

Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 10, 2024

Mark 8:1–21

“Are your hearts hardened?”

1. When bread you gets stale it becomes hard and dry, making it difficult or undesirable to eat.
 - a. I love freshly made bread, especially Mexican bread.
 - i. Growing up, I would eat corn tortillas instead of dinner rolls during a meal
 - ii. But what I’m talking about here is pan dulce, or sweet bread, which was so much a part of my growing up
 - iii. Great for breakfast or for a late afternoon coffee
 - iv. (go to one of the Mexican bakeries here in town and you’ll be surrounded by smells and tastes from my youth!)
 - b. One year, when I was in college, a friend gave me a “starter” for sour dough bread
 - i. A starter is a little bit of liquid dough which has the necessary natural yeast to help bread rise.
 - ii. You use the starter to make a new batch of bread, and early in the process you save a little bit of the batter to be the starter for your next loaf (or to share)
 - iii. My college buddies and I, who had rented a house for the summer, ate so much delicious sour dough bread that summer!
 - c. Later on, when we were just married, Tracy and I had an automatic bread maker
 - i. That one required using dry yeast
 - ii. Pour in all the ingredients, the machine mixes, kneads, lets rise, and finally bakes – all on a timer so you can wake up to freshly baked bread!
 - d. We would make only enough bread for us to eat – it was only the two of us then. There were hardly any leftovers, or if there were, they weren’t around for long
 - i. Bread is best when it’s fresh, because without preservatives the bread gets stale quickly
 - ii. It will harden and get dry.
 - e. Although, even then, people have figured out that this bread can be rescued, and that’s when people make French toast or bread pudding from leftover bread.
 - i. What a delicious way to rescue that bread!
2. In today’s gospel story, the disciple’s hearts were harder than their three-day old bread and, Jesus presented the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod as symbolically infectious
 - a. So, the story seems to be all about bread, or uses bread to deliver a lesson.
 - i. But first we must clarify that it may not have been the kind of bread you and I are used to
 - ii. Bread for people in Palestine was simply “flour mixed with water and baked... [they] made it in the form of an oblong or round cake, as thick as one’s thumb, and as large as a... platter hence it was not to be cut but broken.” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g740/kjv/tr/0-1/>
 - b. In other words, the bread in the story was probably bread without leaven, without yeast, which would have been flatter and could last a bit longer.

- i. “Unleavened breads... are simple to make and do not require any special ingredients or equipment. Because they do not contain yeast, they are shelf-stable and can be stored at room temperature for a long time.”
 - ii. They would have known about leavened bread, even if they didn’t use it, or didn’t use it all the time
 - iii. “The ancient Egyptians were the first to develop a method for leavening bread, using a starter made from flour and water that was allowed to ferment for several days. This starter was added to the dough, which caused it to rise and become light and fluffy. The Romans also developed a method for leavening bread, using yeast. This yeast was extracted from beer and added to the dough, which resulted in a light and airy bread.”
<https://sourdoughsupplies.com/blogs/leavened-bread-blog-only-the-best-recipes/the-difference-between-leavened-and-unleavened-breads#:~:text=Ingredients%3A%20Unleavened%20breads%20are%20often,temperature%20for%20a%20long%20time.>
- c. The idea that the yeast, in very small quantities, could be used for an entire batch, lends itself to symbolic interpretation, which is what Jesus is alluding to.
 - i. Yeast was used a symbol to speak about immortality creeping up into everything. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2219/kjv/tr/0-1/>
- d. OK, so that helps us set the scene then for our story
 - i. We read that a large crowd of women, children and men had been out in the desert three days with Jesus and his followers.
 - ii. I try to picture that scene:
 1. they were listening and learning, maybe bringing people to be healed.
 2. They were spending time in community
 3. Where they camping out somehow? They would have had to I’d say
 - iii. Following three days of this crowd being assembled, Jesus shows concern for them, he has compassion for them.
 1. That’s a lot of people
 2. For perspective, the Columbus North High School basketball gym seats just under 7,000 people <https://www.stadiumjourney.com/stadiums/columbus-memorial-gymnasium-columbus-north-hs-bulldogs>
 3. So picture Jesus speaking to one half of the stadium, but out in the open
 4. He has connected personally with many of them (healing, teaching, listening)
 5. They have gotten attached to him as well
 6. They’ve put their lives on hold to be there.
 7. Now, three days in, he is worried that they don’t have anything to eat.
 8. To be sure, Jesus could have chosen to feed people at most every stop where they had big crowds, but here he choses to make it a point.
 9. He shares his concern with his disciples, as if to say: what do we do?
 - iv. The disciples throw up their hands, helpless
 1. From where can anyone get loaves to feed these people here in the desert!

2. That sounds like a reasonable question... until you realize that only two chapters earlier Jesus had fed 5,000 people!
3. Jesus HAD JUST miraculously fed a multitude and they forgot already?
4. It is surprising that the disciples don't say: hey Jesus, do the thing you did before to feed all those people!
- v. What Jesus does is (again) helps the disciples share what THEY had.
 1. Just as in his feeding the 5,000, Jesus asks the disciples what THEY had
 2. And he invites them to share what they have
 3. Don't worry about the quantity of what you have, the implication seems to be: just help out by sharing from what you have.
 4. Sounds like a way to soften their hearts perhaps?
- vi. Jesus, in what very much feels like a communion moment, prays and breaks the bread and shares it.
 1. Add a few little fish in there and they had a full meal
 2. Miraculously, everyone eats and is satisfied, and there are even seven baskets full of leftovers.
 3. Seven is a significant number: it's the number of the days of creation
- vii. Then later on, when Jesus has a contentious encounter with the Pharisees, Jesus in kind of a parable warns the disciples
 1. He says: beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and beware of the years of Herod.
 - a. He warning the disciples about the corruption of the Pharisees (a corruption of power used in religious and community circles)
 - b. and the corruption of the Romans (also a corruption of power through conquest and a current occupation over them).
 - c. and the sneaky way in which this corruption secretly infects others – like yeast impacting a whole loaf
 2. Clueless and self-conscious, the disciples think we're again talking about bread, and since they had forgotten to bring bread into the boat, they think Jesus is lecturing them about bread (do they ever learn?)
 3. But Jesus was referring to the debate he had just had with the Pharisees who wanted to test him.
- viii. Jesus seems so exasperated, so he peppers them with all these questions, and rehearses the stories they had just lived through
 1. Are your hearts hardened so you can't feel this deep in you?
 2. We fed 5,000, we fed 4,000, there was more than enough, we had compassion for one another, we were in community. Literally!
 3. I asked and you had 5 loaves, and we fed 5,000. Then you had 7 loaves, and we fed 4,000. Figuratively: How's that for a positive kind of yeast that made a little go a long ways and fed a whole crowd?

3. One key to unlock this passage is that it seems Jesus is saying that part of what softens the heart is remembering.
 - a. If bread pudding rescues the hardened loaf of bread, then remembering what God had done in our lives is part of what rescues a hardened heart.
 - b. That may feel overly optimistic, perhaps.
 - i. After all, in the midst of a stressful or painful situation, our emotions may not let us remember more hopeful times right away
 - ii. Or for some there may be fewer good memories of God at work in their lives in their past, which may have been burdened with so much pain.
 - c. But then again, maybe right now is the moment in which we support others, so they remember today years from now as a time when God used a congregation to offer care when they were homeless, or in the hospital, or anxious about the future.
 - i. Maybe right now, in our 200th year as a church, we're building the stories which carry on a legacy of ministry done personally, to impact people, to challenge systems, done without fanfare or seeking attention.
 - ii. I'd argue that a similar thought was in the minds of church members like you and pastors like me who led this congregation 50, 100, 150 years ago.
 - iii. And while maybe we don't have a personal memory of some of those long-ago dates, our hearts remain open, not hardened, because it feels like this congregation remembers, like these very walls remember. And they find hope in that shared memory.
4. When you find yourself losing hope, or injustice in the world breaks or hardens your heart, dwell in the memory of your own heart and the long collective memory of the people, and remember that God finds a way to feed us, body and soul.

Reflection questions

1. Recall a story when something softened your heart, after harsh circumstances had led to you building walls around you.
2. In Mark 8:1–21, Jesus feeds 4,000 women, children and men. What's a time when what you or your community had to offer (your own "seven loaves") turned out to be more than enough to provide in a time of need?