

Sermon Outline: Turning the Pot

Text: Mark 8:14-21

Key Phrase: He gave them strict orders: "Watch out and be on your guard for the yeast of the Pharisees as well as the yeast of Herod."

Introduction

- Succulents are a huge fad. Whenever I go to Cub Foods or Target or those little parking lot pop-up garden centers, there's usually a shelf right by the register trying to entice you into spending \$14 on a tiny little plant. And you think to yourself, "Oh! That thing is kinda cute, and probably hard to kill."
- And then after a while, it ends up looking like the picture that is on the front of your bulletin. I hate looking at that stupid succulent. Look at it! Why is it so weird?! I hate this thing!
- And so, I began to think, "why did this plant grow in such a weird way? Why didn't it just grow strait up, or better yet, not grow at all? Why couldn't it just stay tiny and manageable?"
- My friend Jordan has a similar plant in his room. He noticed one day that it was growing at a 45 degree angle towards his window, so he turned the pot around hoping it would grow up more balanced. Instead there is a sharp 90 degree turn in the stem as the plant kept growing toward the sun!
- And then I had two revelations. 1: Things just happen. Things grow automatically. We just tie our shoes in the morning, we don't think about the steps involved, we just do it naturally after years of tying shoes. And 2: life moves toward the things that give it nourishment. Things get in a pattern, a groove, time doesn't every stop moving people forward; and the difference between a groove and a rut is the amount of time you spend in one. And I don't know if you feel this way, but it seems like our whole world has gotten into a pretty bad rut lately.

The Text

- Which is how we get to today's text. One thing I love about Mark's gospel is how honest it is. The author of Mark was not a great scholar or teacher, and he definitely did not have a great grasp of grammar or a robust vocabulary—but he did have an excellent gift for storytelling.
- And in the story I just read this morning, Mark is showing that even those who lived with, worked with, and followed Jesus most closely still completely and utterly miss the point. And Mark is so honest that he often shows the contempt Jesus feels whereas the other gospels tend to write the disciples in a more... favorable... light. That is to say, in our section this morning, Jesus is exasperated at the ineptitude of his disciples. Why aren't they getting it?

- But before we get to how dumb the disciples are, first we have to back up and zoom out to see the larger stories Mark is weaving together. At this point in the gospel, Jesus is out in the countryside traveling from town to town. He is gaining popularity. He is going into cities and disrupting the markets with displays of healing and miracles. He visits his hometown and leaves appalled by their disbelief. Jesus feeds the five thousand, he heals some Gentiles, he calls out the hypocrisy of the religious elite, he calls a Syrophenician woman a dog and gets outwitted by her, he heals the sick and tells them not to tell anyone. But they always tend to tell everyone. So much so that Jesus could not go anywhere without crowds following behind him.
- One big theme that affects our story today is that Jesus is feeding hungry people. He feeds 5,000 men in chapter 6 and then 4,000 men in chapter 8; plus a lot of uncounted women and children. So Jesus is feeding the hungry masses, not just spiritually but also physically. And the disciples play an active role in the process of these miracles. Part of Jesus' ministry is nourishing others in many, many ways.
- And then, right after Jesus feeds the four thousand, he gets in a boat because he wants to get away from people, and then Pharisees show up! And they begin to argue with Jesus and ask for a sign from heaven to prove that he is the Messiah. Right after he fed four thousand poor people! Jesus literally sighs, and then gets back on the boat because he's sick of these people.
- And that's where we get to our text from today. Since Jesus was fed up with the Pharisees, he and the disciples left in a hurry. They left in such a hurry that they forgot to bring supplies for their boat ride. So the disciples are worried about what they'll eat since they only had one loaf of bread, even though in the last week Jesus has done TWO miracles with small amounts of bread. And so Jesus in his wisdom, says to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees. Watch out for that creeping poison, that insidious venom that tends to get in your head and make you doubt, make you question, and make you wonder if there *is enough bread*. Because Jesus has shown the disciples, the 12 men closest to Jesus, that there is in fact enough bread for everyone, and then some left over! *Watch out for the yeast, watch out for that type of thinking that pulls you away from the good things God is doing in front of you.* I'll say that again, *watch out for the type of thinking that pulls you away from the good things God is doing in front of you.*
- It is so easy to not see or hear the things that God does in our lives. We see that in the disciples. Immediately they start blaming each other for forgetting to bring enough bread, *that* must be the reason why Jesus is talking about bread. And then we get this moment where Jesus is incredibly human and incredibly relatable. He's had enough of the disciples shenanigans.
- He goes off on them, "Why are you talking about not having bread? Don't you get it? Don't you have eyes? Can't you see? Don't you have ears? Can't you hear?" And then Jesus asks the rhetorical questions, "How many loaves left over from the five thousand?"

“Twelve...” the disciples respond. “How many loaves left over from the four thousand?”
“Four...” the disciples respond. “Don’t you get it? Why don’t you understand?”

- I can almost feel the tense silence in the boat for however long it took them to get to the shore from when they were yelled at and when they arrived at Bethsaida. It makes me think of getting yelled at in the car as a child during a long road trip for fighting with my siblings. Silences so heavy and thick you can almost feel it on your skin.
- Jesus recognizes that the disciples are falling to the same rut, again and again. And he is sick of it. And that’s why Jesus is asking them, “why do you all keep falling into that old pattern of thinking?!” The old way of thinking that is down in that rut where there is not enough bread. The way of thinking that is down in that rut where there is not enough healing. That old way of thinking where there is never *enough*. Especially when they have experienced a new way of thinking firsthand! When they’ve participated in miracles!
- This old way of thinking is not the way of the Kingdom of God. This way of negative thinking stops people from action. Instead of distributing food among the poor, this old way of thinking looks at the five loaves and two fish and says it isn’t enough. Why try? Instead of trying to heal the sick, this old way of thinking says there is no way that the deaf can hear. There is no way the mute can speak. There is no way the blind can see. So why try? This old way of thinking puts you in a rut, and leads you to inaction.

Application

- I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve been in that rut for a while. With the ever-present stress of politics, the pandemic, protests, and climate change; it is so easy for me to say, “There is nothing I can do. Why even try?” It is so easy to lose hope and give up on trying to make the world a better place for future generations.
 - And it is absolutely right, and absolutely valid, to feel this way at times. It is okay to feel hopeless in the face of overwhelming stress and anxiety. That is normal. That is part of what it means to be a person. But we don’t have to stay there.
- But being a person also means forming a habit. So when we get in that groove of hopelessness again and again, that is when it turns into a rut. And getting out of a rut usually takes conscious effort and sometimes therapy. That is where that stupid succulent comes in, or my friend Jordan’s plant that has a 90 degree turn in its stem, because **plants grow towards what nourishes them.**
- **Plants grow towards what nourishes them.** I’ll say that one more time, **plants grow towards what nourishes them.** And what nourishes plants is the sun. So when that little succulent has to bend over backwards to get nourishment, it grows to look weird. Had I been more present as it grew, I could have potentially moved it, or turned the little corgi pot it is in, and it may have grown up straighter or less weird. Same with Jordan’s plant, if instead of turning it once in the middle of its life he had turned the pot everyday, the plant would have been able to grow upright. But plants grow toward the sun.

- *“Watch out and be on your guard for the yeast of the Pharisees as well as the yeast of Herod.”* Jesus said. Let me ask you a question that you don’t have to answer, what is nourishing you everyday as we suffer through an economic crisis, a mental health crisis, a health crisis, and the constant natural disasters? Let me tell you, there are days I do not want to get out of bed, and often times on those days I wake up and I look at the news feed on my phone, and I dig deeper into that rut. And it is hard to get out sometimes. Even while writing this sermon I felt the weight, the grief, and the lament of a world that has lost over 900,000 people from a virus, and we have not stopped to take a breath and grieve this loss as a community. I had to stop several times, and take several breaks get all my thoughts onto paper to process these emotions of sadness.
- Because it is so hard to express the despair that can be felt in our world right now, and the reality that we are about to enter the coldest winter of our lives, and I don’t mean the temperature. I mean the distance and loneliness that will come when we miss the rituals that we are so closely tied to, things like Thanksgiving meals and Christmas Eves will be celebrated through screens and Zoom.
- So what do we do? How do we combat this yeast of the Pharisees, of the politics, of the pandemic? How do we get out of this rut?
- Well my friends, I think we need to turn the pot. I think we need to step back, look at what things are giving us nourishment, what are we growing towards? I want you to rethink how you tie your shoes.
 - Because there is a very large difference in days that I start by looking at the newsfeed on my phone and the days that I get my cup of coffee and watch Rufus, Gerald, and Linda eat seeds. Those are the chickadees and cardinals that frequent my birdfeeder.
- When I start my days in awe of creation instead of consuming the destruction of it; I do better. I feel better. And I find hope when things feel hopeless.
- And that is how we get out of the rut, we begin things in a new waym, in a Kingdom way. Which is why I printed off this prayer of John Wesley. If you want one send me a message and I will gladly mail it to you. Free of charge!
- I am inviting you to begin your day in prayer, centered on God. Take that colorful piece of paper and put it somewhere that you will see it everyday. Remind yo urself to begin your day with God— I guarantee you will be uplifted.
 - And as soon as you realize that you don’t see it anymore, once it has blended into your bathroom mirror, your nightstand, your front door; move it! That is the yeast! That is a sign your groove is turning into a rut, shake up the process once again! Be ever conscious to start your day with God.
- And when we begin our life centered on God, things like politics, pandemics, and protests seem more manageable; because we understand who nourishes us. Friends, as we begin a long, cold, dark season; let us grow toward the Son. Pun intended.