

“The Kingdom of Heaven is Like Yeast”

Date: July 21st, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 18:1-8; Matthew 13:33 Theme: Yeast, God’s kingdom

Occasion: Short Stories by Jesus, series

When I first started dating my wife, Barbara, some 39 years ago, one of the things that attracted me to her was the fact that she baked bread. She still does and we’re still married. Bread is the stuff of life, right?

She allowed me to assist her in the kitchen, mixing the ingredients, keeping the kitchen warm so the dough would rise, and helping to knead the dough before we put it into the oven, for it to be transformed into the most amazing bread I had ever eaten.

Having grown up on Wonder Bread, that tasteless and mostly nutritionless bread of my youth, I was in awe of this delicious bread. It melts in your mouth; it’s like eating cake, especially when it’s just been toasted and then buttered. Oh, my goodness, it is so good. Oh, that’s not very nice, I didn’t offer you any, did I? I’m sorry.

My mother never made bread, so I knew nothing about the art. Spending time with Barb in the kitchen, I learned about yeast, an amazing product that makes the dough rise. So, when I read this parable of Jesus, I was feeling a little proud, thinking, “I know how this is done; I got this one figured out.” But then I read Rabbi Amy-Jill Levine’s chapter on this parable and I’m not so sure anymore.

She quickly dismisses some of the easy interpretations that have been offered on this parable, like it means the kingdom will grow, just as bread rises. While that may be true, so what? There’s nothing terribly interesting or profound or shocking in that. Bland, white bread at best.

She also cautions us not to tolerate the negative, Jewish bashing that

some interpreters have taken. Like the one who said that the dough represents the dead lump of Judaism that Jesus has somehow come to bring new life to. While Jesus may have said some critical things about some of the religious leaders of his time, we need to remember that Jesus himself was a Jew and he was talking to Jews. He himself was not anti-Jewish.

To fully appreciate this one-sentence-parable, we will need to understand the nuances of meaning that yeast had in Jesus' time. We'll need to pay attention to the amount of bread that three measures would yield. And we will want to correct the many translations which say the woman "mixed" the yeast into the dough, because that is not what the Greek says.

To begin with, the term for "yeast" refers to sourdough starter and not to those little red packets of cultured yeast that sit in refrigerator doors. This starter is created when water mixes with the naturally occurring yeast spores that end up in flour when it is ground, and then the yeast's enzymes break down the starch in the flour and convert it into glucose.

The starter serves as a leavening agent when it is subsequently mixed in with more dough. Old fashioned Amish Friendship Bread uses this kind of starter. What's happening, biologically, is a form of fermentation. You know it's ready to use when there is a "pleasant sour smell." Rabbi Levine doesn't describe it that way. She says:

"To the contrary; there is an *ick* factor at play. Yeast is the product of corruption and the process of leavening seems to be one of putrefaction." The comparison of the kingdom to yeast might well have been surprising to a 1st-century Jewish audience, since yeast, especially when used metaphorically, could have a negative meaning."

In fact, the term yeast or leaven shows up 11 times in the New Testament, and each time it has a negative connotation. For example, several times Jesus says, “Watch out and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Saduccees.” He’s referring to their misleading teaching. As an alternative, Jesus would be good leaven, for he offers a better teaching.

Long story, short, yeast is neither clean nor unclean. It is not clearly positive or negative; it all depends on the context. And in our context, it is still ambiguous as to whether it’s good or bad leaven. Is something bad being turned into something good, or do we simply pay attention to the potential of its power? Let’s keep chewing on this text.

Let’s turn our attention now to the woman and what she did. Jesus tells parables with female characters in them. He didn’t invent the art form. Women have been appearing in biblical stories since, well, Eve. What’s interesting, and perhaps new to many, is that women and feminine images have long been connected with the sacred, to the holy, to God.

Women have also been connected to that which is not so sacred. Many blame Eve herself for sin entering the world. Therefore, we cannot determine her status as good or evil simply by her mere presence in the parable. But, to her credit, she is engaged in something relative to the kingdom of heaven, so we are justified in seeing her in a positive light.

The greater problem in the parable is not the woman, but what she does. According to most major English translations, the woman *mixed* the yeast with three measures of flour. The problem is that the Greek does not say *mixed*. The Greek term is *enkrypto*, which comes from a root meaning of “to hide.” As in cryptology, or secret-code making. Thus she is literally doing something secretly with an ambivalent substance that works by process of decay.

The Greek verb *krypto* is found many times in the New Testament. In many cases it refers not only to what is hidden, but to something that should or must be uncovered. In Luke 8:17 Jesus insists, “Nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.” In Matthew 8:12 Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.”

So, whatever the woman is doing with this leaven, it’s results will come to light. What is hidden is only hidden so that it can be brought forth. Hiding, like yeast, can have a negative meaning, but in this parable it is a hiding that will lead to something wonderful. Disciples will gain new insight; the faithful a new way of being; and the world, more good works than it had ever known.

Let us now turn our attention to the three measures of flour. Three measures, in first century terms, is not synonymous with three cups. Three measures is somewhere between 40 and 60 pounds. The dough would be too much for one woman to knead on her own. And the bread it would produce would be far too much for one person to consume.

The image is one of extravagance, or hyperbole. Think of the time Jesus turns water into wine and he made 60 gallons of the good stuff. Think of the time he fed 5,000 using five loaves and two fish and they picked up twelve baskets of left-overs. We can easily conclude that God’s love and grace are extravagant and abundant.

We should also be reminded of the places in the scriptures of Israel where the phrase “three measures of flour” occur. Our first lesson this morning provides a wonderful example. Abraham is visited by three visitors, and wishing to show hospitality. He asks his wife, “Make ready three measures of choice flour, knead it and make cakes.”

The three visitors inform Abraham that his wife Sara will have a baby, even though she is now an elderly woman. Is there a connection between the dough rising and a baby growing inside a mother's womb. After all, we do have the expression, "a bun in the oven." It is food for thought.

So with all of these musings, what are we to conclude? What's the take away? Is there a tasty morsel for us to chew on? Perhaps the parable means that the sacred can be found in the ordinary stuff of life, just as well as in grander things? The kingdom can be associated with pearls but also with yeast, with banquets but also with mustard seeds, with kings, but also with shepherds.

If we consider Genesis 18 to be relevant, perhaps underlying the parable of the Leaven is a story about an unexpected, miraculous pregnancy. The idea of hiding yeast inside of dough suggests insemination and pregnancy. Paul tells us "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor until now." Perhaps the parable tells us that, like dough containing leaven, or a child growing in a womb, the kingdom will come if we nurture it.

Given the enormous yield that would result from 40 – 60 pounds of flour, perhaps the parable speaks to the importance of extravagance and generosity. Is it suggesting that we are to be extravagantly generous, inviting three strangers to lunch, or volunteering time at the food bank to ensure that multiple families can eat? Imagine baking bread for those who have none, and who wonder about all those well-fed folks who pray, "give us this day our daily bread."

And finally, perhaps the parable tells us that the kingdom of God is at work in us subtly, in a hidden way, maybe even without our awareness. Perhaps the kingdom is already present, everywhere, in everything, and it

is available to all. It is something that works its way through our lives. Perhaps Jesus is using yeast as a symbol for grace; it's not our work, but God's work in us. Perhaps the entire parable is a metaphor for his life and ministry, for we remember Jesus saying, "I am the Bread of Life."

Today I leave you with symbols, images, thoughts and questions. And I pray that you will allow this leaven to rise up in your hearts. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from *Short Stories by Jesus* by Amy-Jill Levine. Harper Collins Publishing: NY, NY, 2014, "The Kingdom of Heaven is Like Yeast," pp. 117-137.