Introduction:

Every decade produces its share of movies that become classics and in the 1990’s one of those destined-to-be-a-classic-film was the movie Forrest Gump starring Tom Hanks. It’s the story of a simple man by the name of Forrest Gump who isn’t exactly the sharpest crayon in the box, if you take my meaning. He has a low I.Q. but a trusting heart that’s pure but at the same time very naïve. Throughout the film he accidentally meets and experiences some of the most important people and events in America from the 1950’s through the 1970’s, such as Elvis Presley, John F. Kennedy, the Civil Rights movement, and the war in Vietnam, to name just a few.

Part of the charm of the movie is how Forrest Gump is clueless as to the significance of the events and people he comes in contact with. He doesn’t grasp how often he is a witness to milestones in American history. Usually he’s far more concerned with the love of his life, a troubled young lady named Jenny, than he is with the tumultuous events and historical people around him.

While being clueless is part of the charm of Forrest Gump, being clueless in real life is a little less appealing. In our passage this morning, Jesus has two different groups of people who are essentially clueless as to who Jesus is and what he’s been saying and doing. They have the most important historical figure ever to walk the face of the earth in their very presence and yet they’re missing it. While they should be connecting the dots together, they’re on the slow side of figuring it out and so Jesus provides some clues for the clueless to help them. We’re going to consider two clues Jesus gives to these clueless people as we consider what Matthew has for us today at the beginning of the sixteenth chapter of his gospel. So if you haven’t already, please open your Bibles to Matthew 16. If you don’t have a Bible with you, please follow along in one of the pew Bibles in front of you. Our passage we’ll be studying begins on pg. 821. We’ll start by considering the first clue that Jesus provides, which is our first point...

1. Clue #1: The sign of Jonah

Please follow along as I read v. 1-4. “And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’ So he left them and departed.”

Sometimes being clueless comes because you aren’t all that smart and other times it’s because, ironically, you’re too smart for your own good. That’s the case with the first group of clueless people Jesus deals with here. The Pharisees and the Sadducees
represent two different factions of Jewish religious leaders during Jesus’ day. The Pharisees would be what you’d consider religious conservatives. They took obedience to the Law and righteous living very seriously. The Sadducees on the other hand were more like religious liberals: they denied doctrines like the resurrection and only regarded the first five books of the OT as Scripture. As you can imagine usually these two groups were at odds with one another but a common enemy can often bring opposing sides together. One need only remember how after the 9/11 attacks we put aside our differences as Republicans and Democrats and were united together as Americans, against terrorists. So it is here with the Pharisees and Sadducees: they have come together against Jesus.

Matthew tells us their purpose: they came to Jesus in order “to test him.” This wasn’t a benign interest in Jesus; they came to trip him up, to show that he was a fraud, to discredit him in the eyes of the people. They asked him to “show them a sign from heaven.” They want Jesus to show them some great, miraculous sign that would validate his ministry in their eyes. Maybe call the stars to fall from the sky or command a host of angels to appear before them or perform a spectacular miracle that would prove to them beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the Messiah.

The irony of this is those who have been reading Matthew’s gospel up to this point know that Jesus has done more than his fair share of miracles already. The evidence they’re asking for has been given and given in abundance! We recently read in the last chapter two accounts of Jesus feeding a group of many thousands with a few fish and bread loaves. He just finished three days of healing scores of people who were deaf, dumb, blind, lame, and crippled. He has driven out demons, calmed a raging storm with merely a word, walked on water, raised the dead, healed a woman with bleeding, cured lepers (need I go on?) and yet these Pharisees and Sadducees have the audacity to come before Jesus in doubt and disbelief and dare to ask him to do something more, as if he were some cheap street performer they could toss a quarter at and demand he do parlor tricks for their entertainment.

No, I don’t think so. Jesus isn’t going to fall for their trap and indulge their unbelief any further. Look at how he responds to them in v. 2-3. “He answered them, ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.’” Let’s stop there for a moment.

Jesus quotes for them a very well-known axiom in the ancient world regarding the weather. It usually went something like this, “Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight. Red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning.” Based on the redness in the sky and the time of day, once could predict the weather for the upcoming day. Back then, without a weatherman like Jeff Kennedy to count on, people were stuck with coming up with their own forecasts. And even though it wasn’t based upon satellite images and modern meteorology, for the most part it did the job. One could interpret the “signs” in the sky to ascertain the weather.
But even though they were smart enough to interpret the signs to predict the weather, they totally failed to properly interpret the signs of the times. The time of the arrival of the Messiah had come, and God had given them an abundance of signs through the words and works of Jesus. It had happened right under their very noses and yet here they were, stubborn in their unbelief, demanding another sign, not because they were wrestling with genuine doubt but because they fully expected Jesus to be unable to give them the grand, spectacular sign they were asking for and thus confirm their belief that he was nothing more than a fraud and charlatan. They may have been educated and intelligent men, and had their fair share of book learning and folk wisdom, but all of that had made them so prideful, so arrogant, and so full of themselves, that they were clueless when it came to properly interpreting the ministry of Jesus.

Sometimes people reject Jesus not because they are ignorant but because their pride in learning gets in their way. People can think they know too much, that they are too smart to believe in myths and stories from ancient cultures. Christianity can be viewed as the uneducated man’s religion: all fine and well for children and morality tales, but one must grow out of it eventually. Now I’m not against learning or developing a robust mind: after all, I went to college and graduate school and expect my children to read classic literature and graduate from college. I value the pursuit of learning; that’s a very good thing. But all good pursuits have the danger of leading to bad ends and one such danger the apostle Paul mentions in 1 Cor. 13 is that knowledge can puff up. It can make you proud and arrogant, unwilling to listen and learn, to be proven wrong.

I imagine how difficult it might have been for a man like C. S. Lewis to come to faith. He was a professor of English literature at Oxford – no intellectual lightweight, not be sure! - and an avowed atheist. He would lose face before his peers to admit he was wrong, as any of us might if we had for many years publicly rejected something before our friends only to come to accept it later. And yet that’s just what happened. Through his good friend J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis became a Christian, and not only so, but began to write and speak about it, even to the point of writing a series of children’s stories, much to the condescending amusement of his Oxford peers. To become a Christian in Lewis’ setting was difficult because the pride in his own intellect and the pressure of his peers made admitting you were wrong an embarrassing and humbling confession.

I wonder how many Pharisees and Sadducees had this problem, to be too proud to admit they were wrong and too fearful of being ridiculed by their peers for admitting it. Their pride blinded them to the significance of the miracles Jesus did and fear of being mocked and rejected by their peers prevented them from asking the honest questions and voicing genuine doubts that might have lead them to faith. And how tragically that is still true for many people today.

So then, the Jewish religious leaders ask for a sign in order to prove they are right and Jesus is wrong, but Jesus isn’t going to give them what they ask, at least not how they expect it. He’ll give them a sign, but one very different than what they were expecting. Look at v. 4. “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.’ So he left them and departed.”
Because the Pharisees and Sadducees were only trying to trap him and not seeking out genuine belief, Jesus refuses to indulge them with the kind of showy, spectacular heavenly sign they’re looking for. Instead, he tells them the only sign they’ll receive is “the sign of Jonah.” While Jesus doesn’t explain what that means here, Matthew already recorded the meaning of the “sign of Jonah” back in chapter 12, where he reports Jesus saying, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” In other words, the only sign they are going to get to prove Jesus is who he claims to be is the resurrection. That is the ultimate proof that Christ really is the Son of God. If God raises him from the grave, then there can be no greater evidence of God’s approval than that.

Let me give you some good evangelistic advice from this passage: if people aren’t being convinced by other approaches, bring the focus of the conversation to the question of the resurrection. I know we can get into all kinds of debates over a whole host of issues with unbelievers such as abortion or evolution or sexual ethics, but the real proof of the pudding of Christianity is found in the question of whether Jesus really did rise from the dead. If he didn’t, you can toss your Bibles in the trash and close all the church doors: you’re just wasting your time. But if he did, then you had better listen to what Jesus said because it means God has validated him in a way no other person has ever been validated. The empty tomb is the sign; upon it all of Christianity either rises or falls. If it didn’t happen, Jesus is a fake and can be safely ignored. But if it did, then Jesus is Lord and you had best consider his claims about who he is and how you ought to relate to him.

Well, at this Jesus leaves them and departs. The religious leaders are clueless not because of some fault in Jesus – he’s done more than his share of miraculous deeds throughout this gospel already; no, they are clueless because they are too full of pride to see and believe the evidence right before their eyes. Their cluelessness comes from an arrogance that won’t let go of their traditions and their pig-headed reliance on their own understanding. But now Jesus finds himself alone once again with his disciples, who sadly have their own form of cluelessness he needs to deal with. Jesus needs to give them a clue to help them understand what they need to be on guard against. So moving on now, the second clue we’re given by Jesus concerns this…

2. Clue #2: The leaven of the Pharisees

Please look back in your Bibles and follow along as I read v. 5 through 12. “When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees’ And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, ‘We brought no bread.’ But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and
Sadducees.’ Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

After apparently traveling across the Sea of Galilee once again, they land on the other side only to discover they had forgotten to pack adequate food supplies: their supply of bread had run out. Now for a bunch of hungry young men, that’s a real concern. We men like to eat. Camping trips are going to be a whole lot less fun if you left the cooler with all the food in it back at home in the garage. So they’re concerned with this practical problem when Jesus says to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.” Jesus is one who liked to use object lessons based on normal every day circumstances in order to teach spiritual truth. I’d imagine as the disciples were discussing the solution to their bread problem, Jesus overheard them mention leaven and so, having just left an encounter with the Pharisees and Sadducees, he used this to warn them against unbelief.

But the disciples aren’t on the same wavelength as Jesus. He says this and look at how they reply in v. 7, “And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, ‘We brought no bread.’” These guys are still thinking with their stomachs. This is like one of those Amelia Bedelia children’s books where Amelia is constantly taking the instructions of her employer literally, without recognizing figures of speech and metaphors. The disciples hear Jesus mention leaven and immediately they jump to the conclusion that Jesus is grumpy about them forgetting bread. You can picture these guys all huddled together, discussing what Jesus said, each one blaming the other for forgetting to purchase bread before they left, thinking that know Jesus is mad at them for their lack of planning.

It’s pretty funny if you think about it. These guys are totally clueless about what Jesus just said. They are so preoccupied with the fact that they were going to need to go on a forced fast because they’re out of bread that they completely misunderstand Jesus and assume he is just as concerned and grumpy about their lack of bread as they are. But on the other hand, it’s not that funny at all. Their preoccupation with their lack of bread is an illustration of exactly the thing Jesus was warning them against.

Look at how Jesus replies to this. Starting at v. 8, “But Jesus, aware of this, said, ‘O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread?’” What’s the real problem here? It’s not a lack of bread; it’s a lack of faith. They’re all anxious about having no bread but all that does is reveal the weakness of their faith. Who do they have with them? The one who just a few days ago fed five thousand people and who even more recently fed a group of four thousand, with bread left over! Of all the things the disciples needed to be concerned about, a lack of bread should have been at the bottom of the list. They had been witnesses to two miraculous feeding events involving thousands of people, so how could they not trust that Jesus was more than
capable of feeding their little band of twelve? They were so wrapped up with their little food shortage that they seem to have completely forgot what Jesus had done only a few days earlier.

So Jesus is quite right to warn them against the leaven of then Pharisees because that leaven Jesus is referring to here is the sin of unbelief. The disciples are straying into the same territory of disbelief they just encountered with the Pharisees and Sadducees. While thankfully their hearts weren’t hard and calloused like the Jewish religious leaders were, they nevertheless were certainly quick to forget what they had witnessed and were too easily ready to allow themselves to become so preoccupied with the present crisis that they forgot to look to Jesus.

Might this have any application to us? Do you and I ever get so concerned, so anxious and worried over some situation or problem we are facing that it eclipses everything else, including God? I think we do, perhaps more often than we care to admit if we’re honest about it. There’s a difficult situation you’re facing, and you don’t know how it’s going to be resolved. The road ahead seems pretty bleak. Your options look to be a choice between bad and worse. So it consumes your thoughts. You feel sick to your stomach. You don’t sleep well at night. Like the disciples, we get so caught up with our current situation, we forget who’s with us. We forget the ways Jesus has been our present help in times of trouble. We fail to recall all those times when God provided, when he carried us through the storm, when he was faithful to us, when he provided us the strength to carry on. We forget all the stories of God’s goodness, faithfulness, power, and love shown to his people throughout the pages of Scripture. We get a case of temporary amnesia as we fail to remember all the promises of God to provide for you in ways that would make the flowers of the field and birds of the air jealous, forgetting that God says nothing in all creation – be it height or depth, angles or demons, sword or suffering, death or life – can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

We can be as clueless as the disciples are here, concerned about what we’re going to do in order to get our daily bread instead of simply coming to God and asking, “Give us this day our daily bread.” So after gently chiding them for their tiny faith that in their moment of need looked to themselves instead of Jesus, we find Jesus repeating himself once again at the end of v. 11, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.’ Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”

You can almost hear the collective sigh of the disciples saying, “Oh… now I get it. He wasn’t talking about bread at all. Silly me.” Jesus had a far more important matters on his mind than whether or not they had full bellies by the end of the evening. He knew how the teaching of the Jewish religious leaders could infect the hearts and minds of his disciples. He knew their disbelief came from their misunderstanding of Scripture and their legalistic approach to God. He needed to warn them that just like leaven permeates throughout a loaf of bread, so also can false teaching, prideful arrogance, and unbelief insidiously work its way into their hearts. They had to watch out for it lest they also become like them.
Conclusion

So then, as we draw this message to a close, I think we need to heed the clues Jesus has given to the clueless in this passage. For those of us prone to disbelief, who are skeptical about Jesus and perhaps demand some supernatural sign from God before you’re going to believe, Jesus says, “Look at the empty tomb.” Consider that Christ was killed by crucifixion, on a Friday, his lifeless body remained there Friday night, all day Saturday, and through the wee hours of morning on Sunday until the stone was rolled away and Jesus resurrected, appearing to the disciples and to hundreds of other eyewitnesses that he was indeed alive. And those who saw him in turn went and told others and quite literally changed the world. The resurrection is the proof above all proofs, more than any healing or exorcism, that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world.

And for those who are clueless not because they disbelieve but because they are so distracted by their present concerns they lose sight of the Lord they serve, forgetting all that he has done for you in the past and promises to do for you in the future, Jesus says, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. Beware of their pride and their self-righteous dependence upon themselves. Humble yourself and look to Jesus. Rest on his promises. Rely on his power. Trust in his love for you. Don’t be overwhelmed by the needs of the present; look to Jesus and recall his goodness to you. He will provide. He will preserve. He will protect. You need not fear or worry: just trust in him, your Lord, your Savior, and your God. Let’s pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2014.