

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Food for the Road: Cheese Puffs”

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Mark 8:11-21

November 9, 2025

We continue in this series “Food for the Road,” a look at particular section of the Gospel of Mark in which, for one reason or another, the subject of food features pretty prominently, even when folks aren’t necessarily eating together. So as we’ve seen, when they’re talking about food, it’s usually not really about food, but rather how we are being sustained, being nourished, physically sure, but more so spiritually. How are we being fed, with true food?

I’m grateful last week to Pastor Mark and Pastor Ben after we had to call a bit of an audible last minute, sharing about the discipleship and impact of stewardship.

This week we continue right after the second miraculous feeding, the feeding of the *four* thousand, not to be confused with the first one, the better-known feeding of the *five* thousand. So with those in mind, this example of true abundance when what we entrust, when we dedicate what we have not to ourselves but to Christ. Well now, Jesus steps into something of a teaching moment with his disciples.

Let’s go to God’s Word together. [Read passage, Mark 8:11-21.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we pray for your truth this day, that by your Spirit you would guide us away from that which we might think fills us but doesn’t nourish us, that you would turn us to hear your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Large cranes in a factory lift one-ton bags of corn meal into place. Now at this point, the corn meal has some latent moisture in it, but for what they have in mind for it, that’s not enough. They need to get moisture up to about 15% to 20% moisture into the corn meal, and the only way that happens is by applying an enormous amount of pressure to it, 300 pounds per square inch of pressure, just to press the water into the corn meal and then the moistened corn meal through something called an extruder.

Then, after the extruder, the watery corn meal is put through something called a die, which pretty much is a really fast slicer, which cuts the soggy corn meal into a compressed version of its final shape. But remember, it’s all very pressurized, so then after it’s sliced up into the right shape and then exposed to the regular atmosphere, that is, less pressure, poof! It puffs up into the shape we know and love. Could be the curly cheese puff, could be the cheese ball, could be the Cheeto, but that’s how that poof up.

Then it gets baked to a crisp and then tumbled in a 25-foot-long cylinder while getting sprayed with a cheesy mix of powder, flavoring, preservatives, and maybe just a little bit of cheese. Then on to packaging and shipping to the eager mouths ready to consume them.

Now I know what you’re thinking. “Wow, Jay was watching too much Food Network this week.”

But here’s the rumor. The cheese puff itself came about now by a deliberate act of creating an indelible snack, but rather by mistake. The rumor is that it was only while some folks were trying a new approach to making

cattle feed. And then someone said, “Hmm, I should try eating this myself, and then add some powdered cheese to it.” And the snack was born. So, the next time you find yourself considering that delicious snack, just remember, it’s probably just cow food.

But then another thing we might remember about the almighty cheese puff and how it’s made is just the lengths to which folks will go to make not much seem like more, artificially. Jesus, I believe, is warning about the same kind of thing.

After the miraculous feeding of the four thousand, Mark tells us about this encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees. They come to him asking for a sign from heaven to test him. Jesus shows some frustration but then gets back in the boat with the disciples and goes to the other side of the lake.

So there’s a bit of a pause in the chronology, which is worth remembering, because it’s not until they reach the other side that Jesus gets back onto the subject. You ever have a friend, partner, or loved one circle back to something unexpectedly, resuming a conversation midstream even after some time has passed by? You’re kind of caught unawares, right? As in, wait, what are we talking about? Oh, that thing? But that was, like, six seven hours ago. How are we back on that?

It can be a bit disorienting, so let’s give the disciples a bit of credit in the exchange that comes next, because they are confused, to say the least.

Once they get to the other side, it’s realized that they had forgotten to bring any bread, only having one loaf with them. So Jesus says, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.” And looking at each other bewildered, I imagine, because admittedly that’s a bit out of nowhere, they say to themselves, “It’s because we have no bread.”

Then Jesus kind of jumps on them, I think. “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember?” Well, I might have thought if I were there, Why are we talking about having no bread? Well because we don’t have any bread and you’re talking about yeast? What else would we be talking about? What are you talking about? The Pharisees? That was hours ago. Just what are we supposed to remember?

It’s fair to give the disciples a bit of credit for being confused, because what Jesus is getting at doesn’t compute, at least not by worldly standards.

So Jesus then clarifies. “When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” “Twelve,” they responded. “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” “Seven,” they said. “Do you not yet understand?”

I’m still kind of tempted to side with the disciples here. Just what are they supposed to so clearly understand?

But for Jesus, what he’s drawing attention to is the not one but two miraculous feedings of thousands of people, both of which followed a similar pattern. Lots of people. Only a laughable amount of food available. But once it’s entrusted in Jesus’ hands, there’s this miraculous abundance. The first time, had to have been amazing. The second time, also amazing, but maybe it shouldn’t have been so surprising for the disciples, so then again maybe Jesus is a bit justified in showing what seems to be some frustration. “You’ve seen what can happen when a little is entrusted in the hands of God. Why are your hearts hardened? Beware the yeast of the Pharisees.”

The yeast of the Pharisees. That might've been a phrase that caught your attention, wondering what that meant. Yeast is an image Jesus brings up on occasion. Sometimes it's a good thing. But most of the time it's a bad thing. So what point is Jesus making here? The yeast of the Pharisees.

We may have some bread bakers here among us. Why do you put yeast in bread dough? To make it rise. You mix the yeast into the dough, and you bake it, and the yeast causes the dough to rise into what we would consider a loaf of bread. What would happen if you didn't add yeast? Just flat piece of baked dough. Nothing wrong with yeast as a baking ingredient. Just part of the baking process.

But if you consider a flat piece of bread without yeast and a raised loaf of bread baked with yeast, let's say both baked otherwise with the same ingredients and amounts, which one looks like more food. The raised loaf, right? Why? Well because it's bigger. But is there actually any more nutritional substance in the raised loaf than the flat piece of bread? No. It just artificially looks like more. The added size is just air, smoke and mirrors, like a cheese puff. And what lengths we will go to to make something appear like more.

That's the warning Jesus is giving his disciples. Beware the artificially inflated food of the Pharisees, of those who demand miraculous signs or cling to process or legalism and confuse it for true faithfulness. How easy is it to take what can be good things and inflate them, add to them, until the point of them is lost, and the faithful substance of them is forgotten?

You can live a life that appears good, maybe even pious. You can do the things. You can say the prayers. You can go through the motions. You can do what you think is expected of you. Or taken another way, you can add and add and add to your life, in advancement, in achievement, in status, in possessions. It looks like more, but really it's just a lot of air, a lot of smoke and mirrors, isn't it?

You know how it actually becomes more? When you give it away. Jesus will begin emphasizing this point in his teaching: that counterintuitive, counter cultural, upside down way of considering life, a full life, an abundant life. As he'll teach them in just a little bit, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." How do you save your life? Give it away.

And that's why Jesus draws them back to those two miraculous feedings, asking them how many loaves they had at first, how many people were fed, and how much was left over. How did each of those instances begin? When what seemed like little was given over to the Lord. Where did true substance and abundance come from? By adding water to the soup? By running soggy corn meal through an extruder? By adding yeast to the dough? No. It's just air. It only artificially looks like more. How then? By putting it in the Lord's hands.

It's not just about money and possessions or self-accumulation. It's about all the talents and time that we have been entrusted with. How do they become more? How do they become truly impactful and abundant? By using them to build ourselves up? No. By giving of ourselves. Gaining our lives by losing them. This is the model, the example, the path of discipleship our Lord offers us.

It's not just about money and possessions, but yes it does concern money and possessions. Money and possessions are, as some may already be aware, the topic Jesus spent the most time talking about. Not salvation. Not the church. Not some theological controversy. Money. So if we think the gospel doesn't have a claim on how we earn and use and spend what we think is "our stuff," we're wrong. We're just wrong.

When I think of good examples to consider when thinking about money, I, as I'm sure many of you do, of course think of the rapper Pitbull. You may or may not be familiar with Pitbull. He's been all over the place the past couple of decades. I'm kind of joking. Let's not lift him up as the paragon of moral virtue.

But in an interview a few years ago, he cited, as he put it, a "successful friend." At one point in a conversation, someone else said, "Money can't buy you happiness." And he shared that his friend then replied, "Oh yes it can." And at that point, you think, oh well here's some materialistic, Gordon Gekko, greed defense coming. The friend said, "Oh yes it can," but then added, "You just have to give it away."

I wouldn't completely agree with that. I don't think there's a formula or a silver bullet to happiness like that. But the core of it resonates what Jesus is talking about. True abundance, true fulfilment, true happiness doesn't come by serving yourself, by advancing yourself, or by gathering unto yourself. That's not more. That's just air. That's cheese puffs. It comes when we entrust what we have first into the hands of the Lord, and in those hands, miraculous work can happen.

This being Stewardship Season and today being Commitment Sunday. I offer this note each year, and I offer it again. If I were sitting in your shoes and I heard someone in my position say something like what I just said, I would be thinking, "Say preacher, doesn't any money that goes to the church pay your salary?" Yes, it does. "So aren't you just trying to pad the church budget and your own take-home here?" And if that's where you are, I get it. Sadly there's a long line a folks in positions like mine who have exploited this sort of thing to get their private jets by selling anointed bath towels or something like that.

But if that's where you are, if you've been convicted by this word of generosity, of sacrifice, of giving away as the path to fulfilment and abundance, if that has resonated with you, and the only thing holding you back is skepticism about me and my motives, then I have this challenge, this invitation to offer you. First, let's talk. Because if you're skeptical about me or my motives, that warrants talking through further. Second, double what you give away in a given year, and then don't give it to this church. Give it to some other ministry, some other charity furthering the kingdom of God. And third, let's talk again in a year. Because I am so confident that you will note the fruit of discipleship, of fulfilment, of purpose, that whether you give to this church or not isn't so important.

Now, the importance of dedicating to one's particular congregation is a separate thing. It's about how we as a church join together for the shared work of ministry. It's not one more good cause alongside a list of other good causes, but that's a different topic.

For now, I invite you to imagine what you have, what you've been given. The theme we've attached to this year's Stewardship Season is "Full of Broken Pieces." And on one hand, that's drawn directly from this passage: Christ asking the disciples to remember all the abundance that came from the miraculous feedings. How many baskets full of broken pieces were left over?

But on the other, I wonder if it might also speak to how we might feel on the front end, at that moment of discerning whether or how or how much to dedicate to the Lord, when all we've got, it seems, are these broken pieces around us, within us. If we kept them to ourselves, that's all they would stay. But what amazing things, what substance, what abundance, what miraculous work could be possible if we take those broken pieces and entrust them to the Lord first?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.