

July 30 – A Yeasty Faith

Scripture: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Now one of the things you may not know about me is that I love to bake bread, so when I read this scripture from Matthew in preparation for preaching today I focused on verse 33 where Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like yeast. These verses in Matthew contain a collection of parables from Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven. He likened the kingdom to, among other things: a harvest, a mustard seed, a hidden treasure, yeast, and a pearl of great price. Each one of them has a slightly different and often surprising emphasis. Today we will focus just on the image of yeast as it relates to the work of God in our lives and the world.

Before we do, I believe it would be helpful for you to have just a little understanding of what bread making was like in the time of Jesus. It was a woman's duty in ancient Israel to prepare the meals. Bread was such a common part of their diet that it was often referred to as food in general such as in the Lord's Prayer asking for God to give us our daily bread. Each house made their own bread and it took possibly 2-3 hours of hard labor to make enough dough to feed a family. She would take the grain, put it into a stone bowl, and then grind it with a mortar. After the flour was ready, it was combined with water and kneaded inside a large trough. A bit of starter was also added, this is the leaven. The starter was made by setting aside a tiny amount of dough from the last batch to soak up the yeasts in the air and contribute to leavening the current dough. That is where the sourdough flavor comes from. The dough was allowed to rest and rise. Then the dough was usually baked on a hot stone placed over a fire to make griddle bread. About once a week, in smaller communities, the communal oven was fired. The dough was shaped into loaves before letting it rise a second time. The women then gathered together at the oven to bake their bread and exchange news.

There are several surprising things within this parable. The first of these is Jesus saying the power of yeast is positive. Throughout the Old Testament yeast is almost always seen as a symbol for corruption. The way yeast transformed the dough was symbolic of the way evil transformed people or a nation. Amongst the reasons for not having leavened bread used in the high holy meal of Passover is the reminder that the

people had to leave quickly so they did not have time to let it rise. The other was because leaven or yeast, was often represented as the work of sin and it should have no part in this meal. So for Jesus to use yeast in a positive way would be a jolt to his listeners. It would cause them to pay attention and really think about what he was saying.

Once yeast is added to the dough, the fermentation process is pretty much unstoppable. How does it change our perspective to think about the power of God for transforming the world in this way? Too often, we think of the pervasiveness of evil but why not think about goodness in much the same way? The symbol of yeast says that the kingdom work of God is happening and cannot be stopped. The question is whether or not we will be a part of that great work.

The second startling thing in this parable is the quantity of flour that was used. Three measures of flour would equate to around 8 gallons of flour. A gallon of flour weighs a little more than six pound so you are talking about 50 pounds of flour. That will make enough dough to feed around 150 people! So, this parable is also talking about the extravagance of God. Do you hear the connection Jesus is making to some of his other visions of the kingdom and heaven when he talks about heavenly banquets? Again, think about what it means to be reminded that God's transformative power is not only irresistible but extravagantly given and at work in all people trying to transform the world.

Finally, most translations talk about how the woman mixed in the yeast until all was leavened. The word mixed should more correctly be translated hid. We expect the woman to mix or knead the leaven into the dough. But the verb hid means the change that is taking place is not from her actions. It is not the actions of the woman that brings about the extravagant supply of bread but instead it is the work of God. It is saying that the kingdom is already present, God is at work in amazing, extravagant and surprising ways right now. Only in the future will we be aware of this work.

Think about how many times we are facing a situation that seems dark and hopeless. Give that situation some time and, in looking back, we see how God was present. We see the power of good to transform it, and are amazed.

Jesus, comparing the kingdom of heaven to yeast, is making amazing claims for God and also challenging us. When yeast is added to flour it causes the flour to rise. Yeast is a key ingredient for making bread because without it, bread cannot be fluffy and light. In other words, the kingdom of heaven is transformative and uplifting. Without God's reign, life would be flat and dull.

Where do you need to again be open to the yeast of God? Your life is flat and dull like a piece of unleavened bread. You are feeling life is without meaning. God's yeast is hidden in your life and in this situation. Feed on it and let its transforming power begin to enliven you and transform you. It is the presence of God that empowers God's people to rise above life's circumstances. We are also challenged, at times, to share this hope and optimism with others. We can become that hidden yeast of God in their lives transforming them and uplifting them.

I recall reading a story about a woman who was dealing with significant health issues. Amongst them was a weight problem. The doctor told her she needed to exercise. She bought some good walking shoes and with determination went out for a walk the next day. Her plan was to start small and walk a half mile and increase from there. She got about a block and her knee began to hurt a bit so she turned the corner to head towards home. By the time she got back, walking just a little more than around the block her knees were killing her and she was totally out of breath. She laid on the couch, defeated. Life was flat, dull and hopeless. She went to her regular Bible study the next night and shared her discouragement. Most of the groups said they would pray for her. One woman, whom she did not know well, stayed behind to talk with her. She said, "I think you need not only prayer partners but a walking partner. I will be by tomorrow at 4 and we will go for a walk." Before the woman could protest this woman turned and was gone. So the next day she laced on her shoes and with fear and dread waited for this friend to arrive. Upon arriving she said, "I don't know you well. Tell me about your children and grandchildren." They started to walk and she was talking

animatedly about her family. They got back to the house and she was amazed they had walked three blocks. Yes, her knees hurt and she was a bit winded but she was not discouraged. Each day the friend arrived, they talked about family, hobbies, vacations and such. Then they began to pray for others on their walks, taking turns lifting up the needs from their Bible study group, church and the world. In six months they were walking two miles a day at a rapid pace. She had lost weight, her knees no longer hurt, life was no longer discouraging. Her health had improved dramatically. Now she looked forward to time with her new best friend. Her friend was yeast, transforming and empowering her. God had hidden this treasure in her life.

Where is God's yeast at work in you? Where do you need to be yeast for another?