

Faith in a Time of Fear

Matthew 16:13-20

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I.

By the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel, things are getting tense. The first verse reads: "The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven."

These men in power have come from Jerusalem to trip Jesus up; to say "prove it!" to remind him of the way things really work; to assert their own authority; to expose him as fraud; and to sow the seeds of scarcity and control.

In response, Jesus criticizes their inability to discern the signs of the times: "Red sky by night, shepherds delight," he says, "Red sky by morning, shepherds warning." Y'all don't even know what time of day it is.

Then Jesus and the disciples get in a boat and cross the Sea of Galilee. When they get to the other side, the disciples realize they haven't packed a lunch. They freak out.

Jesus says to them, "Be careful. You're starting to sound like the Pharisees and the Sadducees."

But the disciples say, "No, really, we forgot to pack a lunch."

And then Jesus, realizing they weren't getting it, says: "You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Don't you get it? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How could you fail to realize that I was *not speaking about bread*? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!"

And the text tells us, "Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

How could you fail to realize that I was not speaking about bread? I think that Jesus is saying here that bread is secondary. The primary question is, who are you going to trust? The Pharisees and Sadducees who mix in the yeast of scarcity and fear. Or Jesus, who mixes in the kingdom yeast of abundance and trust.

Are we much different today than the disciples of Jesus' day? Aren't we faced each day with essentially the same choice? To trust in the authorities who want to convince us that there is much to fear, that there is every reason to worry, and that there is

not enough to go around. Or, to trust in Jesus, who has shown us time and again that God is worthy of our faith, that there is every reason to trust, and that, in God's economy, there is enough.

II.

In the life of our church, this is a pregnant and vulnerable place to be. As one of your pastors, I myself am feeling an energizing mixture of expectancy and vulnerability. A year ago, aware of possible allusions to Chicken Little, we noticed that the plaster in our sanctuary was falling and that it needed to be replaced. At a special meeting of the congregation, a unanimous vote authorized the church to secure a loan to finance the long-delayed rehabilitation of this beloved and historic building.

Members of the Church Council began preparations for a Capital Campaign to repay the loan. From countless conversations, formal and informal, our council members determined that there was a widespread desire among the congregation to address additional needs of the facility. Namely, to update the functionality of our organ, which, according to one of the premier organists in the city, our own Frank Shelton, is in serious need of an overhaul. Secondly, to renovate our kitchen, mindful of the many ways our kitchen serves this church - for example, to prepare receptions for bereaved families - and the ways it serves the wider community - for example, when we host homeless families through the Interfaith Hospitality Network. Ask one of the many women who care for the kitchen as it is, and they will give you a passionate earful about the improvements we hope to make. Thirdly, the only ADA certified wheelchair-accessible bathrooms in our entire facility are located below the Founders' Room. You need to walk down a narrow flight of stairs to get there. Seem odd? That's because for over 20 years there has been a plan to build an elevator to make our facility accessible to all.

At the annual meeting of the congregation in January, all members were invited to vote on whether we should support a capital campaign to realize these projects. We discussed the goal: Two million dollars. We discussed the feasibility of success. Our feasibility study last fall showed we were capable of at least 2.5 million. We discussed the inclusion of a mission component, which has since been added. We voted unanimously to launch a campaign.

And here we are. We have co-chairs of the campaign. We have chairpersons of about a dozen sub-committees, and over a hundred people involved in the work of those committees. We have a theme, "Building Connections," and have been clear that in everything we do to raise two million dollars we also want to be nurturing relationships. We have a logo. We have printed materials and website content. A video is in the works. Leadership gifts are being ascertained. Information sessions are being offered. Conversations are being initiated and continued. Excitement and passion are being shared. Concerns are being carefully heard and addressed. This is a pregnant and vulnerable place to be.

In a very real sense, we are that place where we have made the decision to cross over the Galilee with Jesus. We've arrived safely and are now noticing that we may have forgotten to pack enough lunch. Why are we talking about money all the time? What if I can't give as much as they want me to? What about the economy? Why are we so concerned with our building when so many folks are out of work? And my own fear as a pastor, what if we don't make it? How will that reflect upon me in my position? Will I have failed?

III.

Jesus, sensing the fear in his disciples, and aware of the many factions competing for their loyalty, asked the question: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples give a variety of answers. Then Jesus asks the most important question: "But who do *you* say I am?" The first question is an ego question. What do other people think? What they saying? What cliques and sects want you to affiliate with them? The second question is a relationship question: "Who do *you* say I am?" We all have to answer that one for ourselves.

And Simon Peter, poor guy, so full of ego and self-doubt, so fickle at times and faithful at others, so much like us, in fact, *he* says, in moment of courage and clarity, and to hell with what anyone else thinks, "*You* are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." There, right there, he risked it all, and cast his lot not with the rulers of scarcity, but with the God of abundance. "In *you* do I trust," Peter said in that moment.

And for that testimony, Jesus gave Peter a tremendous blessing: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! You didn't just make that up. God gave those words to you. Peter, *Petros*, your name means 'rock' and I'm going to build my house upon that rock, upon your selfless testimony, upon your trust in the God who will provide, and even if Satan himself shows up on your doorstep, you will prevail. I'm going to give you the keys of the kingdom and I'm going to trust you bind what needs to be bound and to loose what needs to be loosed.

IV.

Peter's blessing is our blessing. Our church is built upon his testimony, uttered so long ago, so far away. With that in mind, I want to address, briefly and directly, some of the questions posed on this side of the Galilee.

Why are we talking about money all the time?

It does not seem to me that we are talking about money all the time, though we are talking about it more than usual. That is because we, as a church, have undertaken a major initiative to raise \$2 million, which is a lot of money. In the gospels, money is the second most common theme of Jesus' teaching. It is second only to the kingdom of God itself, and the two themes are often related. Jesus seems to be saying that the ways we regard our stewardship of money reflect the ways we regard the stewardship of our whole lives.

Our attitude toward money, Jesus teaches, often disrupts, or even replaces, our relationship to God. Talking about money in the context of the church can help us face our attitudes toward wealth and poverty and can help restore our trust in God to its proper place.

What if I can't give as much as they want me to?

Some folks are feeling anxious as we approach the launch of the Capital Campaign on the second Sunday in September. They've said they are afraid they'll be asked to give an amount they can't afford or that they'll be judged for giving amount that is seen as inadequate. I don't know how to say other than as directly as possible. In order to meet our goal, we, the members of this church, responding to the love of God in our lives, will need give as generously as possible, each according to our means. No one is ever expected to give more than what they feel God is calling them to give. Trusting in God's abundance, let's each take responsibility for our own decision and then rejoice, giving thanks to God for the gift of life itself. Alleluia.

What about the economy?

The economy is the economy. It's one way we're all connected. A lot of it is out of our control, and yet let's not act like victims. A weak economy has affected us all, some more adversely than others. I'm aware of folks on fixed incomes who are having to get by on less. Again, in this campaign, each of us are being asked to make a decision from within our own particular situation. Speaking as your Lead Minister, I want every member to make a pledge this year to the capital campaign and to the annual campaign that will follow. The *amount* you pledge is secondary to the primary purpose, that you stay connected and participate in building up this community. We need each other. One of our members who has been unemployed recently got a job. Praise God. While she was unemployed, she gave to the church. Recently, she told me she'll increase her giving now that she's working. "I know it won't go far toward paying your salary, pastor," she told me, "but that's not what it's about for me. I give because I love God and want to give back a portion of all he has given me."

Why are we so concerned with our building when so many folks are out of work?

Our building is 123 years old. It has survived two world wars and a great depression. It has survived the ravages of weather, pollution, and vandalism. Tens of thousands of people have received comfort, challenge, and inspiration here. Many within the wider community recognize this facility as one of the city's treasures. It is the oldest church building still in continuous use by the same congregation - that's us. But as beautiful as this building is, I agree with those who remind others that the building is not the church. As I pointed out last week, an ekklesia is "a people," and we are a people who should not be simply equated with a building. However, this building plays an important role in shaping who we are and what do. It is one of the primary tools we use to do ministry with each other and to extend a loving outreach into the wider community. Not to mention, that those who pledge to our annual campaign each year are helping to employ 17 people. And those who contribute to the capital campaign will be employing many more for a period time. Jobs are created by economic activity. Spending 2 million dollars is economic activity.

In the meantime, our church responds to church members who are jobless by providing vital spiritual encouragement and community connections. We point people to community resources designed to assist people in these difficult times, and we accompany people, if requested, as they access those resources. Even while the economy was booming, our congregation provided outreach to those suffer in an unjust society, donating money and volunteers to Ecumenical Social Ministries, the Marian House Soup Kitchen, Pikes Peak Habitat for Humanity, and the Interfaith Hospitality Network, among others.

And my own fear, what if we don't make it? How will that reflect upon me as a pastor? Will I have failed?

In my 38 years on earth, my ego has been wounded and healed enough times for me to know life, even my life, is not about me. If we don't make, how will that reflect upon me as a pastor? *Who cares!* Will I have failed? If I, or any one of us, really trusts in God's grace and abundance, then we've already succeeded. That's what it means to be faithful. You see, *he wasn't really talking about bread.*

As a wise person I know once said: If we don't make it, we'll have more money than when we started. If we do make it, we'll celebrate. And if we exceed our goal, which I believe we will, then I hope you'll join me as we dance in the street. Amen.