

## On Staying In The Boat

Mark 8:11-21; I John 2:12-14

The First United Presbyterian Church of Craffton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit  
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/sermon06-24-18.mp3>*

So let me ask you to think about this – and it’s a rhetorical question. No need to answer out loud. But why did you come here this morning? What motivated you to get yourself out of the house and into the pew today?

I ask that because it seems to me that is a crucial question in the gospel reading at hand. This is, at its core, the story of two different motivations for hanging around with Jesus.



When we left Jesus and his followers last week, they were “on the other side” – that is to say, in the region of the Decapolis, the land of the Gentile, the outsider, the “other”. The last thing we saw on Sunday was Jesus and his friends getting into the boat following the feeding of the 4,000. They were heading toward the region of Dalmanutha – a town on “our” side of the lake in the area of Galilee.



No sooner do they make landfall than they are greeted by a welcoming committee of Pharisees. These religious leaders are eager to see Jesus – and they are primed for a fight. Mark says that they came to “question” Jesus. The Greek is a little more emphatic. They were looking to argue, or even to “tempt” Jesus. They wanted to know – was Jesus really who he appeared to be? There were those who were claiming that he was Divine. Was he? They’d know, if only he’d give them the

right sign. They'd know, if only he'd fit into their God-shaped box.

And I love what happens next. Jesus "sighed deeply". It's a word that implies some level of frustration and even anger. They have come to argue, but he won't fall into the trap. He sighs, he rolls his eyes, and then he says, "All right, boys. Here we go. Back into the boat."



At this, the disciples (who, presumably, are doing most of the rowing here) have got to be thinking, "Are you kidding me? I get it – you know a lot about healing, and feeding, and miracles, but you are a lousy sailor, Jesus. For crying out loud, make up your mind..." But they follow his directive and get back into the boat.

I think I know how they felt. Many years ago I took a class on ministry and stress, and a part of that class involved a wilderness trek. We had a group of about 18 folks, and every day, a different pair was in charge of leading the group. That meant reading the map, using the compass, and getting us to our next campsite. I'll never forget the day that a couple of inexperienced folks had the map and we crossed the same stream – carrying 60 pound packs – six times. When they called us together to indicate yet another crossing, I lost my cool. "Listen," I said. "I have one pair of dry socks left to last me the entire week. I'll cross that stream because you're the leader, but if you tell me we have to cross it again today, I'm not going to be happy!" It was not my proudest moment, I can tell you that...

But the disciples were not hanging around Jesus because he was such a great sailor; and they were not hanging around him because he always made sense. If you'd have asked them that day, I suspect, they might not have been able to give you a

clear answer as to exactly why they were still following Jesus... but they were. There was something in him that was growing in them. So this time, they got back into the boat and started rowing.



But there's a problem. In all of the coming and going, unpacking and packing, somebody forget their lunches. All that bread that was left from the other day... forgotten. Given the events of recent days, however, nobody was going to bring that up to Jesus.

If you've been here in the last couple of weeks, you've heard me say that the theme music in the Gospel is beginning to change. There are indicators that something is in the wind, and change is afoot. That becomes a little more pronounced – although the disciples still didn't realize it fully – as today we read about the final teaching that Jesus gave to his followers in the region of Galilee. Whether the others know it or not, Jesus is about to give them the last lesson in this area that has been home to most of them for their entire lives.

Of course, he chooses to use a metaphor about baking. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and Herod!"

The disciples have to be thinking, "Oh, geez, who told him about the bread? Now we're going to hear it for sure!"

But instead, Jesus hurls a series of questions at them – at least eight or nine, depending on which translation you're using. And he ends with the frustrated cry of every teacher at some point or another: "For crying out loud, don't you get it?"



Get what? The teaching about the yeast. What was Jesus talking about when

in this last ever teaching session in Galilee, he talked to them about yeast?

I suspect that you know what yeast is – a microscopic organism that converts sugar into alcohol or carbon dioxide. I know that some of you are quite familiar with, and grateful for, the yeasts in your lives... You know that a tiny amount of yeast, left undisturbed, will radically change a large amount of whatever that yeast is in. Put a quarter of a teaspoon of yeast in fifty pounds of flour and leave it in there long enough, and soon the entire quantity of flour has been transformed.

Jesus said “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod...” In other words, be careful about the ways that their thinking affects your thinking.

The Pharisees were the religious group that had all the power in the daily lives of the people. There was a lot of what they did and held to that was good and noble... but... but... they had come to stand for an expression of the faith that was all but hollow and therefore meaningless. They carried around the Law and pointed to it in order to demonstrate the failings of those around them, but they never applied that same law to themselves. The Pharisees used religion as a weapon against other people rather than a tool to shape their own lives.

And we’ve talked about Herod in recent weeks as we considered his murder of John the Baptist. He took what was meant to be a good thing – the rule of law – and turned it into an instrument of terror. He completely separated morality (what is *right*) from what was legal.

The Pharisees *enforced* the religious laws on others, but disregarded them themselves; Herod *enforced* the laws of Rome not to bring order and safety, but to exalt his own personal power. In both of these cases, Jesus said, there is a

leaven, there is some yeastiness at work. Just as yeast works through a pile of dough and gives shape to the loaf that results, so too these false understandings of how to live work through the lives of those who practice them and wind up mis-shaping the lives of those who live that way. Both Herod and the Pharisees had double standards – they *said* one thing, but they *lived* something else.

More than that, both the Pharisees and Herod used religion as a cover for doing what they really wanted to do anyway. They made some decisions about how they were going to live, and then they selectively applied some religious-sounding language to make it seem as though they were just following through with God’s ideas.

Here’s the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod: you might start out thinking that you have been made in the image of God, but before too long you start worshiping a god who is just like you; a god who wants to give you all the things you want; a god who hates all the people you hate. Whenever we come to worship in order to baptize our politics and our prejudices, then we are using the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees.

And Jesus says, in what is his final teaching in the region of Galilee, “No! Stop! Beware! Don’t be that way!”



Well, what are we to do?

Jesus gave us questions. Eight or nine of them in this passage alone.

Questions? That is fantastic! I love questions! In fact, I have a lot of questions! Does following Jesus mean I get to ask questions, too? Here are some that all of us have had to live with in the past week:

- what are we going to do with those babies that are locked up?

- Is it possible to have security at the border? What does that even look like?
- Why are so many young men of color killed by members of the law enforcement community?
- What do we do about the fact that less than a mile from here is a group of people who have called themselves the “Greenway Boy Killas” – 29 of whom were indicted for drug trafficking, home invasion, violence...?
- What are we to do about the flooding that has come so close to home? Is this climate change, or just a fluke? What will happen in the days and years to come?

It’s not just those, of course. There are some that are a little more specific to individual circumstances...

- what about those lab results? Will I ever hear good news?
- What do I do about my child’s addiction?
- How can I tell my parents about the real reason I failed that class?
- Will I be able to forgive that man for what he did to me?

Man! Those are huge questions. What does discipleship look like here? How do I follow Jesus in questions like that?

For starters, I think we’ve got to remember the caution to avoid the leaven of Herod and the Pharisees. For me, that means that I can’t just parrot a simple answer. It’s not good enough to say, “Well, just follow the rules. As long as you obey the law, you’ll be ok.” That’s a bunch of baloney – because there are unjust laws and corrupt officers of the law. Not every law is good and right. Slavery was legal. Everything Hitler did was legal. Jim Crow was legal. Calling something “legal” doesn’t make it right.

Equally, though, I’m not free to simply say, “Ah, those people who disagree with me are all morons. Get rid of them all!” Dismissing people in that manner is not helpful because it

diminishes my ability to see anything of the Divine image in that person.

So what do we do?

The first disciples, I think, had it right. They stayed in the boat, even when they weren't sure where Jesus was telling them to go. Stay in the boat, and ask your questions. And look at Jesus while you ask them. At whom does Jesus look? Who does Jesus embrace? To whom does Jesus extend himself?

I chose the reading from I John to be included with this passage because, frankly, that message has always troubled me a bit. John says, quite plainly, "Look: you've got this. You know who you are. You know where you're headed. You know who's in charge. You know how to act. Can't you be brave enough to act that way? Can't you simply follow the path you know to be true?" The leaven of Jesus – the yeast of Christ – is more effective and truer than that of the Pharisees or of Herod.

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.

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. There are 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 to bring about his purposes in the world.

“Do you not yet understand?” That's ok. Keep asking. Keep walking. Keep looking. And when you see which direction to go - by God's grace, and for God's sake - get moving. May God bless you as you journey to be like him. Amen