

“Hearts of Remembrance”
Sunday, August 9, 2020
Mary Kathleen Duncan

Mark 8:11-21

¹¹The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. ¹²And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.’ ¹³And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side. ¹⁴Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.’ ¹⁶They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread.’ ¹⁷And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? ¹⁸Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? ¹⁹When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’ ²⁰‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’ ²¹Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The other night, my husband David and I took a walk down memory lane. We spent some time remembering a backpacking trip we took to Europe after college. We went with two good friends who happen to be members here at Westminster. Over the course of nearly a month the four of us traveled through five countries – a journey we had painstakingly planned during our last semester of college. The other night we were specifically remembering our time in the small Italian seaside villages known as the Cinque Terre. How we hiked the trail that connected the five villages and what specific memories we had for each place. We remembered the rock we sat on in Monterosso to watch the sunset and the steep hill that connected that village to Vernazza. Our stomachs growled when we remembered the sandwiches we had for lunch in Corniglia. We recalled the school yard soccer game we watched while eating gelato in Manarola and how we barely saw Riomaggiore because we were trying to get on the train before a rainstorm hit. Talking about the three days we spent in Cinque Terre brought a flood of memories from our entire trip to mind. As I thought back to our trip 12 years ago, I recalled that one constant for the entire journey we shared together was the presence of bread. As college students traveling through Europe on a budget, we quickly realized that bread was a necessity. When departing one city for the next, it was never a bad idea to pick up a loaf of bread on the way to the train station. That bread could be shared among four for an impromptu lunch when the journey took

a little longer than expected. It could be paired with cheese and fruit to make a pretty well-balanced dinner. It could be broken into pieces and passed around on the beach or given out during a walk that began early one morning and ended up taking us through the entire city center of Barcelona. The remnants could be wrapped in a napkin and saved for later when sustenance was needed. All the remembering we did the other night made me crave the bread of Europe...but more than the bread, I found myself craving the moments and adventures we shared with the best of friends.

Remembrance is at the heart of our Christian faith. We break the bread of communion in remembrance of Christ. We remember the sabbath and keep it holy. We remember the day the Lord led the Hebrews out of slavery and bondage in Egypt. We remember the covenants God shared with Noah, Abraham, and David. We remember that we are created in the very image of God and declared very good. We remember the stories of Jonah and Esther, Ruth and Job, Samuel and Rahab, Martha and Nicodemus, Timothy and Phoebe...

I also find that I cannot separate my personal Christian faith from the practice of remembrance. I remember what it is like to worship with all of you, in this space, on Sunday mornings. I remember Christmas Eve when our sanctuary is packed to the gills and bathed in the glow of candlelight. I remember the water splashing on my shoulders when I was baptized in the fifth grade. I remember the smell of my middle school Sunday School classroom. I remember feeling more alive on a mission trip than nearly any other moment in my life. I remember the motions to the VBS songs I learned in second grade. I remember what it was like to attend a Montreat Youth Conference as a teenager and I remember each trip I have led to that holy place as an adult. Often in the journey of faith, it is remembrance that sustains us. But can that remembrance also help us grow?

In this passage, the disciples fail to remember. First, they forget the bread. And then they forget what following Jesus is all about. They forget the miracles they have experienced. They forget the good news they have heard Jesus proclaim. They forget the ways Jesus' ministry is defined over and against the practices of the religious authorities of the day. This story is not often preached from the pulpit. Because it is not part of the three-year lectionary cycle. It is sandwiched between a feeding story and a healing story, so it just kind of gets lost. It comes on the heels of Jesus feeding a crowd of 4,000 Gentiles with seven loaves and a few fish which itself comes not long after Jesus fed 5,000 Jews with five loaves and two fish. How, oh, how, could the disciples forget the bread? Don't they know what Jesus can do with it?!

In a recent New York Times Opinion piece, Lutheran Pastor Emily Scott wrote, *Once, my life was made of bread. I was the pastor of a "dinner church" where our worship took the form of a meal we cooked and ate together. Our church was filled not with pews, but with tables. Not with the heady smell of incense, but onions softening in olive oil and rosemary as the bread warmed in the oven. For eight years, the same song*

was on my lips every Sunday: an ancient prayer that marked this meal as holy. I was the founder of this small church, and, three years ago, it became clear my job was complete. The fledgling congregation was ready to fly on its own, and I stepped away from my role as pastor. The grief was so potent, I could find only one course: I ran away. I scraped together some cash, sublet my apartment and left town in a 1994 Dodge camper van. On the road driving West, I belonged to no one. Detached from the rhythm of Sunday night supper, I was untethered, and often forgot what day of the week it was. When I discovered it was Sunday, the songs of my congregation rose in my heart. On the wind, I thought I could detect a hint of rosemary.¹

I was struck by her words because, while they aren't exactly my experience, I can relate. I wonder if you can, too. When my alarm doesn't go off at 6:30 am, I wake up unsure if it is really Sunday. If I don't spend a Sunday afternoon pulling my red wagon full of supplies from my office to the youth suite, am I really a Youth Pastor? When I don't go to Montreat for Week 5 of the Youth Conference, is it really summer? These days it is hard to remember. It is hard to remember what it feels like to dress up for church. What it sounds like to have hundreds of voices singing alongside yours during the opening hymn. The look on a child's face and those of her parents when water touches her head and she is baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What it tastes like when you receive a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and raise it to your lips. What it smells like when the chancel is filled with Easter lilies.

Let's be honest. This passage isn't really about the forgotten bread. Right? I mean, Jesus himself says that. The forgotten and missing bread is the instigator. The instigator of a larger conversation and a more important lesson. This passage is about the way followers of Jesus LIVE IN and EXPERIENCE the world. Jesus has just miraculously fed THOUSANDS of people, yet the Pharisees demand a sign. There is something wrong with this picture, so he embarks upon a moment of connection and teaching with the disciples. In verse 15 Jesus speaks two words of warning to the disciples –

Ὠρᾶτε which is translated here as “watch out”

and

βλέπετε which is translated as “beware”.

Both words have their origins in the simple definitions of “look” and “see”, but they each take it a step further. Ὠρᾶτε properly means to see with the mind...to perceive. It is an intelligent seeing. βλέπετε refers to an observant seeing. A careful and considering way of taking something in. Jesus wants to equip the disciples for living in the world. He wants to help them truly experience what it is happening in their world. A world of Pharisees and brokenness. A world of Jews and Gentiles. A world full of sin and grace.

¹ Emily M.D. Scott. “Start Looking and You’ll See Roads All Over the Bible.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/19/opinion/start-looking-and-youll-see-roads-all-over-the-bible.html>

He wants them to be able to see the world and understand. He wants them to be able to see the world and remember...what he has done, what they have seen, what miraculous things they have experienced, and how they have been called.

Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? Jesus is calling on them to engage their full selves in this endeavor. Their hearts and minds. Their eyes and ears. Even their senses of touch, taste, and smell. Do they not remember the smell of the sea when he called them from their lives as fishermen? Do they not remember the feel of the money passing over their hands as it entered their pouches before he called them to leave life as a tax collector behind? Do they not remember how their bodies shook with wonder as he cast demons out and calmed the storm and caused the lame to walk? And for goodness' sake, do they not remember the taste of the bread and fish as they dined with 5,000 beside the sea and 4,000 in the wilderness?! Jesus wants these memories to sustain them, but more than that, to grow them...into better disciples, into stronger followers, into people equipped to truly EXPERIENCE their world.

We have the joy and privilege of some of our rising college freshmen leading our music today. They opened our service with the powerful reminder that we are not alone. God is with us and we are bound, knitted, and brought together in the power of the Spirit, despite our distance. In a few moments they will sing the words of our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 12 as an anthem.

Let their words remind you that it is God who saves us. Pay special attention to the way this song slightly rewords verse 5 saying, "make his deeds known among the peoples; see that they REMEMBER that his name is exalted." In a few days many of our college students will be headed back to school, in fact several have already left. Some will begin their college semesters in person, while others begin virtually. Regardless, the world of back to school will look different than it ever has before. My prayer for them is similar to my prayer for all of you. It's that they'd keep their eyes and ears, hearts and minds OPEN so they can EXPERIENCE the world as God would have them to. That they might tap into a central practice of the Christian faith – REMEMBRANCE – to sustain them, equip them, prepare them for living in this world.

In this moment. That they will even let that remembrance grow and shape them as Christ's disciples.

In the closing paragraph of her opinion piece, the Rev. Emily Scott shares,
On the road, I eschewed church for a time, but communion found me anyway. Stranded in the middle of Nebraska when my van (predictably) broke down, a kind Lutheran pastor took me out to a diner. Over eggs and toast, he told me stories of the refugees and immigrants who worked at the meat packing plant in town. At the Whistle Stop Café in Montana, I sat next to Norma, celebrating her 84th birthday over burgers. And in the California desert I was invited to the sturdy table of an almond farmer, where

big bowls of home-cooked veggies were pressed on me with generosity fit for the prodigal son.

In Erie, Pennsylvania, I rolled into a campsite and backed my van up to the edge of the great lake, surrounded by Harley-Davidsons. I shared a beer with a biker who had one thing to tell me about my trip: Don't plan a thing.

"Because all my plans will fall apart?" I asked.

"Not only that," he answered, "but because when you don't plan, things will happen you wouldn't believe." He winked, his bristle of mustache rising mischievously as he smiled. During this pandemic, I can't depend on communion each Sunday as I used to. But there will still be bread. Here, on the road, between the old life and a new one, we have the opportunity to be remade. Who will we choose to become?

The bread was only the beginning. It was the remembering that carried her through. It was the way the church was present, the way the body of Christ showed up, the way hospitality took her back to the stories of her faith that really mattered. She had a heart of remembrance that continued to shape her and help her grow as a pastor and follower.

Maybe it isn't about the missing bread for us, either. Maybe it is about how we experience the world. Maybe Jesus is equipping us to live in THIS world. This very world. The world of pandemics and politicians. Masks and virtual worship. Furloughs and a hybrid school schedule. Maybe Jesus wants us to look around and perceive. To see and observe things in a new way. To remember that we are the church. We can be the church. Inside of a building and outside in a scary and uncertain world. A world where all of the voices are constantly asking for a sign. Demanding this or that to prove that God is here and that we believe. But we don't need a sign. We just need to remember. And if that remembering begins with bread, that's okay. Just don't let it only be about the bread. Let the bread lead you to more and equip you for more...let it grow you into who God is calling you to be, even now, especially now. Thanks be to God. Amen.