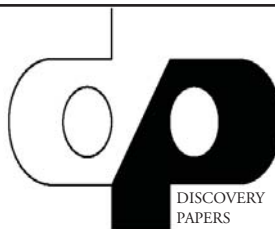


CONNECTING THE DOTS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 8:1-21
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Scott Grant
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I was once a part of a softball team on which some of the players did not know the rules. We had a lot of fun, but we didn't win many games. One play stands out as a sort of symbol for the season. We were in the field, and a player on the opposing team came to bat with the bases loaded. He hit the ball over the heads of our outfielders. One of our fielders chased it down while the runners screamed around the bases. Manning my infield position, I caught the relay throw from our outfielder and saw a runner sprinting for home plate. I was about to throw the ball home, hoping that our catcher could tag out the runner, when I noticed that the runner was wearing a fielding glove. Turns out that the player I spotted was not a runner; he was our third baseman, one of our players who didn't know the rules. I have no idea what he thought he was doing running the bases. When the dust settled, none of us knew exactly what happened and why. We stared at each other with dazed looks on our faces. Finally, one of our players said, with a grin on his face, "Okay, we'll analyze what just happened later." It was on to the next pitch.

That's the way it is with life, isn't it? An event happens. Then it's on to the next event, and on to the one after that. What does it all mean? We're not sure. Jesus, in Mark 8:1-21, helps us understand the meaning of the events of our lives. He helps us connect the dots between events that seem to have a significance we may not otherwise contemplate. The setting for the beginning of the narrative is Decapolis, the predominantly Gentile land east of the Sea of Galilee.

Mark 8:1-21:

In those days, when there was again a large crowd and they had nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples and said to them, "I feel compassion for the people because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come from a great distance." And His disciples answered Him, "Where will anyone be able to find enough bread here in this desolate place to satisfy these people?" And He was asking them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven." And He directed the people to sit down on the ground; and taking the seven loaves, He gave thanks and broke them, and started giving them to His disciples to serve to them, and they served them to the people. They also had a few small fish; and after He had blessed them, He ordered these to be served as well. And they ate and were satisfied; and they picked up seven large baskets full of

what was left over of the broken pieces. About four thousand were there; and He sent them away. And immediately He entered the boat with His disciples and came to the district of Dalmanutha.

The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. Sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, "Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." Leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side.

And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They said to Him, "Twelve." "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they said to Him, "Seven." And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?"¹

Another crowd in the wilderness

Jesus was hoping to avoid attracting a crowd in Decapolis. Nevertheless, word of his presence gets out and he is inundated, which happened often when he entered the predominantly Jewish region west of the sea. The crowd, after spending three days with Jesus, has nothing to eat, prompting Jesus to tell his disciples about his compassion for all of them, who have met him in a desolate place.²

As readers, we have a sense of *déjà vu*, for Mark earlier reported that Jesus "felt compassion" for a large crowd and miraculously fed it in a desolate place. The significant difference between Mark 6:33-44 and Mark 8:1-11 is location. Jesus fed the first crowd west of the sea, in Jewish country, whereas this crowd has formed east of the sea, in Gentile country.³ The disciples' concern about the problem of satisfying this crowd echoes,

in a backward sort of way, the successful satisfaction of the first crowd (Mark 6:42). The nearer echo, though, is Mark 7:27, where Jesus, using an illustration about bread, told a Gentile woman that the Jews—especially his disciples—should be “satisfied” first. Nevertheless, he responded to the woman’s faith and cast a demon out of her daughter. Jesus “satisfied” the Gentile woman, which raised the question with his disciples of whether he will also satisfy a crowd of Gentiles.

In the west, Jesus miraculously fed a crowd with five loaves and two fish. Now, in the east, he miraculously feeds a crowd with seven loaves and a few small fish. In the first case, the disciples collected twelve basketsful of fragments. This time, they collect seven basketsful. The first crowd constituted—or at least included—5,000 men. This crowd, unidentified by gender, constitutes 4,000. Some have seen the different numbers as symbolizing the two crowds in their Jewish and Gentile makeup, respectively. In any event, Mark has given us more than enough clues for us to conclude that the crowd east of the sea includes significant numbers of Gentiles. The more detailed description of the first miracle would have been particularly meaningful to Jews. The absence of details meaningful to Jews in the second account lends credence to the interpretation that Mark is describing a mostly Gentile crowd.⁴

Jesus satisfied the Gentile woman. Now, he satisfies a crowd of Gentiles: “they ate and were satisfied.” The differences between the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 indicate that the new exodus is sweeping up Gentiles, too. The miracle in part fulfills Isaiah’s messianic feast, which stretches out to embrace the last supper, the crucifixion, and the new age: “the LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; / A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, / And refined, aged wine” (Isaiah 25:6). The kingdom isn’t just for Jews. Nor is it for Jews and a Gentile here and there. It’s for a crowd of Jews and a crowd of Gentiles. It’s for the whole world.

Questions about divine involvement

Most of us probably haven’t experienced a miracle along the lines of the feeding of the 4,000, which transpired at a time in history when God’s kingdom was breaking into the world. Nevertheless, many of us experience some events in particularly powerful ways that make us wonder about divine involvement in them. At such times, we want to know what to make of such experiences. If God is involved, what does his involvement mean?

In the spring of 1993, I was asked to be the interim director of a ministry training program at a church in Idaho beginning that fall. It seemed like something the Lord had brought about. I was excited about the prospect and began to prepare for my new job as I went overseas that summer. When I returned, however, I was informed that the church had already found a perma-

nent director. I was out of a job before I had even started it. I was offered a job and spent two months preparing for it; then the offer was rescinded. I was disappointed. If God had anything to do with this, what, I wondered, was he doing?

The disciples, if they wondered at all about the feeding of the 4,000, didn’t know what it meant. For them, it was on to the next pitch. It was a dot without connection to the other dots. Thus, they were vulnerable to the influence of Jesus’ opponents, who discounted what was happening in and through him.

Pharisees demand a sign

After the feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness, Jesus and his disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee only to face opposition from Pharisees. Once again in this passage, after feeding a crowd in the wilderness and crossing the sea, Jesus encounters a contingent of Pharisees, who tended to define the kingdom of God in nationalistic terms (Mark 7:1-5). For them, the kingdom was for law-keeping Jews. Jesus has drawn the ire of Pharisees because of his inclusive vision of the kingdom. Jesus wanted a banquet for all peoples, but the Pharisees wanted something like a table for four.

This time, the Pharisees test Jesus by asking him for a “sign from heaven.” Mark, of course, portrays Jesus’ power as coming from heaven. As early as Mark 1:10, he reported “the heavens” opening and the Spirit descending on Jesus. As late as Mark 7:34, he depicted Jesus as “looking up to heaven” in order to heal a man. Such signs from heaven don’t impress Jesus’ opponents, however. An earlier group of opponents acknowledged a supernatural power at work in Jesus but attributed it to an evil source (Mark 3:22). These Pharisees—like Satan, who tempted Jesus in the wilderness—aren’t testing Jesus for the sake of possibly following him; they’re testing him to trap him.⁵ The only “sign from heaven” Jesus’ opponents value is one that endorses their small-minded agenda.

When a crowd brought a deaf mute to Jesus only shortly before this feeding, he looked up to heaven and sighed deeply before healing the man. Now, as the Pharisees come to him and ask for a sign from heaven, he once again sighs deeply. The deep sigh suggests that the Pharisees are in a sense deaf mutes: they can’t really hear what Jesus is saying and they can’t speak correctly about him. They don’t need a “sign from heaven” validating their agenda; they need to be healed. Jesus sighs, but he doesn’t look to heaven. He cannot heal those who don’t want to be healed. The Pharisees are the leading edge of a generation that is turning away from and finally will reject its Messiah. In the feeding of the 4,000, Jesus started “giving” a few loaves to his disciples,

who then fed the multitude. However, the kind of sign the Pharisees are looking for will not be “given” to them. Jesus leaves the Pharisees. He will have nothing more to do with them until his showdown with them and other Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (Mark 12:12).

The demand for signs

We’re a curious lot. We think that if God just showed us a sign—a no-doubt-about-it miracle—we’d get on board with his mission. But is that true? Is that what we need, or just what we think we need? Dig a little deeper, and maybe what we really want is for God to prove himself in a way that endorses our agendas. Yes, give us a sign, Jesus, to let us know that you’re on our side, and on the side of those like us. If we needed such a sign, Jesus would give it. We don’t need that kind of sign; we need to be healed of demanding that kind of sign. We need Jesus to heal us of our insistence that he endorse our narrow agendas so that instead we might align ourselves with him and his global mission of compassion.

Faith, though open to intellectual inquiry and intellectually sustainable, asks us to submit to another: the Lord Jesus Christ. And there’s the rub, for faith is not mostly an intellectual issue; it is mostly a moral issue. Faith in Jesus calls for us to submit to Jesus. All sorts of human defense mechanisms—including intellectual arguments and the demand for signs—are activated by the claims of Jesus. We’ll do most anything but sublimate our agendas, hopes, and dreams to someone else.

The myopic demand for signs screens out the signs we’ve already been given and prevents us from reading them. We think a new sign would clear up our doubts. Perhaps, though, we don’t need to come to grips with our doubts; perhaps we need to come to grips with what we believe.

The disciples, after the feeding of the 4,000, move on to the next pitch. Jesus, though, wants to help them understand the last play.

Jesus questions his disciples

Jesus noted that the crowd of 4,000 was literally “not having” enough to eat. Likewise, Mark notes that the disciples literally are “not having” any more than one loaf of bread in the boat with them as they cross the Sea of Galilee with Jesus. Jesus miraculously made up for the crowd’s lack with an abundance of bread. Yes, the disciples lack bread, but their concern about their lack belies a greater need: they lack understanding. The disciples’ lack of understanding poses a greater challenge for Jesus than the crowd’s lack of bread.

Jesus warns his disciples to beware of the “leaven,” or influence, of both the Pharisees and Herod, who advocated alternative visions of the kingdom of God. The Pharisees, with their nationalistic bent, flat-out rejected the truth and wanted a sign that Jesus endorsed

their agenda. Herod, who ruled the region of Galilee under the aegis of Rome, fancied himself as the leader of God’s kingdom. Nevertheless, John the Baptist, who announced the coming kingdom, intrigued Herod, and signs of Jesus’ power haunted him. For a while, instead of flat-out rejecting truth like the Pharisees, he enjoyed listening to John. When Herod had to make a choice between the truth and his hold on power, however, he threw John over (Mark 6:14-29).

Jesus is warning the disciples: don’t reject the truth, like the Pharisees, and don’t flirt with the truth, like Herod. Neither the Pharisees nor Herod walk in the way of the Lord. Both those who want to overthrow Rome, like the Pharisees, and those in cahoots with Rome, like followers of Herod, are going to come down on Jesus with the weight of the world (Mark 12:13). At that time, their way—or any way but the way of the Lord—could spread in the disciples’ hearts like leaven in a loaf. Follow not the Pharisees or Herod but Jesus, who walks in the way of the Lord, even if he walks into the hands of his enemies in Jerusalem and lets them have their way with him on Golgotha.

The disciples, however, misinterpret Jesus’ warning. He’s using leaven as an illustration, but they take him literally and argue with each other, as the Pharisees argued with Jesus. Jesus asks them, “Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread?” In light of Jesus’ warning, they should be concerned not for the absence of bread but for the presence of the Pharisees and Herod. He can put bread on their table. Getting truth into their hearts—that’s a different matter, especially when powerful enemies of the truth propagate attractive alternatives. Mark earlier noted that the disciples failed to understand the significance of the feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:52). Now, Jesus, after feeding the 4,000, asks them, “Do you not yet understand?” Even after a second miracle in the wilderness, not to mention everything else they’ve witnessed, they still don’t understand who Jesus is and what he came to do. The disciples don’t understand that he is the messianic shepherd of the wilderness who cares not only for Israel but also for the nations, nor do they understand that he is on a collision course with the Pharisees, Herod, and the other powers of the day. Jesus has fed both the Jews and the Gentiles with plenty left over. There’s more than enough for the whole world.⁶

Jesus isn’t accusing his disciples; he’s probing them. In fact, he forms questions with all seven of his sentences in verses 17-21. He’s not writing them off; he’s waking them up.

What the disciples, like the Pharisees, need spiritually is what so many have received from Jesus physically: healing. They have eyes, but they can’t see. They have ears, but they can’t hear. Ah, but Jesus recently opened the ears of a deaf man. In Mark’s next sequence, not coincidentally, Jesus will open the eyes of a blind man (Mark 8:22-26). Only five loaves for 5,000? Not a prob-

lem. Only seven loaves for 4,000? Not a problem. Only one loaf for twelve men? Not a problem. Ears that can't hear and eyes that can't see? Not a problem.

In verse 17, Jesus asks his disciples whether they “yet” understand. No, they don’t understand yet, but there’s still time. What must they do? They must remember. Jesus leads his disciples to “remember” the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000. Although the disciples were active participants, serving up the loaves and fish to the crowds, the meaning of the miracles escaped them. Therefore, Jesus revisits the miracles with his disciples. Yes, they remember what happened. Maybe now, after revisiting the miracles, they’re ready to hear and answer Jesus’ question in a new way when he asks it a second time, in verse 20: “Do you not yet understand?”

Jesus will soon ask his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” One of them, having remembered, will answer with remarkable understanding, even if his answer is incomplete (Mark 8:27-38). For the sake of the disciples, Jesus needed to feed a crowd twice. Jesus will need to touch a blind man twice, also for the sake of his disciples, who, after being touched by Jesus so that they understood who he was, needed to be touched again in order to understand the nature of his mission. When Jesus fed the 5,000, the disciples collected “twelve” baskets of leftovers: the number of the people of God, as represented by the disciples. When he fed the 4,000, the disciples collected “seven” baskets of leftovers: the number of completeness. Likewise, Jesus asked them seven questions. The kingdom is not complete without the Gentiles. The twelve disciples, once they come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, are incomplete until they understand the worldwide mission of Jesus. They need to understand not only that he is the Messiah but also that he came to fight not earthly powers but Satan, sin, and death; that the way of victory would be the way of defeat; that he would win the war with the spiritual powers by losing the battle with the earthly powers.

Jesus satisfied the Gentile woman’s need with “bread” from the table. He satisfied the need of the Gentile crowd with bread in the wilderness. The Jewish disciples, despite their arguing, don’t need bread; they need understanding. Jesus is satisfying their need as well.

Jesus questions us

So, what do we lack? Whatever else we need, we need understanding. We need to understand who Jesus is, what he’s come to do, and how he does what he came to do. We need to understand the way of the Lord that we might walk in it—uniquely, according to Jesus’ call in our lives. Jesus is the resurrected Lord of the world who challenges not first the earthly powers but Satan, sin, and death in part by enlisting us to walk in his way. What is that way? It’s upside down, inside out, and backwards. He calls us not to be served but to serve, to be the slave

of all, to suffer for the sake of the world. In short, the way of the Lord, as it emerges in Mark 8:22-10:52, is self-sacrifice for the sake of the world. Well, there are easier ways to live, aren’t there? Which is why we need to remind ourselves that Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

What do you do with truth? You don’t reject it, like the Pharisees, or flirt with it, like Herod. You embrace it and marry it. You know that concern for earthly power can work its way into your heart like leaven in a loaf so that you lose all interest in the way of the Lord. Almost any way—the way of success, the way of prosperity, the way of permissiveness—disguises itself as the way of truth when the way of the Lord turns toward Golgotha. The path of least resistance pulls us powerfully in its direction. Sure, it will appear at times as if the way of the Lord comes to an end just ahead, but keep walking. Jesus walked in this way, and he walks with us in this way. Keep walking, and the way will open up.

Instead of giving us signs, Jesus asks us questions. He’s given us enough signs—signs of God’s reality and love—to point us toward the way of the Lord. So he asks us, “Do you not yet understand? Don’t you remember?” He probes us. Things happened, but we didn’t know what they meant. Were the events of your life just that—events, without connection to each other, without meaning beyond themselves? Just pitch after pitch after pitch? Look closer. Listen to your life. Read the scriptures. You can’t see? You can’t hear? Not a problem. Jesus didn’t *say*, “You don’t understand.” No, he *asked*, “Do you not *yet* understand?” Keep looking; keep listening; keep reading. Can you see a pattern in the events of your life, as if Jesus fed 5,000 in one place and 4,000 in another? Can you see a connection—to the biblical story, to God? Connect the dots. First remember. Then understand.

Understand what? Understand who Jesus is and what he’s doing—in a global sense, yes, but also in a personal sense. Understand that Jesus is turning back the powers of darkness and establishing the kingdom, gathering people from every tribe and nation and tongue, even if he’s doing it in an upside-down, inside-out, and backward sort of way. Understand the way of the Lord and walk in it, being attentive to the particular leading of the Lord in your life. Jesus satisfies our need. We lack understanding; Jesus gives it to us. Keep walking.

Jesus enlists us, as he enlisted his disciples, in his mission to satisfy the world. If we respond to his invitation, we’ll be allowing him to satisfy in us the deep desire we have to be swept up into a purpose beyond ourselves. When we respond to his invitation, we become waiters at the worldwide feast, serving up the compassion of Jesus to a love-starved world. The way is difficult. But can you imagine a more exciting way?

In 1994, a year after I lost the temporary job in Idaho, I accepted a permanent job as a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church. It had a similar training program, but I would

not be responsible for it. I was busy with different work, and others were better positioned to lead the program. Then, in the spring of 2001, the church needed a new director for the program. The elders offered me the ministry, and I accepted.

So, what was the Lord doing in the summer of 1993? I was studying to lead a program on an interim basis, but I couldn't help dreaming about what I would do on a long-term basis. I was studying—and I was dreaming. In the following years, I continued to study, in connection with my pastoral work, and to dream about leading a training program. In 1993, I was preparing for a non-existent job, but the Lord was preparing me, and inspiring me, for a job he would give me eight years later. I guess I needed eight years of preparation, not just one summer. The dots connected.

Looking for patterns

So, how do we connect the dots in our lives? First, you have to understand what the dots are about. In a general sense, the dots relate to who Jesus is, what he's doing, and how he's going about it. The dots relate to the way of the Lord: the way of self-sacrifice for the sake of the world. In a particular sense, the dots relate to how Jesus is leading you to know him and be involved in his mission to the world. You connect the dots by slowing down, by taking time, by asking questions. Sure, in life you need to get on to the next event, as in softball you need to get on to the next pitch, but you also need to build time into your life when you can reflect on the events and look for patterns and connections. You need to take time between innings, so to speak.

Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple Computer, was full of insight in his 2005 commencement address at Stanford University. With the addition of a few references to Jesus, it would have made a good sermon. He spoke about what happened after he dropped out of college, which allowed him to drop in on whatever class struck his fancy. On a whim, he took a calligraphy class and found it fascinating:

None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them. If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do.⁷

The upshot? Jobs said, "You have to trust in some-

thing—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever." Or, you could trust in Jesus.

With Mark 8:1-21, the curtain closes on the first act of Mark's three-act drama. Where does he leave us? With questions—seven of them, in fact. The last question, "Do you not yet understand?" brings us to the edge of our seats for the second act. No, we don't yet understand. But we want to understand. So, we read on.

NOTES

¹ A Crowd had nothing to eat (1-3)

B Disciples had seven loaves and a few fish but not understanding (4-5)

C Jesus fed the crowd with loaves and fish (6-10)

X Pharisees tested Jesus (11-13)

A' Disciples didn't have enough to eat (14)

B' Disciples had eyes and ears but not understanding (15-18a)

C' Jesus fed disciples with truth (18b-21)

² The reference to "three days" faintly foreshadows the resurrection of Jesus, who will soon predict that he would rise after three days (Mark 8:31).

³ The note that the crowd has come from "a great distance" may subtly identify it as including Gentiles, whom Jews believed to be far from God (Isaiah 49:12). Jesus worries that if he dispatches the people, they will faint on "the way," a subtle reference to the setting of Mark's gospel. In Mark, Jesus walks in "the way of the Lord," journeying from north to south, from popularity in Galilee to crucifixion in Jerusalem (Mark 1:3). Mark is indicating that Gentiles, like Jews, are being invited to walk in this way.

⁴ Jesus' command for the first crowd to sit down on the "green" grass evoked Psalm 23:2 from the Hebrew Scriptures: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." The gathering in the wilderness of the first crowd into groups of hundreds and fifties echoed the exodus and raised hopes that God was effecting a kind of new exodus, acting once again in a decisive way on behalf of his people (Exodus 18:21, 25). The 5,000 men who were in the first crowd, and who could have constituted an army, raised the specter of a potential Jewish uprising, though Jesus dismissed any such hopes when he dispatched the crowd. Also, Jewish-style baskets (*kophinos*) were featured in the first account, whereas Mark uses a more general word for baskets in the second account (*spuris*). Finally, the two fish of the first account are replaced by a few "small" fish in the second account. The use of the diminutive in connection with the fish echoes the use of the diminutive in connection with both the Gentile woman's "little" daughter and the "little" dogs whom Jesus likens to Gentiles (Mark 7:26-28). (The New American Standard Bible does not reflect the use of diminutives in the story of Jesus and the Gentile woman.)

⁵ The word translated “tempted” (*peirazō*) in connection with Satan in Mark 1:13 is the same verb that is translated “to test” in Mark 8:11.

⁶ Mark 8:1-21 mirrors Mark 4:1-20. In Mark 4, (a) Jesus told the parable of the sower; (b) he noted that his opponents would not understand the parables; and (c) he interpreted the parable for his followers. In Mark 8, (a) Jesus, in parabolic fashion, miraculously feeds a crowd for a second time; (b) the Pharisees, his disbelieving opponents, challenge him; and (c) Jesus interprets the parabolic feedings for his followers. In Mark 4, Jesus, with an allusion to Isaiah 6:9, said his opponents would see but not perceive and hear but not understand. In Mark 8, however, Jesus applies Isaiah 6:9 not to the Pharisees but to his own disciples: “Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear?” Jesus, who earlier was grieved by the Pharisees’ hardness of heart (Mark 3:5), now asks his disciples, “Do you have a hardened heart?” Jesus uses such language with his disciples to make them aware that they are in danger of going the way of the Pharisees.

⁷ Steve Jobs, Stanford University commencement address (June 12, 2005).