

## *The Truth About the Bread*

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Matthew 16:5-12

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### I.

Among my most precious possessions are three stoles that my grandmother, Evelyn Broadbent, created on her loom. This is one of them...

My grandfather, Charles, wore these stoles through much of his career as a minister. They were obviously made by someone, and for someone, who knew just how a stole should look and feel.

I think about my grandparents as we continue our journey through the season of Lent with the loom as a guiding symbol.

Religious practice is always, though perhaps especially so at Lent, a process of drawing together the loose strands of our tradition and weaving them into a coherent piece.

When we do this, we are trusting that those who've gone before were telling us the truth about how our practice should look and feel.

The question of telling the truth has become a fraught question as of late.

Alternative facts try to unseat consensus ones.

Media and politicians duke it out with each other over which set of facts to trust and promote.

The result is an all-out brawl to define reality itself.

Most people, most of the time, favor the version of truth they would *like* to be true rather than doing the hard work of facing the truth itself.

Number 9 of the 10 commandments concerns the practice of telling the truth.

Couched in courtroom language, it says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

That ancient language still strikes me as both radical and beautiful.

It suggests that truth always has a witness, that is, a human agent who is required to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

In other words, there is no truth from on high, as it were.

There is only truth mediated through a human witness.

Yes, even biblical truth must be translated and transcribed, read and interpreted.

Even scientific truth must be collected and collated, polished and published for general consumption.

And yet both biblical and scientific truth assert the need for a truthful witness, not a false witness.

In the words of James Earnest, truth is truth, lies are lies, the difference matters, and, in most cases, it is possible to know the difference.

If we don't know the difference, we should say so, and if we do know the difference we should tell the truth.

Usually, when we knowingly lie, it is for our own self-protection or self-gain.

And yet, the ninth commandment names the neighbor as our primary responsibility.

We should tell the truth because it honors God and our neighbor.

## II.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus finds himself at a critical time in his ministry.

Back in chapter 14, Jesus learns that John the Baptist has been executed.

Tensions are high as the people realize how dangerous it is to speak against the authorities.

Different groups have different opinions about steps to take to resist Roman occupation and Jewish collusion.

The Zealots seek to convince the population to produce a violent uprising.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, prefer to participate in prudent accommodation, bending local customs and temple practices so as not to offend the authorities.

The Pharisees, for their part, advocate an approach of safeguarding the uniqueness of Jewish identity while not drawing the attention of the occupying power.

It's worth noting that, even though he criticized them, Jesus' teaching most closely aligned with the Pharisees, and the tradition of the Pharisees was the tradition that survives to this day as Rabbinical Judaism.

In the highly-charged atmosphere following John's death, people are wondering whom to trust.

The Sadducees are likely telling them something like, "Rome is our friend. The Romans don't want to hurt us, they want to help us. If we could just become more Roman, we could all get along."

The Pharisees were probably saying something different, something to the effect of, "Let Rome be Rome. We've suffered under a lot of empires. Our best chance of survival is to cling to our cherished traditions and try not to rock the political boat."

Meanwhile, crowds are following Jesus, women, men, and children seeking his healing and teaching, feeling safe in his presence.

Threatened by the loss of their constituencies, the Sadducees and Pharisees find common cause in trying to trip Jesus up: "If you're so great, show us a sign from heaven."

Sound familiar? If not, go back and read last week's story about Jesus in the wilderness.

While Jesus is being harangued by the Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus' disciples are watching and wondering.

Which side is he on? Rebellion? Accommodation? Isolation?

They are so caught up in these questions that, one day, as they make their way by boat around the Sea of Galilee, when they come ashore, they realize they forgot to pack any food.

The text says it this way: "they had forgotten to bring any bread."

### III.

If you had been reading the Gospel of Matthew all the way through to this point, you would not miss the humor in the phrase, "they had forgotten to bring any bread." Back in chapter 14, Jesus leaves his hometown, probably Capernaum, and gets on a boat to have a bit of precious solitude.

But when people find out that he left, they follow him on foot along the shore.

Finally, he has compassion on them, lands the boat, and heals those who are sick.

When evening falls, the disciples freak out because the people are hungry and there is no food.

Actually, there is food, but only 5 loaves and 2 fish.

The disciples' solution is to send them all away to fend for themselves, but Jesus says, "Don't send them away. You give them something to eat."

"But we only have these 5 loaves and 2 fish," they say.

"Bring them here," Jesus says, and he takes the loaves and the fish and he blesses them and breaks the loaves and gives them to the disciples and says, "Go feed the people."

You know what happens next, right?

5000 men, as well as women and children are fed.

Not only is there enough food for everyone, there are leftovers: 12 baskets full.

We can wonder at the miracle of this story and try to come up with rational or magical explanations about how it could have happened, but these would miss the point.

The point is, as Walter Brueggemann puts it, that "Jesus is in the bread business."

Having left his hometown, his community of fellow Jews, he breaks and blesses the bread, trusts in God's abundance, and everyone has enough to eat with 12 baskets left over.

Of course, when we hear 12, we should hear 12 tribes of Israel.  
In other words, the truth about the bread is that there is enough of God's abundance for all of Israel.

But that's not the only story about Jesus and the business of bread.

In the very next chapter, chapter 15, Jesus and the disciples enter the region of Tyre and Sidon where he meets a Canaanite woman who challenges and expands Jesus' view of the extent of God's care.

Upon returning from this Gentile region, Jesus is back in Galilee and he sits down on a hillside and the crowds come again.

They are with him for 3 days and the food runs out.

Jesus tells his disciples that he is worried about the people going hungry.

"Where are we going to get enough bread for all these people out here in the middle of nowhere?" they respond.

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus says.

"Seven loaves and a few small fish," the disciples respond.

I love that word, small. It's as if the disciples are trying to downplay what they have so that Jesus won't think much of it.

They were wrong. Jesus makes the crowd sit down. He takes the loaves and the few small fish. He gives thanks and breaks the loaves and gives them to the disciples to give to the people.

And what happens?

Everyone is fed, 4000 men plus women and children, the text says.

Again, there are leftovers, 7 baskets full.

And when we hear the number 7, we should think of the seven days of creation.

In other words, the truth about the bread is that there is enough of God's abundance for all creation.

#### IV.

Perhaps you can see why, in chapter 16, Jesus can't believe it when he realizes the disciples "had forgotten to bring any bread."

It wasn't that they didn't bring *enough* bread; they didn't bring *any* bread.

To put it another way, they had forgotten that they were in the bread business.

Jesus says to them, picking up on the metaphor, "Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

He is trying to warn them about all of the voices arguing a version of truth that does not rely on God's abundance.

He is warning them about affiliating too closely with this faction or that party to the detriment of their trust in God who, alone, provides for every need.

Trying to avoid the real issue, the disciples say to each other, "He's just mad because we didn't bring any bread."

Jesus hears them grumbling and realizes they still don't get it.

Exasperated, he says, "You of little faith, why are you still talking about having no bread? Don't you get it? Don't you remember the five loaves for the 5000, and how many baskets were left over?"

Apparently stuck in a concrete operations level of thinking, one can imagine the disciples clamoring to answer: "Pick me. Pick me. 12 baskets."

Now imagine Jesus giving an enormous eye roll before asking, "Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?"

Again, the disciples, so proud of themselves for knowing the answer: "Seven. Seven baskets left over."

Now bursting their bubble, Jesus says, "How could I fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread?"

Pop!

Finally, he repeats, "Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!"

And then, one final line by Matthew, directly to his readers, treating us like the concrete operational thinkers we can be: "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."

Oh.

## V.

In the stress and tension following the death of John the Baptist, the Sadducees and Pharisees try to work the yeast of their competing worldviews into the crowd that follows Jesus.

They try to get people to decide between accommodation and isolation. The Zealots would have added the third option of armed resistance.

It sounds a bit like the options available in our wider culture today.

Either go along with the elected authorities, fight them tooth and nail, or grin and bear while hoping for the best.

But for those who have experience abundance in the breaking of the bread, another world is possible.

The truth about the bread is that it cannot be hoarded.

Hoarded bread gets moldy and creates jealousy.

The truth about the bread is that it cannot be managed.

Managed bread goes stale and does not satisfy.

The truth about the bread is that it cannot be used to serve partisan ends.

Partisan bread does not nourish and feeds resentment.

The truth about the bread is that, as my rabbi friend once said, it can only be shared if it is first broken, and it only multiplies when we bless and give thanks.

The truth about the bread is that it is always meant for people who are in want, who are poor and sick and outcast and powerless and bereft.

The truth about the bread is that it's not really about the bread, per se.

And it's also not really about us, not about *our* personal well-being, *our* spirituality, not even about *our* community.

The truth about the bread is that it's always about the neighbor and about abundance – let's call it "neighborly abundance."

To tell the truth about the bread is not to bear false witness against your neighbor, but to tell the truth about the numbers 12 and 7, abundance for us and abundance for them.

Do you still not understand?