

Sometimes the smallest details make all the difference. One little word or one little phrase changes how we understand everything else. And we see an example of that in our first verse of our Gospel reading for today, when we are told that "again a great crowd had gathered." That little word "again" changes everything here. It helps us to understand what it is that Mark is trying to tell us, because without it, we would miss the point.

So why, then, does Mark say "again a great crowd had gathered"? Because this is not the first time that Jesus has performed this miracle, Christians. Two chapters earlier, Jesus saw the five thousand in the wilderness, and he had compassion on them at that time. We're told in Mark chapter 6, verse 34, that "when Jesus went to shore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things." So Jesus in his compassion, then, has mercy on them, and he begins to teach them, to give them the bread of life in order to feed their souls. And after he finishes teaching them, he then has compassion on their bodies as well. Because taking up five loaves of bread and two fish, he multiplies them so that everyone has enough, that all of the people in that crowd, the five thousand men and the women and children besides, were able to eat and be satisfied. And there was so much food on that day that they gathered up twelve baskets of what was left over. It was a great miracle that Jesus had done in his compassion for these people! And the disciples saw all of this. They saw Jesus perform the miracle. They helped distribute the food to the crowd. They saw the power of God at work in giving food to all of these people in the wilderness. They knew exactly what Jesus had done. So who could possibly forget a miracle like that?

And yet here we are in Mark chapter 8, when "again a great crowd had gathered." Jesus sees a crowd of four thousand people in the wilderness, and he says to the disciples pretty much the same thing that he said before. In verse 2, he says: "I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat." You would think that this would be the easiest thing in the world to figure out. You would think that the disciples should have this down pat. That this is an easy test. This is a slam dunk. They should know exactly what it is that Jesus is about to do. They shouldn't have any problems with this! And yet they say in verse 4: "How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?" You can just imagine Jesus, sighing deeply, putting his hand into his face as he deals with these disciples, because they just don't get it. They saw all of this happen before, but they have completely forgotten what Jesus has done! And they are so focused on the problem that they can't imagine that there is any solution. And so Jesus has to do it all over again. He takes the seven loaves of bread and the few fish and he multiplies them for this crowd. And the disciples saw it happen. They saw him do the miracle. They helped distribute the food. They saw the power of God at work again, providing for these people in the wilderness. They knew what Jesus had done. So how could anyone possibly forget it now that Jesus has done it a second time?

And yet, just a little bit later in Mark chapter 8, we find the disciples on a boat. And they're in a bit of a pickle, because they have forgotten to bring food. They have one loaf of bread among all of them. One loaf to feed twelve disciples and Jesus and whoever else was with them besides. Not enough at all. And they are fretting and they are worrying about what they're going to do. But Jesus chooses this moment to teach them an important spiritual lesson, to warn them about a great spiritual danger. He says in verse 15: "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Beware of false teaching, Jesus says. Watch out for what people say.

Because if you aren't careful, they can lead you into death and kill your soul. We need to be on guard against false teaching. That's a lesson that we all should take to heart. But the disciples hear that word "leaven," and they think that Jesus is talking about bread, so they go right back to their fretting. Where are we going to get food? Where are we going to buy bread? How are we going to make it through? What are we going to do? What are we going to do? Over and over and over they fret and they fret and they fret. They are so concerned about their situation that they have missed the point entirely. And so Jesus says to them, beginning in verse 17: "'Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' They said to him, 'Twelve.' 'And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?' And they said to him, 'Seven.' And he said to them, 'Do you not yet understand?'"

Do you not yet understand? Do you not yet understand that God is able to provide for you? If he was able to feed five thousand in the wilderness, can he not also take care of you? If he was able to feed four thousand in a place that didn't have food at all, will he not also provide for you? Is God's arm shortened? Is he no longer able to do what he did before? Do you think that he doesn't care? That he no longer has compassion on you? So why, then, are you so concerned with the bread that perishes? Why are you so concerned with all of these things? Jesus says in Matthew 6: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all of these things will be added to you." Because God in his providence will provide for all of your needs, including your bodily needs!

Christians, how quickly we become like the disciples! How quickly we forget what God has done for us in the past! We might shake our heads at the disciples, wondering how anybody could forget so quickly. But then when we are faced with our last loaf, we quickly forget too. Maybe we're going through some financial troubles right now. Maybe money is tight. The bills keep piling up every day, and it seems like we have big expenses that we weren't looking for. And we're not really sure how we're going to make it through. We're not really sure how we're going to make ends meet. What are we supposed to do? But have we forgotten, Christians, all of those times in the past when we went through situations just like this one? Where money was tight, when we weren't sure how we were to make it work? And yet God brought us through. He brought us through so that we are still here. In his providence he provided for all of our needs, and we made it through that situation, even though we couldn't see how then. And if God could do it then, he can also do it now! So why should we worry?

Maybe we're in a tight spot, some difficult situation in our lives. Maybe there's a problem in the family, maybe we're dealing with health issues, whatever it may be. And we're really not quite sure how things could be worse. We're not really quite sure how we're going to get through this. It seems like no matter what we do it just gets worse and worse and worse. Where are we supposed to turn? What are we supposed to do? But have we forgotten, Christians, of all those times in the past when we faced situations no less difficult than this one? And we came through it. God brought us through. He provided for all of our needs. We're still here, after all. And if he did it then, he can also do it now! So why should we worry?

And think back two years ago, Christians, and the difficulties that we were going through then. We had that great drought. The grass was brown as far as the eye could see pretty early in the year. So many of you were selling cattle at that time in the hopes of saving the rest of them, and you were scrambling for hay, doing whatever you could to find some. And you also had crops which didn't produce hardly anything at all. The crop adjusters were quite busy that year! And I remember how we were all worried then, worried about what might happen. How are we going to get through this? Would we even be able to continue after a year like that? And yet here we are these two years later, and things have gotten better. We have a good year this year. Yeah, it might be a little bit dry, but the grass is still green this late in the year. That's certainly something! And we had a nice rain shower this morning. That's something too. God has given us all of these things. And he brought us through that difficult time two years ago. He provided for all of our needs so that we have kept going. And think of all those times in other years gone by, the ones you probably don't even remember all that well, when you were also wondering how things were going to work. God brought you through those too. He took care of you, because God does not fail to care for those who love him. He provides for all of your needs. So why should you worry?

And above all, Christians, God has given us the greatest blessing of all in Jesus Christ, his Son. In Jesus you have been forgiven. In Jesus you have been set free from all of your sins. In Jesus you have been made heirs of heaven. You have the greatest blessing of all in Jesus Christ! And knowing that, will we not be able to face even the hardest times? Knowing that, will we not be able to wait patiently through whatever may come? Because when we know that we have Jesus, we know that God will take care of us. If he gave us Jesus, he will give us everything else too. And even if we have to wait for it, God will open his hand to satisfy the desire of every living thing, especially the desires of his children who call on him in faith, because he is their loving Father!

So Christians, do not forget what God has done for you. When times are hard, think back to all the times that God has blessed you in years gone by. He brought you through those times then. He will bring you through this time now. Because you are his children through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Almighty Father, who in love has given us all things through your Son, help us to always turn toward you in the midst of all of our troubles, knowing that you will care for us in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.