

Things change and ebb and flow if you've lived here for any amount of time. They've often said that the Bay Area, in particular, has a very specific mold into which it wants to shape people, some of that good and some bad. There is a particular mold in which just living in this place will give shape to who you are and who you are becoming. Because the reality of human life, which we often don't think of, is that Christian formation is not just a Christian thing.

We think of it as a Christian thing alone, but to be human is to change. It's to be dynamic. It's to be in the process of becoming someone or something. That's what it means to be human. As one pastor up in Portland, John Mark Comer, says, "Spiritual formation is not a Christian thing. It's a human thing." Now there's a Christian version of it, which we talk a lot about at CPC because if we believe that all of our formation, if this is true about what it means to be human, is to change and to ebb and flow, then we have to be intentional about it.

Change is happening at an identity level. It's happening in how we shape our purpose and our meaning in life. It happens at every level and dimension of who we are. It happens through the ways in which we live. It happens through the stories that we take in and start to believe. All of this is shaping us beneath the surface.

The example I often use is that this is why you're more like your parents than you want to admit. Because you've lived with them, absorbing everything about them. It's why my girls' mannerisms slowly take the shape of my own because we're constantly learning. Spiritual formation is not a Christian thing. It's a human thing, which means every human who's ever lived has undergone a sort of spiritual formation. The question becomes, are we intentional about it?

The church traditions in which I grew up, passed onto me an understanding of spiritual formation as if I was just a blank whiteboard ready to be formed, or a blank canvas or just this lump of human that nothing had happened to. And then we come in, and we begin to be shaped by it. The problem is that doesn't take into consideration that by whatever moment I come to know Jesus, I have already been shaped by so much. And so Christian spiritual formation is, at its core, counter-formation. It has to counter everything which I've absorbed over the many, many years and decades of my life.

We aren't just a blank whiteboard or blank canvas. Rather, we are the culmination of our life experiences and social situations and all of those things which have brought us to this particular moment.

Now, here is why the invitation of Jesus is so compelling. Because if we have an understanding of formation in which we are simply a blank whiteboard, a blank canvas, then when Jesus comes along and all of a sudden, he's instructing us and teaching us how to live and helping

shape us in a form, it feels very burdensome because we're already doing so much. But if we understand that formation is a human thing, not a Christian thing, then we recognize that the struggles and the aches which we carry with us are somehow connected to who we have become.

Then when Jesus comes along and offers a different way, it actually provides hope for change. That is saying Jesus is not so much burdening us with more; he's trying to liberate us from the ways we've been malformed. And he's saying to let him (Jesus) come along, and all those things that bring the pain and the hurt, those things have to be unlearned, dug out of us, which are buried deep within us, more than most of us realize. Because it's the way in which we just operate. For us, it's normal. It's just life. But Jesus says, "No, my kingdom is backward. It flows in reverse." I'd actually flip it and say the way of the world is backward; it flows in reverse. Jesus is coming to rather flip it right side up.

What we're going to see in this text is Jesus confronting the Pharisees, confronting the disciples around this very idea that you have had your minds and your hearts and your soul transformed in such a way that is counter to the kingdom of God. Jesus issues a warning and a very harsh rebuke of the disciples because he's concerned about the ways in which this empire or religious establishment has formed itself within the disciples at a level of which they're not aware. It's what we would call maybe a shadow side.

I want us, as we go into this text, to think there's a reason it's called a shadow side or a blind spot. It's because you can't see it. The disciples couldn't see the ways in which they had been malformed. So we come to this text generally thinking, "Well, how stupid of the disciples." But let's be a little more gracious to them. My guess is as I look at their life and their commitment to the Lord, it's far superior than mine, and yet they had gaps. So maybe we should come humbly to the text saying, what would Jesus have for us in this if the disciples were given a rebuke because they were too much like the Pharisees? Maybe there's a bit of my own heart that has also shaped and formed beneath the surface in that shadow side.

In Mark 8, we're picking up right after the story of Jesus feeding the 4,000 that Mark Mitchell preached on last week. Remember, the verse numbers and the headings in the Bible are all added later. It's one fluid story, and we're in this really dense section of Mark, in which he's framing this particular feeding with the story back at the end of chapter 7.

It's about Jesus healing a deaf person; those who have ears, let them hear, he would say later. And the story that immediately follows the text in this section is about Jesus healing a blind man. Do you have eyes

but do not see? Mark is beautifully crafting this section that points to chapter 8:34, which we'll get to in a few weeks, where we come to the pinnacle of Jesus' teaching about what it means to follow him. He says if you want to follow him, you have to take up your cross. We'll talk a lot about that in a few weeks. It's going to be good, but it's a challenging text, so I'm already digging into it now. But let's pick up in chapter 8:11.

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. Mark 8:11-13

They asked him for a sign from heaven, and he sighed deeply, which just read eye roll there. I'm pretty sure that's what Jesus is doing. So the Pharisees come, and they begin to test and question Jesus. Now they're coming to him testing and questioning. Those are all healthy postures. I would even suggest that a posture of doubt is a good thing. It allows us to pursue truth, seek out answers, draw closer to God, and closer to the way of Jesus. But there's a way in which you can do that built on cynicism, which is much different than a genuine pursuit of truth.

What we find here is they're not really as interested in the pursuit of truth. They're here to argue about their frustration. Remember, Jesus just fed 4,000 gentiles, and as Mark unpacked last week, that would've been mind-blowing for them. They would've had no concept. That was not the way in which Jews were to operate in the world.

This is a sort of inclusive message of the gospel that would've been an affront to the Pharisees. And so they're becoming irritated, and they come questioning Jesus and testing him, and they're demanding a sign. Now think about it, Jesus just fed 4,000 people with a few pieces of bread and fish. He has healed the blind. He's healed the deaf. He's cast out demons. He's calmed storms. Mark's portrayal of Jesus is one which we would consider him giving sign after sign after sign that are all rooted in Old Testament prophecy about the one who is to come will be doing these kinds of things.

The Pharisees are not coming to pursue truth. I think the reason Jesus rolls his eyes and sighs deeply is he's like, do you have eyes to see and ears to hear? Have you not seen what's been happening? But notice that the Pharisees ask for a specific type of sign. It says they asked him for a sign from heaven. That's an important note that Mark is putting here because what they're asking is not a sort of act of power in which they could say, "Wow, that was different." They're asking for divine validation of who Jesus is. They're saying, "We get what you're claiming to be, but we want God to break the heavens open and tell us. We want that kind of sign. We want that sort of validation."

The request of the Pharisees constitutes a threat. They're essentially looking at Jesus and saying that they know about this Messiah who's to come, but this Messiah who is to come would not deal with those gentiles. There's no chance. There's no way in which he'd go there and work with those people. There's no one way the Messiah would come from an illegitimate marriage out of a virgin birth. That's not what would

happen. You can't be the Messiah. They're coming with a sort of combative spirit. They're saying that unless they get a divine sign, they're done with him.

And notice this is quite the confrontation. Jesus responds with just as much force. *He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a sign?"* Now that phrase, this generation is linking to the story of the Old Testament. It's drying in those images in which the Israelites were liberated from Egypt, and they're wandering around the desert and whining and complaining, and he's saying that they sound a whole lot like them.

"Why is this generation..." It evokes the prophetic warnings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, which they were constantly critiquing that this generation continually fails to live up to the calling of God. He says, "Why does this generation ask for a sign? I'm not going to give you any sign."

Then in verse 13, he left them. Now this phrase he left them is a bit stronger than we pick it up on. It's the idea that he was done with them. When he is done entertaining their accusations and combative spirit, it says he left them. He said that they wouldn't get a sign, and then he just left.

So he and the disciples hop in this boat. What I want you to notice is as Jesus climbs into this boat with the disciples, I imagine he's replaying what just took place. And there's another little clue in here about how tense this situation was. It is the word used when it says that they tested him. It's different than questions. The only other time prior to this in Mark that the verb is used is when Satan is tempting Jesus in the wilderness. Mark is aligning the very temptation that Satan did in the wilderness with this particular moment.

Now, remember, Mark's story of the temptation in the wilderness is quite brief. But what we know from the other gospels is that one of those temptations was to do a sort of spectacle, throw yourself off, and then you can save yourself. He brings Jesus on the top and says, what if I gave you power over everything you saw? When the Pharisees come saying that they want a sign from heaven, they're tempting Jesus to be a different Messiah. They're saying, why don't you take up the posture of power and coercion? They're saying that they are the establishment that has prestige and power, and they begin to be threatened by Jesus.

They say, "Why don't you take up the way we're doing things?" The Pharisees would've loved an endorsement by Jesus. They would've loved to sanctify their vision the way in which they had been formed deep beneath the surface with hopes of resurrection, the hope of new creation. They would've loved for that to be endorsed and stamped good by this upstart rabbi, this Jesus. They would've loved that.

They're getting irritated. "Jesus, why don't you give us a sign? Why don't you do that?" And Jesus is so fed up with it because he sees that sort of fervor, that zeal in them for a different kingdom than the one that Jesus was bringing. And he says, "I'm done with you." The Pharisees are tempting him just as Satan did to become a power-oriented messiah. One that wins followers with impressive displays of power and defeat. But listen to the way that one commentator Tim Gombis says, "Jesus is

a cross-directed, cross-oriented Messiah who initiates a cross-shaped kingdom. And this is precisely what Satan is trying to prevent.”

Remember the two feedings that frame this whole section that are culminating in this place, and there’s that moment in which Jesus takes the bread, and he looks up to heaven, and he blesses it, and then he breaks it. It’s this moment in which Jesus is feeding the crowds, but even more so, it’s pointing to that Eucharist moment in which Jesus lays down his life. And that’s the very act in which the kingdom of God operates.

So when the Pharisees are saying, “Why don’t you give us a sign from heaven? Why don’t you do this incredible display of power?” Jesus says, “My kingdom doesn’t work that way. It works through Eucharist. It works through blessing and breaking. It works through loving our enemies and breaking for them.”

He says that this is how this kingdom works. And if I were to take up that, it would be something entirely different. Now, church, do you have eyes to see and ears to hear? What are the ways in which we have remade Jesus to fit our understanding of how the world works? So let’s have a little grace for the Pharisees; we’re far more like them than we desire.

We seek out means of power and prestige because we think that’s how the kingdom of God must operate. That’s the exact same impulse that the Pharisees had. But the kingdom of God operates in a cruciform way. I’m stealing that word from a scholar named Michael Gorman. It means it’s a cross-shaped oriented form. That means in any way in which we operate, claiming the name of God, claiming the kingdom of God that is counter to the very shape of the cross, is something outside the way of Jesus. This is why in a little bit at Mark 8:34, Jesus is going to say, *“If you want to follow me, take up your cross.”*

When Jesus says that, it’s before he was crucified. Before he was crucified, he told the disciples to take up this Roman instrument in which they crucified those who were against the way of the Romans. He says to take that up. That is how we are to operate. That’s how the kingdom of God functions. A blessing and a breaking type of kingdom that the two feedings have demonstrated is for Jew and gentile. It is this radical kingdom built on radically different ethics, this sort of cruciform ethic. For most of us, as we live and operate in this world, this message is so counter to everything we’ve been absorbing since birth.

We absorb ways to live in this world that isn’t about blessing and breaking. They’re quite the opposite. It’s an ethic of self-preservation and self-motivation, of coming up and over others, of having power and influence, and that is then how God must be moving. Those things have been shaped in us since birth, just like they were for the Pharisees and just like they were for the disciples. They’ve been filling our imaginations so that our default setting is to act in that particular way.

This is why the role of discipleship is saying that there are corners of your soul and your heart that you’re unaware of, and Jesus has to do the work of rooting those out of us. So many of us reconstruct Jesus to fit our particular needs, but Jesus will not be a puppet to anyone’s show. Jesus will not be a sort of mascot for a political party, for an agenda,

for anything other than the very kingdom of God, in which he’s not a puppet; he’s the very cornerstone. He says, “This is how it operates; you won’t get a sign.” And he leaves and hops in the boat. He’s replaying this story in his mind.

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. “Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.” They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.” vv. 14–16

Come on, guys. Miracle bread, seven extra loaves, just snag a few on the way out. I love this passage. They get in there and recognize they lost the bread. They have one loaf. And scholars aren’t quite sure what that means. Some would say that in John, Jesus talks about being the bread of life. Maybe that’s what it’s symbolic of, Jesus being there. But that would be a pretty symbolic reading of Mark, who is a little more straightforward and direct. Others think maybe it was just Mark’s way of saying that the disciples were incapable, but Jesus will use that.

I think that seems to make sense, but as they get in there, in verse 15, Jesus uses these two very strong words. He says, “Be careful. Watch out.” They’re active words. They’re words that are causing us to be provoked, to think through what they’re about to say. And Jesus says, “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.”

Now, what’s interesting is Herod, and the Pharisees would’ve had nothing in common. They’re actually quite opposed to one another. They were on vastly different political spectrums. They had different visions of the future. They had different ways of operating, but the one thing in which they did agree on was that they wanted to kill Jesus.

They were conspiring together to get rid of this guy because Jesus was threatening both of them. And so Jesus has to be careful, watch out for whatever it is that is animating the Pharisees and Herod. What he’s getting at is exactly what we just saw with the Pharisees. Because the question is if Jesus is this clear about the warning for the disciples, I hope all of us are asking what is the yeast of Herod and the Pharisees?

Before we get to that, remember that yeast or a better translation would be leaven is a practice in the first century where a small part of a batch of dough would be set aside, and it would be allowed to sit there and ferment. As it fermented, you’d slowly fold it back into the dough. And so that fermented dough would work its way through the entire loaf impacting the whole thing. It’s about a small thing that works its way through the whole thing. And Jesus says to watch out because there’s something in them that’s subtle, that’s small, that it might be your blind side, your shadow side. Something that works its way in that you don’t realize is there, but slowly over time, it metastasizes throughout you, and it begins to consume everything about you.

What the yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod is it’s about that temptation that the Pharisees just demonstrated by asking for a sign. It’s about what Jesus will teach on in Mark 8 about the way of the cross. It’s a way in which you operate in the world counter to this eucharistic kingdom. It’s what the Pharisees were doing. It’s what Herod was doing. And he

says, be careful because these two groups that are diametrically opposed are now connected in this sense of wanting to kill Jesus. They're built on a different kingdom or ethic.

Let me break down the difference between the kingdom of God in really broad strokes and the kingdom of the Pharisees and Herod. The kingdom of God is a cruciform kingdom. It's cruciform. It's built on cruciform service and cruciform sacrifice. It's built on the idea that it's cross-shaped. That says it's actually better to give than to receive. It's where the first are last, and the last are first. He says that in the Eucharist, when I give my life, somehow God uses that. Jesus used a metaphor about a small thing becoming a big thing as well. He said, the kingdom of God is that seed thrown out there and lands on different soils, and every once in a while, it hits, and Jesus uses that, and it grows into this mighty tree. The cruciform kingdom doesn't make any sense to our world. The kingdom in which from death comes life makes no sense.

It's not how you get ahead in the world; it's a cutthroat world. It's look out for number one. It's breaking down the other, so I can then arrive. It's where we battle in this battle of wills, this power struggle that we have to conquer and overcome. And if we just arrive and get the right person in office and get this person of influence and get this person here, then the kingdom of God will take off.

And Jesus is like, "No, I'm not going to give you a sign you don't need." The kingdom of God functions in a way that will make no sense to our imaginations and the logic that has been built into us from birth about the kingdom of the world. The kingdom of Herod and the Pharisees is built on self-preservation, self-protection, and self-advancing. They're interested in their agenda, pushing forward their thoughts, pushing forward their movements. It wasn't built on this cruciform ethic. It was built on a self-ethic. And Jesus says to be careful. Watch out. That can get into you.

It slowly works because it can often be built on good intentions. The Pharisees, at some level, had good intentions. They wanted to purify the people of Israel so that the resurrection would come; that was the hope, so that the Messiah would come. They believed if they just coerced and forced everyone into it, then God would move. They were built on a good intention of God moving.

Of course, it's worth it. Look at what God's doing. But it was built on something entirely different. Jesus says, be careful. Watch out. Look what that same commentator, Tim Gombis, says. "The yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod is the self-orientation that seeks advancement, leadership that goes the way of self-promotion, and self-absorption that mistreats and exploits others" (Tim Gombis).

This yeast of the Pharisees of Herod, it's all this sort of self-centeredness, which gets into your bones. It gets into the corners of your soul you didn't know existed. It gets within us in a way from which we operate, and we wonder where did that come from? Well, it's been formed in you. You are not a blank slate. All formation is counter-formation. Discipleship is counter-discipleship.

To live in the Bay Area is to be disciplined into a particular way of life. It's to understand the way humans operate and live and should exist in the world. And Jesus says there's a different way. This is buried within you, and that little, small bit of the part of your shadow side that you don't realize exists well, that can slowly, over time, overtake you.

He says, be careful. Watch out. I'm reminded of 1 Corinthians, when Paul says, "*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (1 Cor. 1:18). I mean this idea of the kingdom of God is so counter, it is so radically different than the way we understand how to live and operate in the world. It's foolishness to others. To think to sacrifice to give rather than receive. To not try to be first but to be last. That sort of cruciform kingdom doesn't make sense. It didn't make sense to the Pharisees. It didn't make sense to Herod.

It didn't make sense to the disciples. In a little bit, Jesus is going to say; I have to go to Jerusalem and be killed. And Peter, with all this sort of nationalistic zeal, is going to rise up and say, no way. He rebukes Jesus because he says to him that's not the way the kingdom operates. It operates by influence and power. He tells Jesus, that's not what this is about. Jesus says, "*Get behind me, Satan.*"

Jesus tells him that it is a counter formation. That you've been consumed by the Pharisees and Herod, watch out. Be careful of the yeast of the Pharisees. Church, does Jesus always fit nicely into your life? I've been wrestling with this a lot as I've been working my way through the scriptures again. I'm in Exodus now, and I'm thinking through the lens of the fact that I've read the Bible so many times; it's so easy for me to just take it in without allowing it to actually confront me, without allowing it to question my assumptions, to question the presuppositions I make about the way the world works. Church, if Jesus nicely fits within your life perfectly, every single time an issue or something comes up, it's just not what we see in the story of Jesus.

I wonder if, at that moment, I wonder if, in myself, I've refashioned Jesus to fit the way I have been formed by the world around me. That's the default setting, to capture Jesus and make him a sort of mascot for everything I believe about the world, rather than coming to Jesus and allowing Jesus to then question my own assumptions about the world. My own thinking, my own ways of living and being, and thinking through how I exist in this world.

Then the disciples discuss it amongst themselves. They wonder why he is talking about this yeast. And I love it. "It's because we have no bread." What the disciples do here is they fail to dig deep. I wonder if they knew what he was talking about, but if they just weren't ready to give it up. He couldn't be talking about more than that. They were so formed beneath the surface of who they were by the world around them that they weren't ready for the radical nature of the kingdom of God. Well, the problem comes again.

"Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see and ears but fail to

hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?" vv. 17-21

Jesus comes strongly against that, aware of their discussion. Now, I'd like to imagine this scene as the disciples say 12. Jesus is bringing them back to the basics again. Like, don't you just remember what I did? He says, do you remember when the crowd was there, and I blessed, and I broke, and I did this eucharistic act in which I've been laying my life down? He says that was enough. That was more than enough. There were 12 basketfuls there. Then Jesus recalls the scene that they were literally floating away from.

Do you still not understand church? Do you still not get it? That one loaf that's sitting in the boat is enough. When it functions from a place of Eucharist of blessing and breaking for others, it's enough. It'll work. It's a small seed. It's ordinary. It's mundane. It seems like you would never think of it, and yet this act, well, it brings about the very kingdom of God. He says it's enough. Do you still not have ears to hear? Do you still not have eyes too? Church, it's enough. Here's the challenge. I was reminded of a tweet by Pastor Rich Vilodas out in New York.

If Jesus spent eight hours a day, every day, for three years with his disciples, he would have spent over 8,000 hours with them. And after all that time, they still had major gaps! One hour a week on Sunday will never change people. We need a life that abides in him, with the support of others.

Church, as a pastor, I want to tell you this will not be enough to counter form you against the ways of the world. What we do here on Sunday morning is a crucial part, I believe. But it is one step of a life that abides in Jesus. The disciples spent three years and probably more than eight hours a day with Jesus, learning, watching, and soaking in with a mind that had already been saturated in the scriptures, and they came to these moments in which the kingdom of God just seemed to not make sense to them.

Church, I'm telling you, it doesn't make sense to me. It doesn't make sense to us. We need a life that abides in Jesus because that yeast of the Pharisees and of Herod, it's small, the yeast of what it means to live in this country, in this place, in this time with this culture and all of these things that shape and form you. They don't always happen in insidious ways. We have to get that out of our minds. There's not like a back alley in which they're plotting and thinking, how can we get them? It happens in the subtle ways in which a world is just built on something other than the way of Jesus. And it slowly, over time, shapes us, and you will need more than an hour a week to counter it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

It's hard. It's challenging. It's one of the reasons that tomorrow I'll hop on a Zoom call with my therapist over and over, week after week, because I know there are areas of my heart that I can't see that need to be reshaped for Jesus. It's the reason I live in community, and I find people around me who can speak into my life because I get the yeast of the Pharisees. This stage, what I get to do every single week, is such a gift, but I'm not naive about its power to distort my own ego for power and influence. It's something I'm terrified of, to be quite honest. But I live in community. I live under authority. I live within a church community that can hopefully help counterbalance that. And that's just one small area of yeast in my soul that I know I need to heed.

Be careful. Watch out. That idea is built on something different. You know, it's one of the major reasons that we shaped the Vision in which we're in now as we have. The four practices over the next four to five years we're taking on are built on the very idea that we are being shaped in a particular image, and we need to counter form that. So we're in the middle. We're about six months into a yearlong stretch of practicing attentiveness, and we're practicing that.

The way it's written here is in contrast to a life of distraction by organizing our daily lives around the presence of God. We're doing this not because these are good things to do but because we believe we have to counter that noise and hurry. They are not just keeping us frazzled; they're shaping us at a soul level in the way we view the world around us. And so we practice something like silence and solitude—the habit that hopefully you're still forming and shaping in your life. I was working on that this morning. I work on it every day because I believe that I have to disconnect from the world around me at some point because that's forming me. And so I stop in the presence of God, and I pray with the Lord. I listen to the Lord as a sort of stake in the ground that says I have to do something to counter from the way the world is trying to shape me.

The invitation for us this week is to re-up on our commitment to something like silence and solitude. Not for the sake of doing, but because you're recognizing the formative way this place will shape you and you just need to connect with Jesus. Can you do that in contrast to a world of noise and of hurry? That's the invitation for all of us. Is that we need the continual renewing of our mind into a counter way of the world, into the way of Jesus. Because it's forming, it's shaping; it's fashioning you into a particular way. And Jesus says, "Be careful." And then he says, "Do you have eyes to see? Do you have ears to hear?"

I want to end with the very haunting question of Jesus that Mark intentionally ends this section with. Do you not understand? Church, do you not understand the invitation of Jesus? It's an invitation to life. He says, "Do you not understand? Be careful. Watch out."

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