

Matthew 16:1-12: Sign Requesting II

Friends! Let's pray!

Prayer:

Introduction:

Today's passage makes no sense unless we realize what's happened in between Jesus' time in Phoenicia, near Tyre & Sidon, and the passage that was read to us this morning.

Jesus exchange with the woman who was his rhetorical master, but who called him master and asked for the healing of her daughter, it invigorated Jesus, somehow. It sent him right back to the sea of Galilee, helped him re-engage with the mission to Israel that he knows that God has called him to.

So he heads back to Galilee and the shore of its lake, and he heals people like it's Christmas. He goes up on a mountain, and settles himself in, and we read:

A Little Before:

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.

The fact that it's "the God of Israel" that's being praised here points to the truth that some of those who are being healed are not Israelites themselves. Perhaps most of them weren't. Whatever Jesus opened himself up to when he was in Phoenicia, he's carried to here, too; he's allowing his mission to Israel to be one that has more care of Gentiles in it than it had before.

In the scene that happened almost no time ago, Jesus has compassion on this crowd, and calls his disciples to him, and tells them to feed the crowd. They say, in response:

“Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?”

And this time, when we read this, we hear them asking with a look on their faces, an expectant, "Are you going to do this again?" face. Is that true? Who knows. Hard to imagine them not remembering this, though, right?

And Jesus does do it again. He asks how much food they have, this time, it's seven loaves, and a few fish, and he does what he did just a few days ago: spreads the people out, and everyone's fed. Four thousand men, this time, with women and children uncounted,

but we assume in the hundreds. And at the end of things, the disciples only pack up seven baskets of food this time.

Immediately Before:

Right before today's passage, we read, "**After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.**"

Two things here: This is, most likely, a city on the Western side of the Sea of Galilee, which means Jesus fed the crowd on the less populated Eastern side, just as he had before, before sailing over. It's also probably the hometown of Mary of Magdalene, who Jesus drove seven evil spirits out of, one of the first women to attest to Jesus' resurrection, and a woman who helped pay, out of her own pocket, for all the ministry Jesus was doing for the three years he roamed around Galilee.

When Jesus arrives, this is what happens:

16 The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

Alignment!

We have to notice that now it's not just the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law who stand against Jesus. The Sadducees are with them, now, too. The Pharisees,

and the Scribes or Law-Teachers, we've talked about: Their power and influence lay in the way they had created boundaries and rules that so tightly separated Israelites from other ethnicities, and each other, that they could no longer be the blessing God had intended them to be in the world. Jesus, claiming rights over the Sabbath and undoing their rules about what was off-limits and what wasn't--what was clean and unclean--usurps their power. Destroys it, really. The Sadducees' way of being a faithful Israelite overlapped with the Pharisees slightly, but they had a different power base, and a very different theology. They were higher class, by and large. They didn't accept that the oral tradition the Pharisees prized so much was valid, but tried to follow only the written tradition, only Scripture. They didn't have any hope for a resurrection of the dead, the way the Pharisees did, and were just more grounded, really, you know: miracles weren't their thing. God was active, of course...but active mostly through the institution of the Temple, which was their power base. And the Temple was an enormously important institution for Israel in all sorts of ways: economically, politically, culturally. And maybe because they've been so one-upped by Jesus, the Pharisees decide to bring the Sadducees along. Maybe they wanted to see if he was more on their side of things--he has, after all, just recently denied the "tradition of the elders" that the Sadducees would have mostly denied, too.

So these two incredibly powerful groups are now aligned against Jesus. There was a smaller, third way of being a religious Israelite that was sort of popular, but frankly, it was a way marked, by and large, by disengaging with Israel--sort of the prepper, survivalist branch of religious life--and they never really involve themselves much with Jesus. But these two major groups, the Pharisees and Sadducees, are now together against him.

And they've come to "test" or "tempt" him. We, as readers, automatically remember the time Jesus was "tested" or "tempted" by the devil in the wilderness. So our expectations are probably already set, a little.

2 He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' 3 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] 4 A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away.

Signs of the Times:

Let me be honest. This passage is tough. It is a problem, and it causes problems.

It is a problem because some of our oldest

manuscripts don't have the whole "When evening comes" thing at all. There's none of this "Signs of the Times" stuff at all; Jesus just goes immediately into his point that "a wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign."

It causes problems because people have, for years now, decided that what we ought to do this side of Jesus is look for "signs of the times" with regard to when he might return, something that I basically think is a fool's errand, and a misuse of faithful, Christian energy. Ironically, of course, it's in the name of faithfulness that Christians have sought to do what Jesus says here is something only a "wicked and adulterous generation" goes about doing. Doubly ironically is that while 99% of the text in our Bibles, Old and New, is reliably attested to throughout the historical record, we shouldn't build practices or theology on the very little bit that is not reliably attested to in the historical record. That's actually poor Christian practice.

So what I'd like to do is skip this whole "sign of the times" piece. I won't. Let me say this, about this passage:

Jesus makes use of this statement primarily to put down, to silence, the Sadducees and Pharisees, by suggesting that they can't perceive what seems obvious to him--that God is at play in the world. This

should be as obvious to them as the "red sky at night, sailor's delight" thing. He just healed the lame, gave speech to the mute, the blind can see, and the God of Israel is being praised. And the God of Israel is being praised by Gentiles. If they can't see that in Jesus God is up to something, and making good on promises that Israel has been waiting on for a long time, then, frankly, they have no discernment at all.

Jonah's Sign:

And then, of course, Jesus says the only sign that this this "wicked and adulterous generation" will be given is "the sign of Jonah."

We remember Jonah's story, probably. It's weird. Jonah is sent to Ninevah, to pronounce judgment on them, let them know that they will sow the violence they've been reaping in the world unless they repent. He doesn't want to go, does all he can to get out of it, because--we learn later--he knows that if he goes and seeks their repentance, they will repent, and Jonah would rather have them burn, you know?

Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish after he talks himself into being tossed overboard into the Mediterranean. It must have been a large one, and he presumably hoped he'd die instead. He was spit out, and did finally continue on his way to do what he was supposed to do.

We could talk this story up and down, but suffice to it say that it's assumed that the "sign" Jesus is referencing here is his own three days in the grave and his unexpected return-to-life, that is like--with the crucial difference that Jesus really was dead--Jonah's time in the fish's belly. And it's fair to say that this is at least what Jesus is referencing. It's at least what he's referencing.

But Jonah goes on to fulfill what God wanted from him, with the end result that all of Ninevah--even the animals--repent, and these non-Israelites end up worshipping God. I think the best reading of this is to remember that Jesus isn't just foreshadowing his death and resurrection, but he's also foreshadowing how God's intentions for his death and resurrection are going to go on to result in non-Israelite's turning, repentfully, back to God. He has, after all, just healed the daughter of a canaanite, and brought all the miracles God's People hoped for to those who the Sadducees and Pharisees would never have thought were fit to receive them.

Jesus leaves, taking the Twelve with him. We read this:

5 When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. 6 "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

7 They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread."

Pharisees' & Sadducees' "Yeast": Hunh?

I love this scene. Jesus gives them a warning that they simply don't understand, so they talk about it.

The timeline's tricky, in that how soon this happened after Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees isn't clear. The disciples don't seem to have any bread at all at this point, even though they gathered seven baskets a bit ago. It may be that they've eaten it, or it's just a bit later on.

Let me share something that is nothing but conjecture. I've always wondered if the disciples go immediately to the "it's because we didn't bring any bread" because, in fact, they have started to kind of expect Jesus to provide miraculous food, and they acted irresponsibly. When Jesus tells them to "beware the yeast" of these groups, their guilty consciences immediately bring to mind the way they are taking Jesus for granted. Total conjecture; we don't know if they are feeling guilty, or feeling anything; what they definitely are is confused. And Jesus knows it:

Pharisees' & Sadducees' "Yeast": Explanation

8 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among

yourselves about having no bread? 9 Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 11 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." 12 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.

Here's what I really, really appreciate about Matthew's last line, which is complete commentary. We read "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 the Sadducees."

If Matthew didn't tell us this, I wouldn't know what Jesus meant when he says "yeast." We'd have to guess; we wouldn't know what he wants it to stand for. I mean, Matthew places this scene after the interaction with the Pharisees and Sadducees, and ties it to them, but there's nothing about their teaching, here, that would clue us into what Jesus is trying to warn them away from. In some ways, all this does is kick the can for us: Their teaching was incredibly expansive.

Let me give us my best guess, though: I do think that if Jesus is talking about their teaching in any way more than generally, then what he's highlighting is, particularly, their teaching that divides Israel from the rest of humanity, and believes God has no concern for the gentiles. This would make sense of the situation Jesus has found himself in, in which he's very recently undone the "clean and unclean" way of thinking about the world, something Paul suggests is part of the "dividing wall of hostility" that has separated Israel from those nations around them. He's recently healed a Canaanite woman's daughter, someone who called him Lord and "Son of David," and just a few days ago healed a crowd that praised "The God of Israel," a very specific way of talking about God that was only done by outsiders. If he's referencing anything specifically--and it's not clear he is--he's trying to get his disciples to see that their mission will not be only to Israel, as it has been so far, and that the blessings of God that have been coming to the Gentiles are part of God making good on his promises. And of course, I wouldn't suggest this if I didn't think it was true, right? And if you want more on that basic "us versus them" worldview that the Pharisees and the Sadducees lived with, it's in last week's message, which you can read or listen to online, of course.

What do we do with today's passage?

Let's acknowledge that it's transitional. It's a scene

change sort of passage. That's fine. But important things happen. The Pharisees align with the Sadducees; We discover that the threat of Jesus is more important than the threat each group poses to the other. Jesus offers to the Gentiles--although a lesser number of them--the same thing he offered to the Israelites just a little bit of time before: healing, provision, care, and an experience of God's promises coming true. His disciples continue to be confused, and Jesus continues to patiently reveal to them the truth about what he's doing, and why.

If we want applications, I can suggest some, but only hints of them.

Applications: Divisions

If it's true that, as readers paying attention to the context of today's scene, the most in-our-faces bit of the Pharisees' and Sadducees' teaching is the way the Gentiles have no part in God's blessings, aren't "chosen" as both of those groups knew the Israelites were, then there are implications for us we could consider. Are we in any way, this side of the Spirit coming on all flesh, and the Church being made out of all kinds of people--Israelite and Gentile both--are we on the side of divisions in the Church? In what way do we contribute to an "us and them" way of behaving in the world? Or do we ourselves feel ostracized, pushed aside? And if so, what are we called to do with that feeling? These are hard questions, and today's

passage only springboards us into them, doesn't directly lead us there, but they are ones we can ask from today's passage.

Applications: Guarding

We could ask if there's teaching, generally, that we should guard ourselves against. Is there teaching that we should guard ourselves against? Christian teaching, I mean; teaching about God as the New Testament, and Jesus, and the Spirit, reveal him to be? If there is, what is it and how do we know? How can we be on guard against it? How can we who are mature in Christ test the teaching we receive?

We have, like, almost ten seminary grads in our congregation, a number of us have taken part in difficult, committed bible study groups and organizations, we read and read to understand, and we think well. So when I preach and teach, I do so to people who know things well, and yet do so as one with my own convictions, of course, and some matters deeply settled in my mind and heart. How do we test what we receive? How do we disagree in a way that honors Christ? Especially, how do we do this in a time when it is easy to receive things--there's so much to read, hear, or be assaulted by--and it's easy to disagree--because it's easy to neglect the commitment to another's good, and our mandate to be reconciled to each other if we can be. How do we do these things well?

Applications: Alignment

We could ask how we align well with others, I think. What I mean is that we have all sorts of affiliations, partnerships, groups, clubs, societies that we're a part of. We align with people. How can we align in a way that is different from the joining of forces the Pharisees and Sadducees model for us? What honors God? What bridges divides? What bears witness to the Kingdom of Heaven, or chips away at it's core virtues? If we like other people, and we gather with them in any organized way at all, we have to think about these things.

I recognize, though, that what we want is something straightfoward sometimes. "Don't sin!" "Pray more!" "Feed orphans!" I'd invite us all to think about the things I just suggested, of course--how and why we align and divide from people, how and why we guard or receive teaching about God from people--these are important things to think about.

And yet, if we're just too exhausted, I'd offer us this: In today's passage, there were hungry, desperate people, who had no "right" to expect the miracles of God, and they got 'em. They got him. Healed. Released. Fed. They were cherished. And the God of Israel was praised for it. Let's at least see the ways we are cherished, and praise the God of Israel for them all. And if we can invite others into the joy we've received, then all the better.