

Beware the Yeast: A Paulin Devotional

Matthew 16: 1-9

In Matthew 16, we find ourselves back in Jewish territory after a wild, miracle-filled trip through both Jewish AND Gentile territory in Chapter 15. Jews, Gentiles, are all coming together to follow this amazing Rabbi and his disciples around Galilee and the Decapolis.

But the moment they step back onto home shore, the Pharisees and the Saducees, normally arch-enemies, band together to test Jesus.

The Pharisees were the popular religious leaders of the common people, embedded in the local synagogues. For them, the most important thing was the strict adherence to the Law, the Torah, that would be necessary for their Messiah to come. To them, Jesus was a dangerous law-breaker, a rogue rabbi, misinterpreting Scripture and misleading the people.

The Saducees were members of the elite, wealthy, ruling class, who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem. Conservative protectionists maintaining their power and influence through cooperation with the Roman Empire occupying their territory, they saw Jesus as a dangerous radical, who threatened the stability in the occupation, lest he prompt and lead an uprising against the occupying forces.

Religiously, they were polar opposites. And when Matthew tells us that they came together to test Jesus - it's radical. All they have in common is a fear of Jesus and the influence he has over the people. The Saducees don't even belong up in the north of Galilee, where this takes place - they have deliberately travelled from Jerusalem to intercept Jesus. And together, they demand a sign - a sign they have no expectation he can give them.

They aren't interested in another meal. They don't care about people being fed. They want something BIG. They want something cosmic. Bolts of lightning. The sun, standing still in the sky.

Jesus is having none of it, and tells them the only sign they'll get is the sign of Jonah. What a slap in the face! Just like Jonah, Jesus has gone and preached to the Gentiles, who have repented. It's a stinging comment to the resistant Pharisees and Saducees.

In the next "scene," when they're heading out across the lake, the disciples realise they've forgotten to take bread.

If you remember from the devotional earlier this week, the very fact that they've forgotten bread is deeply, deeply touching. The Jews of the day were accustomed to carrying special "baskets" with them - really more like little lunchboxes - of food, to ensure that they could have access to ritually safe food. Here, after the feeding of the 4,000 those special Jewish travel baskets (kophinoi) don't seem important anymore.

BUT. In the boat, Jesus tells them to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Saducees.

"It's because we forgot the bread," they whisper to themselves, in dismay.

And I swear, I have always thought they were such FOOLS to respond that way. Bread and yeast confusion - what is wrong with these, dumb disciples? (I have always thought it interesting that they never worried about making themselves look good, but STILL!)

But this week, reading the passage, I saw it differently. Jesus fed 5,000 and then 4,000, and he just refused to give the Pharisees and Saducees a sign.

What if the disciples were embarrassed and afraid that Jesus might think that like the religious and political leaders, they were seeking a third miracle? What if their fear of looking "wicked and adulterous" froze them in anxiety so they couldn't perceive anything more than their own evident failure?

We can be that hard on ourselves, too, can't we? We often approach God with this same anxiety. When we make a mistake, or face a shortage, we try to fix things quietly, or put on a good face. We don't want to look faithless, or disappoint him.

But we forget the most important thing. We're in an entirely different category than the critics. Look at the grace in Jesus' response. He doesn't call them "wicked," or "hypocrites." He just says, "you of little faith."

That's not rejection - that's correction. We hear that more than once in the gospels. As a hand stretches out to pull Peter from underwater up into the boat, for instance. That's his intimate, gentle correction for his friends. Never for his enemies.

He reminds them. He's not worried about bread. Remember the 5,000? Remember the 4,000? I'm not talking to you about bread. Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Saducees. And then they understand. It's not about asking for a sign. It's about that insidious spread of teaching that Jesus is a radical to be feared, instead of the Messiah that they've recognised and followed.

But that insidious teaching - the yeast of the Pharisees and the Saducees - that's coming from the most respected and revered teachers and leaders of their society. And they're being warned to reject them utterly to keep following Jesus.

And that warning is what is going to be uppermost in their minds in the next passage, when Jesus asks them, "Who do you say I am?"

But that's a passage for the next devotional.

Matthew 16:1-12

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

He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' 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 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.

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

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

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 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." 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.

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