

Needless Repetition 7:31-8:9

Why does Mark record the story of the feeding of the 4000, only two chapters after describing the feeding of the 5000? Remember, the gospel writers had to be very selective with the stories about Jesus that they chose to include in their narratives – in the Ancient World, papyrus was expensive and column inches were precious. So why the repetition?

Well, perhaps one reason reflects another reality of the Ancient World – people didn't travel as much as we do. That's one reason why Jesus went around to so many different towns and villages, so that many people could see His miracles and hear His teaching. It is thus very likely that Jesus repeated many of the same stories and lessons in slightly different ways, just as He performed similar miracles before different audiences. This, by the way, helps to explain some of the so-called discrepancies between some of the similar stories about Jesus told in different gospels. It's not that the gospel writers were adding embellishments – it's more likely that they were accurately recording some of the different ways that Jesus taught the same lesson.

Of course, we can also explain Mark's inclusion of the feeding of the 4000 as an important piece in the literary structure of chapters 7 and 8. We first discovered that structure at the beginning of chapter 7, when the Pharisees confronted Jesus and His disciples about their failure to follow all the traditions that their forefathers in the faith had dreamed up. In response, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29, pointing out that they were hypocrites, substituting the commandments of men for the Law of God.

The following verses from Isaiah 29 then go on to say that God would answer the hypocrites by working marvelous works among them. And as we have seen over the last few weeks, the rest of Mark chapters 7 and 8 shows Jesus fulfilling this prophecy, performing the miracles in the same order that Isaiah 29 describes.

And the structure is pretty obvious, once you know to look for it: Isaiah 29:17 says that God will transform Lebanon into a fruitful field, and immediately after Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, He casts a demon out of a girl near Tyre, which is in Lebanon. Isaiah 29:18 next says that the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and right after returning from Lebanon, Jesus heals a deaf man, which we have read in today's passage. Isaiah 29:19 then says that the humble and the poor shall rejoice, and that's exactly what we see in the first verses of Mark chapter 8, as those who haven't had anything to eat for days enjoy the full meal that Jesus provides for them.

Okay, so why is it so important that Jesus acts out the miracles that Isaiah predicted? Isaiah 29:14 says that it is the Lord Who will do all these wondrous works among the people. Isaiah 29:19 says that the poor will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. In other words, by performing all these miracles in the same order, Jesus is making a clear claim to be not just a teacher, and not just a miracle-working prophet, but the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, God Almighty.

And both of today's miracle stories make it plain that Jesus is in fact the One doing these miracles, that He Himself is the source of all this divine power. For example, do we see Jesus praying in either of these stories, asking God to heal the deaf man or to provide bread for the people? That's what Old Testament prophets had to do. They were only messengers from God – they could only do what the Lord allowed, and could only say what the Lord said.

But Jesus' power was not derivative, and that seems to be the main point of the very hands-on way that Jesus heals the deaf man, isn't it? For Jesus doesn't pray that this man would be healed – He just says "Ephphatha," which means "Be opened," and the man can hear. Moreover, Jesus is careful to speak in the common language so that anyone who was listening could understand and thus get the point – when Jesus speaks, things happen.

And to further emphasize the very personal nature of His power, Jesus touches the man's ears and tongue, the parts of his body that need healing. Jesus even takes some of his own spit and touches the deaf man's mouth – that's about as close an encounter with Jesus as this man could get. No, there can be no doubt that the healing power that restored this man's hearing and speech came from Jesus Himself, in fact, from the physical body of Jesus, the Holy One of Israel of whom Isaiah wrote so many years before.

Okay, so Mark includes these stories, in large measure repeating himself, so that we'll understand the divinity of Jesus. But there's another reason that Biblical writers sometimes repeat similar content – noticing the subtle differences between lessons or stories helps us to notice important details. And there are, of course, many similarities between the two miraculous feeding stories that Mark tells in chapters six and eight. In both cases, for example, the disciples expressed disbelief that a huge crowd could possibly be fed in such a remote area. In both cases, Jesus asked the disciples to find out how much bread was available, and in both cases, there was not nearly enough to go around. In both stories, Jesus had the multitude sit on the ground as if to prepare for dinner, without first explaining what was going to happen. In both cases, Jesus gave thanks for the food, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the people. In both cases all the people ate and were filled. In both cases, there were a lot more leftovers than Jesus started with. In short, the similarities between the feeding miracles all serve to underline the main point of chapters seven and eight – that Jesus is truly the divine Son of God.

Ah, but what about the differences between the two stories? The amounts of food are different – starting with five or seven loaves and ending up with twelve or seven baskets of leftovers – but that seems to be a mere mathematical detail. It's really just as amazing for Jesus to feed five thousand families with five loaves as it is for Him to feed four thousand individuals with seven loaves. Again, both banquets make it clear that, in Jesus' divine power, He can clearly provide whatever is necessary, indeed much more than enough.

No, the primary difference between the two stories seems to be in Mark's description of the initial situation. The crowd of five thousand families that Jesus fed back in chapter six seems to have gathered spontaneously over the course of one hectic day. Many of them may very well have had breakfast before they started out on their journey. And in suggesting that Jesus send the people away to get something to eat, the disciples obviously considered it quite possible that they could all make their way back to their homes without too much difficulty.

In contrast, the situation in chapter 8 is much more dire. Yes the crowd was smaller, only 4000 individuals in comparison to 5000 families, but that's still a lot of folks. And in verse 2, Jesus points out that this crowd had been with Him for three days, and that they have gone without food for so long that many of them would not be able to make it home – some had come from a long distance, and in their weakened condition He thought many of them would pass out along the way.

And that draws another contrast between the two stories – who first noticed that the crowd needed something to eat? In chapter six it was the disciples who informed Jesus of the lateness of the hour and of what they considered to be the impossibility of providing for all those people. So, why didn't they tell Jesus the same thing in chapter eight? In fact, since they had already seen Jesus perform such a miracle, why didn't they suggest that He do the same thing on the first or the second day that the chapter eight crowd was with them?

We find the answer in one more of the similarities between the two miraculous banquets – the compassion of Christ – and illustrating that compassion thus seems to be a main reason for Mark including these stories in his gospel. In chapter 6 we recall that the disciples had just returned from a mission trip and were anxious to tell Jesus everything that they had done and taught. And so Jesus suggested that they come with Him to a deserted place where they could get some rest and discuss their adventures. But that's when the huge crowd showed up, preempting the disciples' quality time with Jesus. And why does chapter six say that Jesus spent so much time with all these people who had barged in, uninvited? Because He was moved with compassion for them. And in verse two of chapter eight, we see Jesus making the same point, this time in His own words: "I have compassion on the multitude."

But here is perhaps a more sobering point: Jesus' compassion is all the more striking when we compare it to the disciples' apparent lack of concern for the needy. After all, Jesus is the One Who is willing to get personally, physically involved with the needs of this deaf-mute. Jesus is the One Who not only notices the hunger of the crowd but Who does something about it. And what are the disciples doing? Chapter 8 verse 4 says that they don't have any confidence that anything can be done for the crowd, even though they themselves participated in an almost identical miracle only two chapters before.

So, what about us? Sure, we know the main points that Mark is trying to make in chapters 7 and 8. We know that Jesus is the divine Son of God, the promised Messiah, the Holy One of Israel. At the same time, we know that He is truly human, having a physical body in the same way that we do.

The Westminster Confession of Faith helpfully summarizes and explains this mysterious truth: "The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, is truly the eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father. In the fullness of time he took on himself the nature of man, with all the essential qualities and ordinary frailties of man – except that he was sinless.... The person Jesus is truly God and truly man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man."

Yes, we're good Presbyterians, and we believe all this. But what difference does it make for us? Think about it: we see Jesus' divine power so clearly demonstrated in these two stories, the power to heal the sick and the power to provide all our needs. But are we really trusting Him to do those things for us and for our loved ones? Or do we give ourselves over to the sort of despair the disciples manifested – thinking it impossible that any of our problems will be solved?

And then there's the reality of Jesus' compassion – we see Jesus' willingness to get physically involved in meeting the needs of others, perhaps to a shocking extent – He's the One Who touches the deaf man's ears and tongue, and He's the One Who breaks the bread for the hungry. How about us? Sure, we're generous with our funds, helping plant churches in other towns, and supporting missionaries in other countries. We're indirectly involved in lots of Kingdom work, but what are we ourselves doing

here, in this place, for the suffering people around us? How do we demonstrate our compassion for the lost, the lonely, the left out?

And if we're not really trusting Jesus to solve our most serious problems, and if we're not that interested in helping others with their needs, maybe the underlying problem is that we really haven't learned the lessons that Mark is trying to teach us after all. Maybe, deep down, we really don't believe in God's power or in God's love.

And maybe that's the ultimate reason Mark chooses to include such repetitions in his gospel, the same reason that teachers have to go over the same material so many times – because we didn't get it the first time, and it's really, really important.

So Christian, God has power to meet all your needs. God loves you with an everlasting, unconditional love, a love that gave up everything for you. God loves us enough to become flesh and enter into our world to touch us and to suffer for us and to die for us. That's the truth, and it's really, really important. Are we listening? Will we let that truth change our lives?