

A Three-Tiered Parable

Luke 13: 20-21

²⁰ And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? ²¹ It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

How many bakers do we have in the room today? “To what should I compare the kingdom of God?” Jesus asks. And with all the options at his disposal he says, “I know, Yeast!” Yeast? What does yeast have to do with the kingdom of God? Now, traditionally, we have interpreted the story as a triumphant church story; where the church grows and spreads—like yeast does—until all people are “saved.” But we must be careful, because baked into these two verses are many hidden layers. So let’s unpack the layers, shall we?

Start by thinking of the parable like a three-tiered cake. When we put on our first century ears, the parable is dense. The kingdom of God is like yeast—that’s the first tier. Now we when we think of yeast, it’s a lovely ingredient. We tear open the little pouch and mix it into the bowl with some flour, water, and a pinch of salt. We knead and fold, fold and knead until it’s all mixed in so the bread rises. But the Greek word isn’t yeast and the Spanish translation is better. The Greek word is leaven! For the Jewish people leaven is a chunk of bread kept in a dark, dank place until the bread begins to mold. Ever peek into the pantry and see the stale bread molding? What do we do with it? We toss it. The kingdom of God is like moldy bread. To go deeper, leaven is a symbol in Jewish history for corruption. Think about those who corrupt our world—gun lobbyists and gerrymanders, and those who silence our voices and divide us apart. During Passover, faithful Jews do a mega-cleaning so not one crumb of leaven is in the house—it contaminates. You couldn’t burn leaven as an offering to God, because even God didn’t like the smell. St. Paul famously says, “A bit of leaven spoils...the whole batch.” Leaven is not a good thing! The kingdom of God is like leaven—a filthy contaminate! That’s the first tier.

The second tier is that the kingdom of God is like leaven which a “woman hides.” Now we know, back in the old days women weren’t exactly on equal footing as men. The old days, right? We know women were treated as second class citizens in a masculine world. Women needed a man’s signature to get a bank account, or to buy or home. They went allowed to preach from pulpits. Their highest courts said women couldn’t be trusted to make their own decisions regarding their future or their bodies. The old days, right? The woman in the parable hides the contaminate—in the Greek it is encrypts—the leaven into the flour. It’s an encryption, like how we do some online shopping for a new mattress and then all of a sudden we start seeing all these advertisements pop up for mattresses. They call them “cookies” and they are an encryption baked into our search engines and stored in our electronic devices. It’s a bit sneaky and scandalous, isn’t it? So tier one: the kingdom of God is like leaven. Tier two: that a second class citizen—a woman—encrypts into the flour.

Now the third tier is the kicker: we get a measurement. Three measures of flour. Numbers are big clues in scripture. First of all, that’s about 50 pounds of flour. Anyone ever used 50 pounds of flour before? That about 10 bags of flour! She’s up to her elbows in dough. With no bread maker! It’s an absurd amount, which means there is something else going on. The first time we

hear about three measure of flour is in the book of Genesis when Abram and Sarai host the three angels for dinner. It says Sarai bakes three measures of flour. The number shows up again when Gideon makes an offering to the angel—it's three measures of flour. The number shows up again when Hannah gets pregnant with Samuel and makes an offering to God. Wanna guess the main ingredient? Three measures of flour. In other words, this is a sacred recipe which one prepares for God!

So let's recap: the kingdom of God is like a contaminated ingredient which a woman sneaks into a recipe which is prepared for only God! Now who would prepare a meal for God with a contaminate which God has forbidden in scripture? Who would sneak what God has said is unclean into the recipe until the whole batch is tainted? Is anyone else confused or is it just me?

Well, let's think about it. Who is the one who sits down for a bite to eat with forbidden sinners? Who is one who taints the sabbath with healings? Who is the one who touches lepers and hemorrhaging women and contaminated people? Who is the one who comes into the world through an impregnated, unwed woman who hides—encrypts—the scandal of God in her womb? Who is the one who is hung high on a cross, accused of blasphemy for contaminating religions understanding of who God is?

Could Jesus be saying that inside of God's kingdom—God's most truthful way—there is no distinction between the pure and the profane. No difference between who is clean and who is unclean. No difference between those who are labelled the righteous and those who are labelled the sinner. That in God's kingdom these aren't categories God cares about. No, they are categories which we care about! Because they make us feel better about our group, our beliefs, and our own lives. But all they do is continue cycles of exclusion, judgement, and oppression—all in the name of holiness and purity. Jesus is the one who contaminates the religious system. All in the name of God's expansive love, mercy, and real justice. Why? Because God's kingdom is full of the people who the world has rejected!

A couple weeks ago, the governor of Florida transported a bunch of immigrants to a place called Mary's Vineyard in Massachusetts. We have all heard the story, right? Today in Massachusetts, they are trying to find these migrants homes and jobs outside of Mary's Vineyard. Except, some of the migrants don't want to leave. They want to stay and be a part of the community who accepted them, and fed them, and celebrated them. I mean, why would they want to be anywhere else? Especially after they were treated in Florida like they were the contaminates.

How many times have we heard of churches doing the same exact thing? Rejecting a human being because of what they think the bible says. So my encouragement for the church today is this: please don't be a Florida, be a Massachusetts!

On World Communion Sunday, we receive God's sacred meal. But what makes the meal sacred is not so much the bread or the grape juice, but the people God has placed around the table. The kingdom of God is like a contaminate that a woman encrypts inside of God's sacred meal until all of it is contaminated by the love, mercy, and justice of Jesus Christ. And after being accepted and fed and celebrated...why would we want to be anywhere else?