**Faith Grows through Training**

April 21, 2013

Mark 6:45-56

Key Verse 6:52 “For they have not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.”

Have you experienced that no matter how much you try, you cannot make progress? It can be your homework, or raising disciples. It is very frustrating, and we complain and despair. That’s what happened to the disciples in today’s passage. No matter how much they tried to go, they could not go on the lake. But Jesus was watching them. Jesus is watching us also. Last week, we learned about Jesus who fed the 5,000 with just 5 loaves and 2 fish. Jesus displayed his compassion for the crowd. From his command to the disciples, “You give them something to eat,” we learned to have the sense of responsibility. The feeding of the 5,000 is the backdrop for today’s passage. This miracle had occurred mere hours before. We find that the disciples had not understood the significance of feeding of the 5,000 with the 5 loaves. They did not apply what they saw. They did not know how to put 2 and 2 together.

Look at verse 45. “Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd.” The feeding of the 5,000 happened in the late afternoon. Perhaps the disciples picked up the left over pieces as the sun was setting. By now it was evening, and Jesus immediately sent the disciples ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. Look at verse 46. “After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.” According to John’s gospel, people were excited about Jesus and wanted to make Jesus king by force. They wanted Jesus to solve all their problems instantly through his miracles. Jesus was sorry for their miracle-seeking mentality and their blindness to the kingdom of God. Jesus prayed that God may open their eyes to see the kingdom of God. Jesus also prayed for his disciples. Through the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus wanted them to be responsible and compassionate shepherds and to have faith in him to do the impossible. But they did not understand Jesus’ mind. Instead, they were just filled with excitement with the crowd.

Look at verses 47. “When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land.” In the evening, they had set out, and everything seemed to be going well. But then the wind turned against them. Strong 80 km/h gust winds were pushing against the boat and whipping the waves into frenzy. Only 2 chapters ago, in Mark 4:35-41, a storm came upon the unsuspecting disciples in the lake of Galilee. At that time, the storm came suddenly. But this storm did not come upon them suddenly. This storm did not threaten their lives. Rather it started with a gentle breeze and built and built in intensity over a period of 8 hours. Some storms spring on us suddenly, like a daughter's illness, or losing our job. But there are other storms that build with deceptive slowness. They do not appear life threatening, but they threaten to exhaust us, and to prevent us from going anywhere. This passage says that the disciples were straining at the oars. They were not going anywhere! Although they had gotten to the middle of the lake by evening (47), they struggled for at least the next 8 hours, without making any further progress.

We can imagine the struggling of the disciples. At first, when the wind picked up, they were not   
concerned. They thought they could see the lights of houses on the far shore. But by then disciples were getting tired. The less experienced rowers like Thomas, Mathew, and Philip complained that they needed a rest. The more experienced rowers, Peter, John, Andrew and James, began to accuse them of not pulling their weight. Frustration led to bickering. Soon they could not see the lights of the shore any more. For the next 8 hours, they struggled in vain against the waves. They were finally all exhausted. Every muscle ached. Every hand was blistered. And for all of their work they were still going nowhere.

During their difficulty, where was Jesus? Verse 46 tells us that Jesus was praying on a mountainside. The disciples felt all alone in their current troubles. They didn't think to ask Jesus for help, because they didn't think he could see them or hear them. They thought he was unaware of their trouble. But verse 48 says, “He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake.” The whole time that he was praying, he knew that they were struggling. Even though he allowed them to struggle on their own for 8 hours, he always had a plan to go out and rescue them, at the right time. The disciples thought that they were on their own. But we see that Jesus was in fact with them. He knew exactly what was happening; he saw them and was praying for them. But they were not praying. They were not crying out to Jesus or to God. They were trying on their own and they were failing.

Actually, the disciples in the boat are a picture of all people. When people try to accomplish something without the help of God, they may meet initial success, but they will ultimately reach their human limitation, where the situation is just too much for them. Man reaches a point where he just isn’t going anywhere. For many people, this occurs in money problems. They get a paycheck in the mail along with bills. The bills are for more than the paycheck. It seems that no matter how hard they work, they just can't break even, but keep slipping further and further into debt. For others, it is school studies. They finish 2 homework assignments, and have 3 new ones assigned. When people struggle to get ahead out of selfish ambition, their effort is meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Ec 6:9).

Some of us may feel like the disciples. We have begun to obey Jesus’ command practically. Jesus said, “You give them something to eat,” so we have begun to invite students to Bible study. However, we have met only rejections, a sea of rejections. Or we may have begun Bible study with someone, but that person does not seem to grow at all. Our Bible student is stuck, and so are we.

It seems that no matter how hard we work, we never make any forward motion. After struggling, we become tired. We complain to Jesus, “Where are you, Jesus?” Jesus seems to abandon us. Jesus seems far away. But Jesus is watching over us. The right response is to acknowledge our human weakness, and depend on God so that his power is made perfect in our weakness. We cannot do it. But we should not give up; because God will come to help in our weakness.

At 3:00 am, when the disciples’ last strength was ebbing and they were about to fall asleep at the oars, Jesus came to them walking across the water. How did the disciples react to Jesus walking on the water? Look at verses 49-50. “But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.’” They thought he was a ghost. Of course we can understand why. It was a dark night on the lake, with only a moonlight. The strong wind made eerie howling noises. The waves began to sound scary. A big fish jumped out on the lake with a splash, and the disciples jumped, “What was that!?” Then they saw something walking to them across the waves. No solid object can walk on water. Not the boogie man or the werewolf. So it must be a ghost. They remembered campfire stories when they were young about the sea ghosts of those who had died at sea, and who would wander at night bringing disaster with them. Their conclusion is understandable, but it is superstitious. It is not Biblical. It shows their lack of faith, and their fear.

First of all, biblically, such ghosts do not exist. Secondly, even if there was such a ghost, they should not be afraid of it. The Bible says that we should fear God only. Some people come from very superstitious cultures, but even if all of the imaginary monsters were real, we should not fear them. When we do not fear God, we fear everything else. We fear imaginary ghosts and we also fear real troubles. We have fear of losing our job. We have fear of having an accident. We have fear of getting sick. Fear makes us powerless. But when we fear God, we do not need to fear anything else. Jesus taught us not to fear even those who can kill us, but rather to fear God who controls our eternal soul.

Look at Jesus’ reply to the disciples. “Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take courage! It is I.   
Don’t be afraid.’” They didn’t recognize him because of the poor light, but also because of their fear. Jesus showed his concern for the disciples. “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid." They were encouraged. In our struggles we should also be encouraged by Jesus, who came to the disciples in their time of need. They had no reason to be afraid, when Jesus was with them. In the midst of our troubles, we too can take courage. Jesus is there to help, so we do not need to be afraid of anything. When we take courage, we can have faith in God to deliver us from evil.

Look at verses 51-52. “Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.”   
When Jesus got into the boat, the wind stopped, and they were able to reach the shore immediately.   
The disciples were amazed that Jesus had walked on water. They couldn’t believe that such a thing was possible. Mark interprets their amazement as unbelief. “They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.” What does it mean that “they had not understood”? It does not mean that they did not remember. The miracle with the 5 loaves and 2 fish had only happened 12 hours before! They remembered but they didn’t understand.

Understanding does not mean remembering, but applying. The disciples did not understand what the feeding of the 5,000 was supposed to teach, so they could not apply it, when a new situation came along. What should they have learned? Jesus who fed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish is the Son of God who can do anything. If he could feed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish, he can do anything, such as calm the sea or walk on water. Even though these are very different sorts of miracles, when they see one miracle, they should be able to apply it to the next situation. But they missed the point of Jesus’ miracle, because their hearts were hard. When one’s heart is hard, nothing penetrates the hard outer crust. One miracle or a hundred will not matter, because the heart is not open to accept. The Pharisees, who had seen Jesus do many miracles, demanded an additional sign--none of the others would do, because their hearts were hard, due to unbelief. To these people Jesus would give no sign except his resurrection. That one sign is sufficient, but if our hearts are hardened to it, then no number of signs will do. The Israelites are another example. After God performed 10 wonders to bring them out Egypt with a mighty hand, he even parted the Red Sea, allowing them to pass through as on dry ground, while the Egyptians were destroyed. None-the-less, only three days later, they complained again. When we study this, we criticize them, saying, “What is wrong with them, after all that they had seen?” The answer is that they hardened their hearts. Are we any better? No! Psalms 95:7,8 says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart like they did in the desert.” We soften our hearts through a conscious decision, and through spending time meditating on God’s word.

When God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, he could have fallen into fear. He might have been afraid of losing his only son. But he decided to sacrifice his son. How?

Through the years of God’s training, Abraham had learned to trust in God. He believed that in every situation, the Lord would provide. No problem was too big; no problem too small. If God gives his servant a task to do, no matter how impossible it may seem, when his servant does everything he can to obey, the Lord will provide. The Lord is the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. He is the Giver of life. In particular, when God gave him a son through Sarah whose womb was dead, he was convinced that God is the Almighty God. Abraham deduced that God would raise Isaac from the dead even if he cremated the boy when he offered him as a burnt offering. There is no limit in God’s power to raise the dead. Abraham’s faith in God’s power to raise the dead is amazing. Hebrews 11:17-19 says, “By faith, Abraham when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham reasoned God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”

In this passage we learned that Jesus trains his disciples in faith. Jesus wants us to apply what we learned to practical problems and overcome them, especially, when we are in the midst of struggles that we are going nowhere. Let’s call out to Jesus for help in this time of need, and learn to put 2 and 2 together.