

For the past year my wife, Julie, and I have thought a lot about what it looks like to do life together as empty nesters. What will be different? What new thing can we enjoy together, just the two of us, in this next season of our lives? Julie and I were ready for some different experiences together, and we thought, you know we have seen couples that poured so much into their kids that they forgot how to love and enjoy each other after they leave the house. So we began to investigate a hobby that the two of us could share in this season of our lives. We started looking, researching, and talking to people for about six months. We finally broke down and bought ourselves a small towable camping trailer. We did the walk through with our sales guy to learn how everything works, not that we could remember much at all. So back in March we took ownership and embarked on our first maiden voyage. We didn't want to go far, actually about 25 miles, but that was far enough for us. We store our trailer in a lot just south of San Jose, and our first adventure was to an RV park in San Juan Bautista. Julie loves Alfred Hitchcock movies, and that was where he filmed some of *Vertigo*, so it was perfect, close, and convenient.

I picked Julie up from her work, and we headed out. The storage lot helped us hook up our trailer, we waved bon voyage, and we carefully merged onto South 101 pulling this thing behind us 25 minutes down the freeway. We were excited about our new toy, but also anxious. We knew we didn't know anything about this first hand and we had little faith we could remember how to connect and disconnect everything. We had seen Robin Williams in *RV* way too many times. I just didn't want to break anything.

So we are going through the checklist in our minds about unhooking, turning on the propane, the heater, fridge, the black and grey water hoses and cooking dinner. We pulled into our RV park as it was just getting dark, hoping I would not have to back the thing up into a tight space, and as we crept along looking for our spot, a couple must have recognized our anxiety and said, "First timers? Well don't you worry, you came to the right place. First, join us for dinner in the clubhouse. Don't bring anything, just show up and you can meet the rest of our club."

"Your club? I asked.

"Yes, we are the Central Coastal California RV club, and you are at one of our monthly events. After dinner, I guarantee several club members will be over to see you and check out your trailer and help you with anything you need."

Julie and I, two newbies, hit the jackpot in the RV Park in San Juan Batista. There were RV lovers around us the entire weekend. We had a breakfast invitation, which we turned down because we knew we needed to try out our stove. Early Saturday morning, I was cooking bacon and forgot to open the exhaust vent, so my smoke alarm went off bright and early. They still loved us and invited us to dinner that evening. At the end of

the trip, they were by my side reassuring me as I pulled the lever to empty my black and grey tanks.

Julie and I love our new empty nester hobby. Our trailer has been a fun addition to our family and something for just the two of us.

I love what that first couple said to us when we drove into that park. "Are you new to this? Have a little faith! We will show you what to do. We will teach you. Some of us have been RV'rs for 30 years."

Great teachers help those with little faith. Great teachers help grow faith. I don't know where you are this morning when it comes to faith. I don't know the depth of your faith, the trials that have challenged your faith. I don't even know the object of your faith this morning, but what I do know is that all of us were created to walk by faith.

The New Testament book of Hebrews chapter 11:1 says this about faith, "*Faith is the confidence in what we hope for and the assurance about what we do not see.*"

There are a lot of things in the material and invisible world that happen, which I do not understand. But I do know that for us to relate to God, we need faith. Thank God he doesn't turn us away because we have little faith. He is there to teach us, feed us, and walk us through difficult times. Even when it seems the darkest, and we can't see him as clearly as we want, he sees us, and he is with us. He promises to guide us when we need help.

Our story this morning is found in Matthew 16:1-12. We will read about some Jewish teachers named Pharisees and Sadducees. We will hear from Jesus, the greatest teacher of all time, and we will hear from some disciples who I think we relate to best—disciples with little faith.

Jesus explains to those with little faith what to ask for when they need spiritual help

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. (Matthew 16:1)

Our story begins with two groups of people who are asking for a sign from heaven. Sounds innocent enough. But it isn't. These two groups have felt threatened by Jesus since the beginning of his ministry. Not only did they not like Jesus, they didn't like each other. The Pharisees were like rabid Giant fans and Sadducees were like rabid Dodger fans. When are you able to get Dodger fans and Giant fans in the same room? When they have a common enemy to cheer against such as the NY Yankees. Hostility like necessity can make for strange bedfellows.

In Matthew, it says the two came together for the first time. And they came together to test Jesus. The word "test" is the same word used back in chapter four to describe Jesus' temptation in the desert. They had come to tempt Jesus in the same way as Satan tempted Jesus in the

desert. They are saying to Jesus, "If you are who you say you are and you say you come from God then act like God. Do something to show us you are from God."

After what we have read so far in Matthew, we know this was a disingenuous request. These guys had heard the reports and likely seen some of the miraculous signs Jesus had performed throughout the region. In the prior chapters, we can count up to 18 reports of miracles, involving literally thousands of people. The evidence was already there. The signs were clear for all to see. No generation has seen so many signs.

In chapter eight Jesus healed a leper, with a word he healed a Roman soldier's servant. He healed Jesus' mother-in-law. He cast out demons, calmed the wind and waves, and cast out a legion of demons from two men. In chapter nine he healed a paralyzed man and forgave his sins. Then he healed a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years, and he raised a little girl from the dead, and then gave sight back to two blind men. He cast out a demon from a mute man who then began speaking. In chapter 14 he fed 5,000 men plus women and children with five loaves of bread and two fish. He walked on water. He made it possible for Peter to walk on water. Healed many people who were lame and blind, and fed another 4,000 men plus their families with a few loaves and fish.

These Pharisees and Sadducees were not interested in truth. They were not interested in faith. Their hearts were hard and closed. With just a little openness in their hearts, a little bit of faith, God could have worked in their hearts. But it wasn't going to happen.

Here was their plot. If Jesus didn't give them another sign from heaven, they would claim Jesus was a fraud. But if Jesus did give them a sign, they would once again accuse him of being empowered by Satan instead of God and to be someone the crowds should fear.

So Jesus, knowing their faithless hearts, would not show off his superpowers and give them another sign from heaven. Instead, he answered them. "You want to talk about signs, let's talk about signs."

He replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.'

You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. (verses 2–3)

Jesus is telling them that they could interpret the day's weather because they could see the sign in the sky, but they couldn't interpret the times. They knew if it was going to storm or not, but they couldn't tell the fullness of time was upon them, that the King of the Kingdom of heaven was here. Like so many of those we know and love, who give serious thought to the weather, serious thought about the business climate, or the latest playoff game, but don't give a serious thought about the greatest sign of heaven—the real God in the flesh. They don't recognize Jesus, his words, his work, his death, and resurrection. God has revealed his heart to us. He longs to see people able to read the "signs of the times" and recognize the corrupt leaders and false teachers, who are bent on leading people away from God, away from repentance, and away from trusting in God to save them. Instead of looking at accepting Jesus, they look for another sign.

A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. (verse 4a)

Who was Jonah? He was a prophet who hundreds of years before preached a message of repentance in a wicked city named Nineveh. And Jonah became famous because the entire city repented of their sins and believed in the God of Israel. To us, he is more known for this incredible miracle where he was thrown overboard from a ship in a storm and was swallowed by a big fish. After three days in the belly of the fish, Jonah was spit out on the shore and lived to tell about it. Jesus and Jonah had the same message of repentance. Since these Jewish leaders accepted the sign of Jonah through his preaching, why would they not accept Jesus and his message? If they wouldn't believe the love and truth of Jesus and the 18 plus signs of Jesus that had already been reported, there was no way they would ever believe even in his resurrection after being dead and buried for three days in a tomb. The next thing that happened is disturbing.

Jesus then left them and went away. (verse 4b)

Knowing what we know about Jesus and his extravagant love, this had to be so hard for him. The original Greek indicates finality. He was done. He was out of there. He would never turn back. You wanted a sign? Jonah was a sign. I am the sign Jonah pointed to. Later it was recorded he stood on the Mt. of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem and wept over the city for its unbelief.

Today, Jesus remains the sign, which strengthens those with little faith. For those of us in need of spiritual help this morning here is a great ask to make to Jesus.

Jesus, Help Us to See Your Signs

Jesus help us see you. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:22–24 ring true today. Paul preached Jesus was the sign. *"Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."*

The empty cross of Christ is the greatest sign. As Jesus explained to us with little faith in Matthew 12:40, *"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

We have a treasure trove of signs from Scripture, and he still shows himself to us today. The power of God is made available to us because of the work of Jesus Christ. The presence and power of God indwells each of us in the person of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks to us, urging us to think the right thoughts, say the right things, and take the right actions at all the right times. God gives us his signs through others who have faith in Christ who know us, have love for us, and speak into our lives. And he gives us signs today through the Word. Sometimes he speaks, and it's like a small gentle voice, whereas, other times when he speaks, and it's like a 2x4 to the head.

How do we know that a sign is from the Lord? We live in the shadow of all kinds of signs pointing every direction—signs that are flashy, signs that are seductive. And so many signs we come across every day, which beckon us to follow the teachings of modern day Pharisees and Sadducees.

Consider the signs we see in front of us every day. These are not signs from God. I see political signs, which promise fulfillment is found if we get the right people in our government. I see Hollywood signs, which promise fulfillment in entertainment, art, and beauty. I see corporate signs up and down this peninsula, which promise fulfillment through advances in technology and science. I see signs from prestigious universities, which promise fulfillment by gaining wisdom and knowledge. When you go about your day tomorrow, and you see all these signs, remember these signs promise way more than they can possibly deliver.

Then remember the sign from God: The sign of the empty cross. Jesus died for your sins, offers you forgiveness, a new life, and rose again on the third day. Don't forget it's the gospel that saves you. Salvation is in Christ alone, by grace alone, and through faith alone. Don't believe for a second the gospel is not sufficient to give you the life you have always wanted. All other signs we ask for pale in comparison to Jesus who was, is, and always will be the sign of true hope to the world.

So Jesus and his disciples head across the lake. What was Jesus thinking? When we consider his great love for his lost sheep, he had to be discouraged at what just happened with those religious leaders. The Sign of God, the great teacher, had to be hurting when he thought about the Jewish leaders and the judgment, which was coming upon them. So now he was with his disciples. How would he use what just happened as a teaching moment for them? What would this teaching moment look like for those with little faith who needed spiritual help?

What were the disciples actually thinking about? It wasn't about what had just happened.

When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (verses 5-6)

The disciples were thinking about dinner. They had seen all these signs, and they had tasted the Lord and seen that the Lord is good, and the next moment they are wondering about hot rolls. "Hey Jesus! We forgot the bread. Are you listening we forgot the bread!" Now listen to Jesus response.

Jesus gives them a strong warning. "Watch out, Open your eyes! These guides are blind. They can't see. They live in darkness. They will lead you into darkness if you follow them. Guard against their false teaching. Those false signs that lead you to the life you never wanted."

Jesus uses the word "yeast" which is an appropriate metaphor for something that spreads. And Jesus knows their hearts. The threat of this evil yeast of false teaching spreading to them and fermenting in them was real and closer than they would have thought.

This warning from Jesus rings true to us as well. A big and appropriate ask for those of us with little faith is this: *Jesus, help us resist the false teaching in our day.*

Have you ever noticed when you read the New Testament how much attention is given to false teachers and false teaching? The New Testament makes clear that there is truth and there is also error. Truth matters. Our opinions? Not so much. False teaching has consequences. In the 20th century, an evil young soldier in the German army decided to detail his anti-Semitic views in a book titled, *Mein Kampf*, or My Struggle. This

racist was named, and his views led him to power and to ignite WWII. How many have suffered and died because a group of people believed this false teaching?

In my college experience, I was required to read Fredrick Nietzsche. I remember sitting under a professor who referred to him as a brilliant and insightful philosopher. Nietzsche taught that there is no objective truth, no moral standards, no order or structure in the world, all values are baseless, and God is dead. How many students suffered then and still suffer today from the consequences of false teaching? They were not taught by good teachers to read everything critically or comparatively to the teachings of Jesus and the Christian worldview.

How many young and old suffer today because they don't believe they are created in the image of God? They don't know their precious identity, acceptance, and purpose is found in a relationship with God, which comes because of his great love for us, and his powerful work to redeem us from meaninglessness and despair.

What was the false teaching of the Pharisees Jesus warns us about? The Pharisees were highly religious. They went beyond the scripture and held up their own man-made religious rules and rituals as the way to be accepted by God. They placed unbearable religious burdens on people. Jesus tells us to watch out for false teachers today who heap on more requirements above and beyond the gospel of Jesus Christ, which says, "Salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone through faith alone." Beware of anything that adds new requirements to the already perfect gospel of Jesus Christ.

So what was the false teaching of the Sadducees Jesus warns us about? They were the opposite of the Pharisees. They didn't believe in a resurrection of the dead. They were secular. They were modern. All truth was relative, not absolute. They embraced all the world could offer. They were the elites who loved the status they had in Roman society. They embraced whatever teaching the world was selling. So where the Pharisees added to the gospel, the Sadducees actually subtracted from the scripture. Jesus told his disciples to beware of their false teaching. Beware of those who don't teach the grace of God.

So how are the disciples comprehending this teaching moment so far? Not so good.

They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread."

Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? (verses 7-8)

To paraphrase, Jesus is saying, "I know you forgot the bread, you knuckleheads! I don't care if you forgot the bread. What I care about is that you forgot me. You forgot the sign I performed with a little bread and a few fish two times in the past two months.

I'm so grateful the Bible is full of people with little faith. Someone put it this way. The Bible is a museum of false starts and failed discipleship. I take comfort in that.

This past week Julie and I watched a documentary on Walt Disney. It was interesting to see all his false starts and failures in his long and successful career. One part of the show explained how Mickey Mouse came into existence. It was so interesting to see Walt first designed a

rabbit with long floppy ears. It was basically an ugly Mickey. And that idea ended up a failure. Next Walt designed Mickey Rat. That was even less lovable than Mickey Rabbit. Both ideas were false starts. Both ended up in the trash. Finally, Walt created Mickey Mouse who he called his alter ego.

Over and over again, the Gospels record the "false starts" and spiritual failures of the disciples. Thankfully, they also record Christ's willingness to encourage and challenge his flawed disciples. I don't know how you feel about this, but this encourages me. There are days when I reflect and think: "I did this... I said that.... And I consider myself a Christian?"

Our security is in Christ who continues to love us even when we stumble and fail.

To each of us here today with little faith, God doesn't throw us out because of our lack of faith. We may think of ourselves as an ugly rat, but he sees us as a work in progress. He is the artist. We are his artwork. And he is committed to design us into something with big and beautiful faith, which is attractive to others. His attention to detail, to his design, is to make us something, which reflects his glory and character, to be God's alter ego in a sense. Jesus continues,

Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?

But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (verses 9–12)

It's alarming to think how easy it is to forget the needs of the here and now what God has done in our lives and throughout history. It is so important for those of us with little faith, who need spiritual help, to give the big ask of Jesus: *Jesus, help us remember God's truth and his goodness to provide.*

Every one of us, especially when life is hard, needs to know and value the history of God's redemption story. To have the life we always wanted, we can't just live in the "now." The capacity for our faith to grow is unlimited when we remember God's goodness to provide. When we read

his redemption story, we remember what God did back then for his people and his faithfulness to all generations.

And every one of us, especially when life is hard, need to value the future that awaits us when God's plan is fulfilled. Our capacity for our faith to grow is unlimited when we look forward to what God will do in his future plan. Our faith grows when we long for the coming of God's future kingdom in its fullness.

As the prophet Habakkuk said in 2:4, *"the righteous shall live by faith."*

Carolyn Gillette told the story of a hospice chaplain named Larry, and how he became friends with an 80-year-old lady named Mary. Mary was a hospice patient. Larry visited with her many times, and was greatly impressed by her faith. One day, he got a call that Mary had taken a turn for the worse. And that if he wanted to see her alive, he'd better go that day.

Larry went to visit his friend, and found her in a very deep sleep. Larry didn't wake her up, because he knew Mary had been in a lot of pain. But just as he turned to go, she opened her eyes wide and stared right at him. Mary looked intently and then said to him, "Oh, for a minute, I thought you were Jesus."

They laughed about it for a moment and had a good visit together. Just two hours later Mary did see Jesus face to face.

Mary's comment, "Oh, for a minute, I thought you were Jesus." really hit a note with Carolyn. She later wrote: "I believe we all ought to be mistaken for Jesus, every once in a while."

For all of us with little faith this morning, be encouraged. God has given us good stuff to ask for that will grow our faith. And this is for a purpose. God has given us a mission: To grow a big and beautiful faith in each of us. This is so we may honor God when someone looks at us, sees our faith, and thinks, "Oh, for a minute I thought you were Jesus."

God has given us a mission. If we are living it out then maybe someone will look at your life, see your faith, and say, "Oh, for a minute I thought you were Jesus."