

Can You Hear Me Now?

Mark 8:1-21

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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All right, let's say that you're in the back seat of a car...make it any car...say, a Ford station wagon. And let's say that you're on a long, long trip...say, oh, I don't know, from Wilmington DE to Falls City NE – 3 days in an unairconditioned car with 5 people and a dog. And let's say, oh, just imagine this, that you're in the middle between your older sister and your younger brother, and they keep *touching* you. And it really, really, bothers you. For 2 days, it bothers you. And maybe, let's say, you happen to mention this fact out loud. A couple of times. And let's say, just for the sake of this discussion, that your father turns around while he's driving 70 MPH down the highway and says, "Son, how many times do I have to tell you to quit your whining?"

OK. Helpful tip here, if you ever find yourself in that situation. Some questions that people ask – they don't *really* want an answer. "How many times do I have to tell you?" "Ummmm, seven?" – OK, that's not a good answer. I'm just saying...Some questions, you better think really hard before you try to answer them.

I thought of that entirely hypothetical situation, which has nothing at all to do with my real life or any relatives, living or dead, which I might have, when I read this passage from Mark. Here, in the span of just 21 verses, Jesus asks (depending on the translation you're using) eleven or twelve questions – including eight or nine in the last four verses. That's a lot of questions!

Maybe because I don't want to make the mistake of answering a question that is better left unanswered, instead of dealing with those questions, I'll ask three of my own. One to Mark, one to Jesus, and one to you. And maybe those questions will help me to make sense of the ones that Jesus asks.

Question number 1, for Mark, the author of the gospel we're spending this year studying. Mark, you make it pretty clear that Jesus and his followers are in a deserted place. We know that they've been on a road trip that has taken them out of the Jewish area of Galilee into the Gentile regions of Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis – the "ten towns" where we start the action this morning. So if this is such a desert place, and there aren't that many faithful religious people around...where do all of these people come from? I mean, Jesus isn't from here, and none of the twelve are locals. This is the Decapolis, for crying out loud – and Jesus is preaching to four thousand people – four thousand people who would rather listen to him preach than eat? Where are these people from?

Well, do you remember the last time we visited the Decapolis? Not last week, I mean – the time before that. The other time Jesus came through here? It was back in Mark 5, and Jesus and the disciples went to the same place, and they met a man who had demons that were so strong that his friends couldn't even

chain the man down – he roamed the graveyard night and day, and people were terrified of him. Do you remember that? And do you remember that when Jesus healed that man, the demons left the man and went into a herd of pigs? You know that story, right?

Now, think about the healings and exorcisms we've seen in Mark since September. Typically, when Jesus heals someone, what does he almost always say to the person? "Shhhhhhh. Don't say a word about this to anyone." Jesus does these amazing things and then tells people to keep quiet. But do you remember what happened in Mark 5? The man wants to follow Jesus and the disciples back to Jewish territory, and Jesus, in an astonishing break from his past practice, says, "No." Mark 5:19-20 reads, "...Go home to your friends, and *tell them* how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and all men marveled."

Almost every time he heals someone, he says, "don't mention it". But in Mark 5, he tells ONE MAN in the entire region, "OK, now, go spread the news..." And here in Mark 8, after a period of at least some months has elapsed, Jesus comes back to the Decapolis, and there are 4000 people who are so eager to be with him that they are forgetting to eat. Where did they come from? Could it be that this is what happens when one person is faithful? Could this be in the Gospel to remind us that one person, doing what Jesus said, can make a huge difference in the world? That's the best answer I can find.

Question number 2, for Jesus: Again with the bread? We just had the feeding of the 5000 a page and a half ago, and now we are into reruns here? What is it with you and bread, Jesus?

Well, there are some clues. First, look at verse 6, where we are told that he took the loaves, "and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples..." Does that language sound familiar to you? Can you think of a time when Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples? Doesn't that sound a whole lot like the last supper? And when I tell you that the word for "giving thanks" here is *ευχαριστων* – a word that we often use when referring to the sacrament of communion – do you see that maybe this is a way for Jesus to hammer home the idea that in him, and in him alone, the desires of humanity are met? 4000 people who haven't eaten for 3 days come to Jesus, who gives thanks and miraculously fills them. This time, it's bread. Next time, it's his very body.

But there's more with the bread. When Jesus fed the 5000, he did so in Jewish territory. But here, he's in Gentile country. He still feeds them. And later, when he and the disciples are comparing the feedings, he asks them about the baskets of leftovers that they'd collected. When talking about the feeding the Jewish crowd, the word he uses for basket is *κοφινους*. That's a basket that was used mostly by Jewish people in Jewish areas – it's narrow on the top and wide at the bottom. You see a woman with a *κοφινους*, and you can bet she's Jewish. But when he's talking about feeding the Gentile crowd, the word for basket is *στυριδων*, and – you guessed it, that's the kind of basket that was favored by the

Gentiles. So Jesus, in showing grace and compassion and love, is not restricting it to either one group or the other.

That point is a little clearer when we think about something that “everyone” knew back then. When Jesus fed the 5000, do you remember how many loaves he started with? Five. How many books are there in the Law of Moses? Five. How many *κοφίνους* – Jewish baskets – were left over? Twelve. How many tribes in Israel? Twelve. I’m not so sure that those numbers are coincidental.

When Jesus fed the 4000, how many loaves did he start with? Seven. How many *σπυριδων* – Gentile baskets – were left over? Seven. While everyone knew that there were twelve tribes in Israel, everyone also knew that there were seven “nations” of people who lived in the promised land – seven groups of people that the Jews were supposed to “drive out” before they took possession of the land. Those people are the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

So here we have the Jewish Messiah preaching in a Gentile neighborhood, filling Gentile stomachs with bread, and instructing his followers to collect the scraps of the bread – one for each of the Gentile nations – in Gentile baskets. What’s with the bread, Jesus? Well, I’m betting that when the first readers of Mark’s gospel read about this, they said, “Thanks be to God! I was afraid that I wouldn’t be included in the Good News – but this is unmistakable – the new thing that God is doing in Jesus can include me, too!” In Mark 7 and 8, Jesus leaves Galilee and goes into foreign territory – and in so doing, shows that his grace is not merely for those who are “insiders” – in fact, he seems to be going to great lengths to show that there are no “outsiders” among the people of God.

All right, that’s a question for Mark, and one for Jesus. Now, one for you. “What next?” What I mean by that is, how are you going to respond to the things that Jesus is or has been doing in the world? Again, let’s look at the text.

In verse 11, Jesus returns to the Galilee (in the area of Dalmanutha, also called Magdala – the hometown of Mary Magdalene). He’s been with the disciples for some months, teaching them, and, as you have heard, doing more than a few miracles along the way. And the Pharisees come to him and say, “Give us a sign”. Jesus, instead of giving them a sign, gives them a sigh – and says, “You know, if you can’t see it yet, you’re just not going to be able to see it.”

These men were not open to a discussion – they were asking Jesus, “Look, do you fit into our preconceived notions of what God is doing, or not?” And because Jesus does not fit into their little “god-box”, they cannot grasp the power and the love that comes through him.

But look at this – when it comes to understanding what Jesus is doing, the disciples are winning any prizes, are they? All those questions in this passage? Almost all of them are aimed directly at his closest followers.

“Don’t you understand?”

“You have ears – can’t you hear? You have eyes – can’t you see?”

“Do you still not understand? Can you hear me now?”

We have the questions – written on the paper. But what we don’t have is the tone of voice. Was he saying it in an accusing manner – as if they were idiots – “What’s wrong with you knuckleheads? Don’t you understand anything?”

Or was he saying it with a smile, the way that we might ask a child: “Really? You haven’t figured it out yet? Well, hang in there...you’ll see...”

My point is that neither the Pharisees nor the Disciples had a clue what Jesus was up to here...but look at how differently they responded. The Pharisees couldn’t see, and they shrugged their shoulders and said, “Well, that’s it. This man needs to die.” And they looked to escalate the conflict.

The disciples couldn’t see, and so they kept talking about it amongst themselves...they stuck with him...they asked him questions...they made more mistakes...they ended up following him, as we will see in the weeks to come, into Jerusalem...and up the hill to Calvary, where they watched him die...they followed him to the graveyard, and they were there when he rose from the dead...and they were still trying to figure it out when he ascended into heaven...and somewhere, somehow, some way in the midst of that sticking with Jesus, it clicked for them. They had ears, and they heard. They had eyes, and they saw.

His friend Peter wrote to his friends, years later, “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty...” (2 Peter 1:16). John wrote, “what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our own hands...we declare that to you so that you may also have fellowship with us...” (1 John 1:1,3). They stuck with Jesus, and they got it.

Beloved, I am here to tell you that God is at work in your world. The God who sent his son to be born as a child on earth, the God who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead – the power that made the blind see and the deaf hear, the hands that broke bread for Jew and for Gentile alike – that God is calling to you.

And I fully acknowledge that you may not totally understand this right now. It’s easy to see that there could be some confusing things about your life and how God fits into it right now. And, to be honest, I’m not sure that I am the one who can necessarily explain how God is moving in your world.

But I can ask you this – I can ask you to stick with him. Don’t give into disappointment or depression, frustration or anger because God isn’t fitting into your box right now. Instead, ask God to show you a new way of seeing him. Ask God to show you his goodness. Ask God to show you how he intends to use you in the world.

“Do you not yet understand?” That’s ok. Keep asking. Keep walking.

Keep looking.

May God bless you. Amen.