Understanding Jesus in Mark Chapter Six

Mark 6:30–52

Flannelgraph Stories

Well, good morning. We're glad you're with us today. You ought to be well rested. In fact, the problem is that now you get up at four o'clock in the morning rather than your regular time. But that's okay. You'll get used to it.

We are in Mark chapter 6 today, and I wanted to start by asking you a question. These are stories you are extremely familiar with. Almost everybody I know has gone through some of them as a kid in Bible class. Jesus is going to feed the 5,000, a very common story we're all aware of, and then he's going to walk on the water, another story we're well aware of.

So how many people grew up with flannelgraph in Bible class? Oh, see, I got the right class. I go upstairs and do that, and somebody says, "What's a flannelgraph?" It makes me feel bad when that happens.

We all grew up with flannelgraph, and if you've done anything with it, you know you tell a story with it. You put up what you want to teach, and so you teach it. Here's the question I want to ask you this morning: if you took those two stories, how would you tell them on a flannelgraph? What would you include?

For the feeding, you told me the fish and the bread, the boy, and the baskets of food. For Jesus walking on the water, you'd put up water and waves, and the boat. It's interesting, because we all fill this out in our minds the way we have heard it told. Now, are there things you would omit as you told them? Probably. We wouldn't talk about how high the waves were, and that they're lapping and Jesus is getting all wet, all that kind of thing. We might leave that out.

We are going to look at these stories today from a different perspective, because Mark has a particular reason for putting them there.

Look at Mark, Not a Harmony

Let me give you a pet peeve of mine. Sometimes when we study a gospel, everybody wants to drag into it details from another gospel, and we turn a gospel study into a harmony of the gospels, and it quits being that gospel. So if you're talking about Mark, look at Mark. Don't try to blend it with Matthew. Don't try to blend it with Luke. Even if John does some of the

same things, don’t try to blend it with that. Today we’re going to concentrate on what’s there and how it works.

Do We Really Understand?

There’s a basic misunderstanding I want to start with, and it’s this: when we see something, we think we understand it. Or do we? That’s a problem, isn’t it? Every preacher I know has gone through it. You give a sermon, and somebody comes up afterward and says, “That’s how I’ve always thought about it.” No, you haven’t. You never thought about that, but now all of a sudden you see it, so you say, “Oh yeah, I’ve always understood that.” No, you haven’t.

This is kind of like watching a magician. You see the magician do things and you go, “Man, isn’t that great?” But you don’t understand how he did the trick. You just saw what he did. And because of that, Jesus is asking a simple question: “Do you understand this?”

There are two things that happen in life with expectations. First, we expect to see what we want to see, whether we believe that or not. How life works is what we see, and that is what we consider normal. That is how we sort out what is true and what isn’t.

But then there’s the other part: how does Jesus fit into that? That’s part of the Jewish issue with Jesus. They expect to see a conqueror on a white horse. They have been preconditioned for that, so their grid, their filter, which they run everything through, has to do with that. When Jesus doesn’t match it, when he doesn’t wash his hands the right way, when he doesn’t fast the way everybody else does, when he associates with people you don’t think he should, you begin to say, “I don’t think that’s him.” But Jesus is going to smash all the expectations of life, because what you expect to happen is not going to happen when Jesus is around. That’s what we’re going to look at today.

A Retreat Interrupted (Mark 6:30–34)

Peopled Out

We’ll start with the background. There’s a retreat that takes place. Verse 30, which is where we stopped last week, says the disciples came back from what we call the limited commission, when they went out and preached the kingdom of God. They came back and they wanted to tell Jesus everything they knew. They were excited, but the other part was they were tired. When

you're tired, something begins to take place. So Jesus says, "Come away by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

If you need a translation of that, it means the disciples were peopled out. It's kind of like the cannibal who finally got fed up with people. Now, my seven-year-old grandson would laugh at that if he understood cannibals. I'd have to explain cannibals first.

They hadn't even had a chance to eat. That's the hazard of ministry, by the way. There's always a deadline you can't get to, and there's always something to do. I have gone through my lifetime being called out before we were going to have Christmas dinner. That's tough. You want to say, "Can your loved one not die later?" But no, it's that way.

So they went away in a boat to a solitary place by themselves. Everything in this lesson revolves around the travels around the Sea of Galilee, the destinations and so on, and this retreat takes place in the middle of that.

Then there's an interruption. When they were leaving by boat, all these people saw where they were headed, so they ran around the lake to see if they could meet him. How'd you like that? You go to a solitary place, and 5,000 folks show up. Think about what that meant for these people. They had a desire to get there that others did not have. If you ask me to run very far, I'm not going to do it. But they ran on foot around the lake to get there ahead of them.

Now how do you think Jesus felt when he got out of that boat and saw all those people who weren't supposed to be there? Wouldn't you be irritated? "Hey, folks, give us some time here." And yet Jesus has a different reaction. When he sees them, he has compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Sheep Without a Shepherd

Sheep are strange animals. They have no sense of context. They don't know where they're going. They don't know where they've come from. All they know is there's a blade of grass in front of my nose, and I'm going to eat it. I don't care if there's a wolf over here or a bear over there; I've got to eat this piece of grass. They need someone to take care of them, push them in the right direction, and give them the care they need. Jesus said, "This is what these people are like." They are shepherdless. They're looking for something and they can't find it.

There are a lot of people in the world today who are looking for something and can't find it. There was an old country western song, "Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places." There are a lot of people looking for love in all the

wrong places. They're looking for life in all the wrong places, for that matter. They're looking for something, and Jesus needs to deal with them.

Compassion

What it says is that he had compassion on them. That's an interesting word. I don't dare try to pronounce the Greek because it's really tough to say. It starts with S-P-H, and I'm clear three rows back trying to pronounce that word. But what it means is that you're feeling with your inner parts, your gut. While that may sound strange to you, it's really not. It's the butterflies-in-your-stomach feeling.

When you deal with people, there are two ways to do it. One is to deal with them remotely, as a case. The other is to get into their world and deal with them there. I don't know whether you have felt this before. I know I have. I have had plenty of moments where I have been at the home of someone who has lost a husband, a wife, or a child, when the body is still there.

The one I really remember is a man who could not stand me at church. He had a little girl, eight months old, who died in the hospital. I got a call at 2:30 in the morning: "Can you go down there now?" Do you go down and talk to the person who can't stand you? Now there's a crisis of faith. I got dressed and went, and the mother was sitting there rocking this dead child back and forth, back and forth, and all I could do was pull up a chair and sit. But I know what I felt inside. It was a terrible feeling that I wish I could have just run away from. What I understood was that whatever I was feeling inside, she was feeling inside too. I was feeling what she felt. That's called compassion. In fact, the Latin word we get "compassion" from means "with feeling."

Until you can feel the same things people feel, you cannot really touch their inner needs. You'll always deal with them as a case study to be looked at, but not to be helped. Jesus enters their world and says, "I understand." We say that too: "I understand." No, you don't. Yeah, you do. And that's different when we get to it.

He Began to Teach Them

It says Jesus began teaching them many things. That word "began" is significant. It means this was the start of an experience they were going to have from now on with Jesus. What we're looking at the rest of this lesson, and next week, and the week after, is the continuation of the teaching of Jesus to shepherdless sheep. That includes the ones closest to him, because it needs to happen all the time. Sheep don't get a lesson that way. You don't say, "Let's give you 30 minutes and see if you get it." We won't get it. It takes longer than that to teach a lesson, as Jesus is going to point out today.

The Hungry Crowd (Mark 6:35–44)

How Do You Feed a Hungry Crowd?

The biggest issue he's going to ask them about first is this: how do you handle a hungry crowd? What would you do? You do know the word "hangry," don't you? Our grandkids get hangry. My daughter got that way. It took me forty years to understand our grandchildren, because about five o'clock in the afternoon she would just get bearish. I would come home, and she was a baby, and Vickie would say, "Here, she's yours." She's crying, and I'm walking the floor, holding this baby and doing everything I can. Finally it took us a long time to realize she was hungry, and she was angry because she was hungry. My wife would say, "She just ate." I don't care. Feed the kid. Now that's easier for me to say than for her. But that's the way people are.

So how do you feed a hungry crowd? The answer is, you feed them. Someone said to order pizza. I don't think Domino's travels back in time, especially with their "we'll get there in thirty minutes or less." So this is the big question.

The disciples are paying attention. The sun is setting, and they know what's about to happen. These people have run around a lake. They've expended all kinds of energy. They've spent all day long listening to Jesus, and they haven't had anything to eat. So the disciples go, "Oops, we've got trouble," and they tell Jesus, "Send them away so they can get something to eat." That's the logical response to this situation. That's what I would say. These people are here, they need something to eat, and there are villages close enough. Let them go get it.

The problem is, Jesus turns around and says, "You give them something to eat." How would you feel if he said that to you? "Are you kidding? With what?" I can just imagine their faces. Really? You want us to feed this group? What's interesting is that the accountant of the group has already put together a spreadsheet to show how much money it would take to buy this much food to feed these people. The bottom line is, we'd have to work for six months to pay for this.

"We Don't Have It"

They're also saying, "I don't have it." And that's the first thing that happens: they say what they don't have. That's the first human response in life, what we don't have. I'm going to tell you that's a positive thing. When we finally admit what we are incapable of doing, it's the first step in figuring out how to deal with the rest of it. There are too many people with an arrogant

pattern of life that says, “I know everything.” Really? Show me. But if you say, “We don’t have it,” if you feel like you’re empty and you don’t have the capability, that’s a good first step.

The second part is the answer Jesus gives: “What do you have?” What do you think he had in mind? This is a moment to teach them. This is a test of some things going on here. He never specifies what is part of what they have. He just says, “What do you have?” That’s a key question, and I’m not going to answer it right now, because it has everything to do with this whole passage. What do you have?

We Learn from the Process

Understand something: people do not learn best or most from what you tell them. I am under no illusion that you’re getting anything out of this class right now. That’s not how we learn. We learn from what you put them through.

I have a seven-year-old grandson who is a math whiz. I’ll take him to Target, and he’ll say, “Will you buy me this $69.95 Lego set?” I didn’t know how much it cost, so I asked, “How much is it?” He’ll say, “Well, it’s $69.95, but with tax it’s going to be…” and he calculates the tax in his head and he’s within a nickel of it. I’m going, “I don’t know what to do with you.” He likes me to buy things to the point that he knows he can use my phone and say, “Look at this,” and my face will unlock it and buy stuff. So I have to be careful what I look at now. It’s terrible.

But he goes to school, he’s in a math class, and in math you know what they say: “Show me your work.” He doesn’t want to show his work, because he didn’t do any work. He can just tell you the answer. He says, “Why should I bother with that class? I know the answers, and all they want to know is what I’ve written down. I’m not going to write that down if I already know the answer.” He doesn’t understand that going through the process is what he learns from. I can’t explain that to him. Nobody can. He’s too hard-headed. Maybe he’ll learn one day.

One year in high school I was in a trig class. I am not mathematically inclined, but at that point in my life I was going to be an engineer, which meant I had to have math. I didn’t like trig, because it was hard and you had to do all these calculations, and the only thing I had to do them with was a slide rule. You remember slide rules? Whoa, are you old! You try to find out what it says, and you have to be close enough to figure it out. Well, the guy who sat next to me had a father who worked at TI, and they were developing a new piece of equipment, a handheld scientific calculator. His dad brought a prototype home and said, “Why don’t you take this to

school?" He got the right answer right away. But I want to tell you something: I didn't learn a lot of trig, but I learned more than he did, because he got the right answer without the process.

Jesus has to put them through the process to get them to what they need to understand. He puts us through a process so we'll get to where we need to be. We can't understand it if we don't go through the problem.

Five Loaves and Two Fish

So he says, "How many loaves do you have?" They go out and survey the landscape, and they come back and say, "We've got five loaves and two fish." Let me explain that. It doesn't mean they went out and got the big loaf of Mrs. Baird's bread. A loaf was about the size of your fist. We call it a roll today. They had five dinner rolls. The fish were probably about six inches or so, like sardines, dried and salted. So they come back with that.

I want to point out to you that Mark never tells us about a boy. Your flannelgraph had one, but Mark doesn't say anything about a boy. He doesn't say where they got the food. All of a sudden they just come up with five dinner rolls and two sardines. Isn't that great? And you're going to feed what? I guarantee you're not going to feed me on that.

There's also something left out of their answer. We'll come back to that.

Take, Give Thanks, Break, Give

Jesus sat the people down in groups of hundreds and fifties. If you go back to the book of Exodus, this is how Moses dealt with the people. He organized them in groups of hundreds and fifties to keep it orderly. There's a hint back here about what Jesus is doing: he's going back to a manna situation.

Then he takes the fish and the loaves, and Mark gives you the process. You're going to meet it again when we get to the Last Supper. Look what he does. He took it, then he gave thanks for it, then he broke it, and then he gave it. Those same four steps took place in the Lord's Supper. He's reminding them of something that will come back to haunt them later when they finally get it.

So they distribute to this 5,000 and all of this. What lessons should the disciples get from that? One is that Jesus doesn't have the problem of the question, "What do you have?" He can do it. Another is that he's doing what God has always done. He's a man of God. It's kind of like Elijah, who feeds the widow of Zarephath, who had enough oil and enough meal for her next meal. I like that story because it would put every supermarket out of

business today if we did that. You just need enough for today. Don't buy a week's worth of groceries.

But there it is. The question, though, is what should they learn from this? And did they learn it? That's a pregnant question, this last one. Did they learn that? Because the test is going to come. Not our test, their test.

The Test on the Sea (Mark 6:45–52)

Get in the Boat

This is the lesson's next part. They come down to the test. What did you learn? That's what a test is for. It says that immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. He didn't give them an option. Can you imagine standing there watching this unfold, and Jesus says, "Get in that boat now"? They don't have time to think about it. They don't have time to talk about it. They don't have time to ask questions. "Well, can't we talk about that?" No, you can't. Get in the boat. There's no delay. There's no option. Why? Because he needs the moment to do this.

They're going to Bethsaida. If you look at the map, Bethsaida is right there, and they were probably over here by Magdala, so they're going to cross the Sea of Galilee toward its northernmost point. They knew where they were going.

A Night at Sea Without Jesus

But something happens. A headwind comes, and they are not making any kind of time against it. I want you to pay attention to the timeline here. They get in the boat as the sun is going down, and it says that shortly before dawn he comes to them. This whole time is a night at sea without Jesus there. What it does say is that he's praying. But it also says he saw the disciples. He's watching them. He's watching what their reactions are going to be, what they're going to think about, and how they're going to handle this. Understand, Jesus is always watching what we're going to do and how we're going to react. Does our faith rise to the occasion or not? He's always watching for that. And it says he was about to pass them by.

When you find yourself in trouble from circumstances not of your own choosing, how do you respond? They didn't choose this. They didn't want to take that trip. They didn't want to get in that boat. Jesus made them get in that boat, and they found themselves there. One of you shared how, when a crisis hit, your training got you through it. That's kind of what happens to us sometimes. Other times we don't know what to do. I don't know that the

disciples knew what to do. They had tried everything they knew to do, and it was not working.

If you go backward in Mark a few weeks, we talked about Jesus calming the sea. As long as Jesus is in the boat, it's a different situation. What happens when Jesus isn't in the boat? How do you deal with life now?

"It Is I"

They're expecting to see something, and he's not there. In fact, they did not expect to see Jesus come. They thought it was a ghost, a phantom, and they shrieked. It says they were terrified when they saw him. Remember, our expectations are that Jesus is either going to be in that boat or on the shore. He's not going to be walking on the water. So he's smashing up their expectations.

He says, "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." That phrase is important to this whole lesson. "It is I" is simply two words in Greek, but if you took it back into Hebrew, it would be the name of God: I AM. Take courage, I AM. Do not be afraid.

He gets in the boat, and the wind dies down, and they were completely amazed. That word "amazed" has another meaning besides wide-eyed. It can mean insane. They were out of their minds. It did not make any sense at all. They had no explanation for this: him walking on the water in the middle of the night, getting into a boat that's being swamped, and everything calming down. What are they going to do with this?

Hearts Were Hardened

That brings us to the verdict. How did they deal with the test? It says, "For they did not understand about the loaves; their hearts were hardened." Those are the same words used of the Pharisees, who couldn't understand who Jesus really was. These disciples can't either. Their hearts were hardened. They didn't understand about the loaves.

The loaves happened before. The question is, what did they not understand about the loaves? That's an interesting problem. Why did they not get this out of the experience on the hillside with those 5,000 people? The problem with the disciples, and with us, is not a lack of information. It's the difficulty of our response.

What Do You Have? We Have You.

Here's the problem. When Jesus asks them about the loaves, he says, "What do you have?" and they give him a grocery list. There's something left out of

the equation. There's something left off that list. Here's what they could have said: "We have you." They never thought about saying, "We have you." They were looking at life from their own perspective, and Jesus is trying to teach them that no matter where they go, they will have him. It cannot keep coming out this way.

It's one of the struggles of life. When I feel like I'm all alone, I'm never alone. When life is hurting you, you're never alone. You have him. The hardest lesson in the world to learn is that you're not in this by yourself. That's the difficulty of response. You can have plenty of information, but the hard part is responding to what you already know but haven't yet accepted. That's a problem.

The crowd had no shepherd. The disciples had the shepherd, but they didn't recognize him. They were like sheep without a shepherd too, except they had the shepherd. They just didn't rely on him much. He's still trying to teach them. He began teaching. What's he beginning to teach? He's trying to teach them, "Who am I in your life, in everything that you do?"

God Has a Track Record

Because of that, it's important to remember one thing we tend to forget: the next hard thing is not a new problem to God. He's seen it before. He's done it before. Whatever we think is impossible, he doesn't. Why? He's seen that. He's done that. One of the reasons faith means something in life is that God has a track record with us.

In Link Groups, we're studying Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 is based on a certain premise, and the premise is that the reason you have faith in God is that God has always been faithful to you. God has always come through, no matter what. When the times were needed, that's what happened, and because of that, you can rely on him, because you now have the experience that he has always been there for you. If you don't have that, you don't have faith, because faith is not blind. It is based upon the evidence of life and reality. God has always been there.

So when he teaches these disciples, and he does all of these things, he's telling the story: the next time you face this, what are you going to do? If I had to ask you a second time, "What do you have?" how would your answer be different? That's a critical issue for our lives. Until you come to grips with the fact that no matter what we don't have, we always have one thing, the power of the Son of God behind us, we won't know that someone else is in control.