

The Sourdough Parable

The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast.



He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven (yeast) that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds (three measures) of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Matthew 13.33

Leaven (yeast) is essential for baking, especially in baking bread. We are not talking about the dried yeast you can buy from the supermarket but of a living

sourdough starter which is a live culture made from flour and water. Once combined the mixture will begin to ferment, cultivating the naturally occurring wild yeasts and bacteria present within the mixture. A small portion of this culture is used make your bread dough rise.

Leaven, in history, is what today we call a sourdough starter, usually for making bread. Bread is mentioned many times in the teaching of Jesus: "Give us this day our daily bread." or "Our Father" speaks straight to the Jewish listeners, from the view that as God fed us in the wilderness with manna, so God will continue to provide for our needs, to the image of the world to come as a giant banquet, in which "people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God."

This Jewish idea of feasting in the world to come permeates the stories of Jesus, and his mission as well. Luke's story of Jesus opens with him being placed in a "manger," that is a feeding trough. Jesus consistently meets people at table, imagery made most memorable at the Last Supper. By the time we get to John's Gospel, Jesus has become the "bread of life" and "the living bread that came down from heaven."

Jesus is comparing the kingdom of heaven to leaven that a woman used in preparing bread. Leaven stands

for food in its most complete and perfect form and everything that is leavened rises, and joy is the rational elevation of the soul. Yeast permeates all the good dough it has infused and gives rise to something nutritious.

Sometimes, in the New Testament, Yeast can have a negative impact and it is “the leaven of the Pharisees” that is to be avoided, but not the leaven that Jesus offers. St. Paul takes up this idea when he writes, “Put aside then the evil leaven, which has grown old and sour, and turn to the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ.”

However, in the context of the parable found in Matthew 13, the leaven is not old and impure. If the yeast was impure then the bread would be also. The leaven, described as hiding in the dough, will lead to something wonderful.

The woman hides the leaven in three measures of flour. We are not talking of spoons or measuring cups of flour, but in first century times three measures of flour is somewhere between forty and sixty pounds. The dough would be far too much for one woman to knead on her own, and the yield would be far too much for one person to consume. The image is one of extravagance and we are reminded of other New Testament images of food in abundance, from the

wedding at Cana, with its sixty gallons of good wine, to the feeding of the five thousand, in which five loaves and two fish yielded twelve baskets of leftovers.

I think one lesson from this parable about the yeast is that we should re-evaluate the smallest of domestic materials. The Kingdom of Heaven can be associated with pearls, but also with yeast, with banquets, but also with mustard seeds, with kings, but also with shepherds. The importance of extravagance and generosity within the life of a Christian suggests we ought to adapt our lives. Imagine inviting three strangers to lunch or setting up a food pantry with stocks for more than one family could 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."

Perhaps, also Jesus was asking his hearers to value the women in that society. Women who did much of the baking, who maintained the sourdough starter, kneaded the bread, and watched it while it baked to be sure it did not burn.

Finally, perhaps the parable tells us that despite all our images of golden slippers and harps and halos, the kingdom is present in the Galilean village when everyone has enough to eat. The kingdom is present and available to all, from the sourdough starter to the

rain and the sunshine. It is something that works its way through our lives, and we realise how important it is only when we do not have it. To clean out the old leaven allows us to make room for the new, to start again and again to enjoy the feast.

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Bibliography:

Short Stories by Jesus. Amy-Jill Levine.

