

## **When Yeast is Activated**

Matthew 13:33

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*“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”*  
*Matthew 13:33*

Our parable today is the shortest one. Only one sentence. It comes in the midst of a series of parables Jesus tells – Kingdom or Kin-dom of God is like... a sower of seeds, weeds and plants in a field, a mustard seed, a treasure buried in a field. In many of the parables something of value is hidden. Today we explore the parable – the kin-dom of heaven is like yeast used by a woman.

I have learned that yeast is classified in the fungus kingdom. Yeast, as a fungus microorganism, requires energy to grow. These microorganisms need a food source, primarily sugar. Active yeast will feed on sugar resulting in the fungus burping carbon dioxide and ethanol. The process is called fermentation: carbon dioxide in bread making and ethanol in alcoholic beverages. Hence, when Jesus compares the Kin-dom of Heaven, of God to yeast being added to flour, he is speaking of a very disruptive experience. (1)

Scandalous is the word used by some theologians to describe this disruptive experience. After all, something is going to alter the simple properties of flour, water, and salt turning them into something fabulous. Unleavened bread is useful and portable, a staple of many cultures and civilizations. It meets basic nutritional requirements for sustenance. By adding the active yeast microorganisms to this utilitarian food product, one unleashes a chain-of-events that forever transforms the basic ingredients of bread. Once added, the yeast will go about its work breaking down starches, which is aided by the baker’s kneading the dough. As the starches are torn apart, the yeast sets about gorging on the sugars that are released, after which it burps itself into happiness.

All this release of gas, causes the dough to “rise”; the air pockets that develop from these yeast gas bubbles give the dough volume that results in a light texture to the finished product. Even if the baker punches the rising dough down, it will rise again. As long as there are sugars for the microorganisms to feed on, they will form countless air bubbles within the raw dough. This is what the Kin-dom of Heaven, of God is like.

This process can be seen as something that is happening in the present but is not complete. It is ongoing. And like yeast activated in the dough, the Kin-dom of Heaven is both now and not yet. In our Christian household of Presbyterians and others, there is an understanding of the Kin-dom of God as being ushered in by Jesus, is present to us now, but will only find its completion in God’s time. It is both present and future, now and yet to be. Something a little hard to wrap one’s mind around, and thus we have parables to help us better appreciate this idea of present while simultaneously incomplete.

As I have been reflecting on this parable this week, we could think of unleavened bread is our present reality where leavened bread represents our journey towards the fullest expression of the Kin-dom of Heaven. Introducing yeast to unleavened flour is very much a scandalous thing, as those microorganisms tear apart the starches in an effort to reach the sugars which in turn causes the microorganisms to create CO2 thus ushering in transformation.

What about our context today? Yeast is – disruptive, transforming, fermenting. Yeast brings about change. Maybe the protests and public engagement in looking at systemic racism, white privilege and police violence against the black community is the yeast. It is rising up. It is causing good trouble in the dough of society so something good can be made. It reminds me of a quote by one of my heroes John Lewis – civil rights activist, congressman from Georgia.

*“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”*

Yeast today is getting in good trouble that shifts the status quo, calls for courageous & difficult conversations, and moves toward meaningful actions for anti-racism and racial justice. I need to consider is how I, how some of us, are the white flour. We need the yeast to activate us, change us. And then maybe the Spirit helps us become part of the yeast, the starter for someone else.

If we stay the same and are unchanged, we are like unleavened bread, though useful, is not all that flavorful. It will feed and sustain many people. Now imagine God as the baker who adds yeast to this, where the active yeast breaks apart the internal components of the flour, water, and salt in order to feed and create bubbles, thus causing the raw dough to rise.

Think of the yeast as being the Holy Spirit. It sets about, tearing apart our assumptions, presuppositions, even our biases all in order to reach that which is best in us. It disrupts our hemostasis, that condition of just getting along, doing our thing, comfortable in our situation. The Holy Spirit feeds on our self-imposed limitations, our self reliance. And it brings forth grace in abundance empowering us to greater witness as co-participants with Jesus in ushering in the Kin-dom of Heaven, the Kin-dom of God that is both now and not yet.

Jesus more than invites us, he warns us that the Kin-dom of Heaven isn't life as usual. It isn't built on our presumptions, our egos, our individual abilities. It is built on God's grace. It is made through the scandalous work of the Holy Spirit in our lives constantly seeking to transform our being into active agents of faithful witness. So Yeast disrupts, transforms, causes good trouble.

What kind of yeast would Jesus have been referring to? Of course yeast didn't come in a foil packet. You had to make it yourself, out of flour and water. You mixed them together and set the wet goo aside in a warm, dark place for a few days. Bacteria from the air would enter the mixture, causing it to ferment. You could then mix a little of the stuff into your batch of bread-dough and set it aside for an hour or so. That was long enough for the natural fermentation process to cause the dough to rise.

To people of biblical times, the action of yeast must have seemed like some kind of magic. They knew nothing of bacteria, nor the chemical process of fermentation. Bread must have seemed like some kind of gift from the heavens, an everyday miracle.

Then — as now, when you're making sourdough bread with a starter— before you put the last of your bread-dough into the oven, you'd set a little lump of it aside for the next day. That saved you from going through the long process of making yeast every time. You could knead that leftover dough into your next batch. There was enough yeast in it to begin the process all over again.

This was an absolutely commonplace occurrence in Jesus' time. Everybody knew how to do it, because bread-baking was a daily task. Most often, the women of a village would bake their family's bread in a mud-brick oven heated by firewood.

Yeast is invisible. That little lump of dough from yesterday's baking you throw into today's batch doesn't look any different from the fresh dough — but if you forget to fold it in, your bread will never rise. We know, today, you can examine yeast under a microscope. You can watch the bacteria doing the work of fermentation. There was just something different about that lump of starter dough, something you couldn't see.

Matthew passes on to us a very interesting word, a word Jesus himself probably used. The word is *enkrypto*, "to hide away." Our English Bible translates it as "mixed in" — "yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour" — but the parable's literally saying the woman hid the yeast in the flour. (2)

The yeast, the leaven, that is God's kin-dom is abundant. Jesus says the woman takes her yeast and mixes it in "with three measures of flour." Now, when you hear that expression "three measures," you're likely to picture it as something like three cups. Greek word suggests more like 50-60 lbs! And when you add in the forty-two cups of water to make it come together, you have about a hundred pounds of dough. That's an enormous amount of flour, enough to bake enough bread to feed a large crowd of people.

During the stay-at-home coronavirus time, flour and yeast have been short supply. So many people have started making bread. What if you can't find the ingredients to make bread? Members of our church Erin and Dave Berta were in this predicament. The groceries stores were out of flour and yeast. So Erin decided one of her few options was to order flour on line. Amazon had some in stock but only 50 lb bags! So she clicked and a few days later this huge mammoth bag arrived on their door step. They dragged into the house. They made a few loaves at a time but soon realized they were not going to be like to woman in the parable and make it all at once. They shared the bag with Martha and Marcia. Such abundance. More bread rising for the common good for First Pres!

God's kin-dom is one of abundance, where no one is meant to go hungry. It's a place of ample resources, and those resources are meant for sharing. The woman in the parable isn't just baking for her family. She hides her yeast away in the dough to feed a crowd.

Hide a little yeast away in a batch of dough, and that little bit changes everything! It doesn't happen right away. Bread-baking is, and always has been, a time-consuming process. There's a time of waiting, as the leavened dough sits in a mixing-bowl in a warm oven. This is the time when the dough undergoes its miraculous transformation.

Perhaps church is the place where we remind each other of God's promises and point to places in our lives and the world where we catch glimpses of the kin-dom of God, of transformation. I have seen glimpses here - the person who overcomes addiction, the people who overcome a prejudice or stereotypes, the person who gives money and time generously to the church and finds their joy in the giving, people who in the face of illness or death offer courage and strength to others.

Close with one more important lesson that yeast can teach us. Kipp Gilmore-Clough, pastor in Philadelphia, shares his reflections about yeast and brewing his own beer.

*There are monasteries that have supported themselves for centuries through the brewing of beer, and Martin Luther is said to have utilized the caloric content of strong beer to sustain himself during fasting. If Jesus turned water into wine, then perhaps there are intrinsic spiritual possibilities in the transformation of barley, hops, water, and yeast into beer.*

*The home brewer's final key ingredient is time. The initial outlay involves preparing the pot and other equipment, and giving a few hours over to steeping, boiling, transferring the mix into the fermenter. All must be done with care and attention. After the yeast is added comes the waiting. It may take a couple of weeks for the yeast to do its job, working through the grainy water to digest the extra sugars and morph into beer. Over this time, providing that it has been properly sealed and attended to, it may be forgotten about—but it does not stop working. This endeavor become a metaphor for the movement of the Spirit: with proper tending and care, something bracing comes forth that is ultimately beyond the brewer's ability to entirely control. And, as with the end product of home brewing, the best part lies in the sharing.*

*A HOME BREWER'S PRAYER - Wild and yeasty God, you who image your realm in a lump of leaven, let your spirit work its fermentation within us. Grant us the grace to pay proper attention, to undertake the labors that help lay the conditions that make possible your invisible work. And as our breads & brews usually do, God, surprise us with the unpredictable directions of your leavening, the transmutation of good into good, of work into delight, of life into sharing. Amen.*

*(3)adapted*

- 1) Rev. Gary Cyr, "May the Holy Spirit Be Yeast in Our Lives," 7.30.17, St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton, NY [https://o.b5z.net/i/u/6046428/f/sermons/2017\\_Proper\\_12\\_29\\_July\\_Sermon.pdf](https://o.b5z.net/i/u/6046428/f/sermons/2017_Proper_12_29_July_Sermon.pdf)
- 2) Rev. Carlos Wilton, "Leavening the World," 2.3.2014  
<http://pointpresbyterian.org/multimedia-archive/leavening-the-world/>
- 3) Kipp Gilmore-Clough, "A Home Brewer's Prayer — From the Psalms to the Cloud," 2.3.2014  
<https://giftsinopenhands.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/2488/>