the first. Counter-cultural to the max! This turns the world's system of doing business on its ear. The more you strive to be number one, the more you miss the mark. If your ambition is served, you find yourself in last place instead of first. The greatest in the Kingdom will be the servant of all.

Just imagine that picture for a minute -- Christians falling all over themselves trying to out serve each other. Neighbors and friends who are astounded at Christians because of their servant's heart and that they can be depended on night and day to serve.

Jesus picked up a child nearby and said, "If you welcome on of these little children, you have welcomed me." A child can do nothing for you. He cannot repay you or be an ally. If you serve him, you expect nothing in return except love. The greatest joy we have in serving is that we have done something that pleases our Master. What an ambition for life! I just want to please Jesus!

Questions:

1. Why was it so important for the disciples to decide who was greatest?
2. Do you think Peter, James, and John were involved in the argument?
3. Why do you think Jesus said, "he must be the **very** last" instead of just saying "he must be last?"
4. What does welcoming little children have to do with being s servant?

Competition

Competition is everywhere. Athletics, business, education – you find it everywhere. People like to win. We tend to want to break up into teams – one team against another. Who is going to win?

There is one place where competition does not belong – serving Jesus. Did you notice that competitive spirit kick in as you read today’s passage? A man was casting out demons in the name of Jesus and John told him to stop it. The reason? The man was not “one of them.” How would we say the same thing today? Maybe, he is not on our team.

So many questions immediately beg to be answered. From where did the man come? How is he casting out demons? Where did he first come in contact with Jesus? I guess we will never know. One thing we do know is that Jesus was very direct in his instructions concerning the man. The disciples are not to stop him. They are not to put obstacles in his way. They are not to try to get him on their team. They are certainly not to rebuke him. They are to leave him alone.

There are many important lessons for Christians in this story. One glaring lesson is that God has work going on in this world that we may know nothing about. The Bible is available almost everywhere and people are able to read for themselves and come to belief. Why should we be surprised to find others, who are not a part of our group, doing God’s work?

A second lesson is our attitude toward others who are trying to do the Lord’s work. Our goal is not to shut them down or to rebuke them. We should be supportive of all the good things being done in the name of Jesus.

A third lesson that I think is at least implied in this story is that we can have strong convictions without being judgmental towards others. We should stand for the truth. We should have definite convictions and beliefs, but are there not some things that all kinds of believers can agree on – feeding the hungry, helping the sick, housing the homeless, etc? Isn’t that what Jesus is saying here? Don’t be in the business of shutting down good things. Help them!

Questions:

1. Make a list of things that all kinds of churches could do together.
2. What do you think was the disciple’s main concern? Why did they want the man to stop driving out demons?
3. In verse 41, what is the reward about which Jesus I speaking?

Serious Business!

Do you consider yourself an overprotective parent? Some of us might fall into that category, especially when children are young it is hard to imagine that you could protect your children too much. It is easy to see Jesus' protective urges in today's reading.

Jesus has just finished instructing the disciples that they should not try to stop people from doing good things. The "And" in the passage tells us that Jesus is completing the thought he has just begun. Jesus does not want anyone hurting his "little ones." The meaning seems clear. Don't you be the one who puts a stumbling block in a believer's path. Don't you be the one who leads another person into temptation. Don't you allow your body to be used as an instrument of Satan to destroy another person's faith. If you do, you will be dealt with harshly.

This is serious business to Jesus. Believers are to be encouraged and helped, not hindered and discouraged. In fact, this is so serious that the person who uses himself in a way that hurts others would be better off at the bottom of the sea with a millstone tied around his neck. He tells them that if one of their body parts is causing them to sin that they are much better off without that part. Hell is a reality and one of the reasons it exists is to punish people who hurt others and cause them to sin.

There are other important implications for everyone in this story. We must be careful with everything we say or do to make sure that we do not harm others. The example we set is important. We should never all our freedom to lead another person to sin. We need to be careful how we talk to other people. We should never allow ourselves to, or to be the cause of people spending time in gossip and slander. We must be careful to keep confidences and everything we say should be tested to see if it will build others up.

One other implication from this story is that it is important to control our own actions. Jesus calls for some fairly drastic measures. Whatever is causing you trouble, get rid of it. If someone is having trouble with gossip, that person might have to stop associating with people with whom they find it easy to gossip. If being around certain people tempts us to do things that might hurt our example, we might need to stay away from that kind of person. Jesus makes it clear that if we are unwilling to take his teaching seriously, punishment awaits. "The worm does not die, the fire is not quenched, and everyone will be salted with fire."

Questions:

1. Who are the "little ones?"
2. Do you think Jesus literally means that if your hand, foot, or eye causes you to sin you should cut the offending part off your body? If no, what is the meaning?

Salt Your Relationships

Salt is a substance we normally take for granted. Salt has basically one use for people today; it is used to add seasoning to our food. I'm sure that salt was also used for seasoning in the Ancient Near East, but the predominate use for salt was for preservation.

All kinds of meats and some kinds of vegetables could not have been kept over long periods of time had it not been for the preserving power of salt. Salt has the ability to ward off bacteria and other microscopic substances that tend to spoil and putrefy things. Isn't it interesting that this discussion about salt is placed where it is?

Jesus has just finished a rather pointed discussion with his disciples about who is greatest, how people outside your group is treated, and taking our responsibility not to cause others to sin seriously. This verse seems to serve as a conclusion to this section.

Just as salt has great preserving power, disciples ought to have great preserving power in the way they live their lives. If the preserving power is missing then salt is worthless and should be cast out. In the same way, if the preserving power for relationships is absent in the disciple's life, he is missing the key ingredient that causes him or her to be useful.

There are several points that seem clear from this text. One is the mission that God has for all believers. We are not loners. We have distinct responsibilities that God expects of all Christians. These responsibilities include being a source of goodness and peace in the world. The preserving power of the believer is for the purpose of preserving relationships and bringing people closer together. Just think about the words of Jesus. He told his disciples that they had a responsibility to forgive others. Forgiveness is not contingent on an apology or a change in the way another person acts. Forgiveness is the result of the preserving power of salt. Believers are not to sit in judgment over others. That doesn't mean that we agree with everything another person might do or say, but we realize that we are not the judge, God is. It is the preserving power of salt. Believers are not to be self-centered and full of pride. They are to seek out those who are needy and those who are hurting. Did you notice that Jesus never gives a way to test if someone was really needy? We are called to help other, period. The preserving power of salt!

Because of Jesus and the new life we have by virtue of his death and the Spirit's power, we can live the words, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Questions:

1. In your own words describe what "salt" represents in a person's life.
2. Think of the last three passages in John 9. How does "salt" make a difference in each story?
3. How do you get "salt" in yourself?