

SERMON FOR JULY 30, 2017

Matthew, the gospel editor, gathered up several parables of the kingdom of God and placed them side by side in one of Jesus' teaching times. We find the mustard seed, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field, and the leaven in the lump of dough all in a row. I guess the logic is that if we are not jolted by one metaphor, we will be jolted by another.

And I do mean jolted. The parables are not meant to explain a concept or bring us understanding. They are meant to stop us in our tracks. They are meant to shock us into thinking fresh. They are meant to rattle the predictable, to shake up the usual, and to draw us into new relationship with the holy. Do they?

I know that I am so familiar with the parables that Jesus spoke that I am no longer awake to their radical vision. I am so use to reading them and preaching them that they have become ordinary-interesting to think about but not surprising. Only when one of my students gave me a copy of Bernard Brandon Scott's book, *Hear Then in Parables*, did I start to see what I was missing. This sermon starts with what Scott showed me. I hope that you will be suitably shocked by the leaven in the lump of dough. That one small verse of scripture has the power to turn the world upside down. If we let it, that is.

Often, I think, we see the yeast in the bread dough through 21st century eyes. We see a gorgeous loaf of bread, sourdough, pumpernickel, ciabatta, risen high and baked beautifully. And we say, “Aha! Look at that lovely loaf. It would make a great sandwich! That bread is risen to perfection.”

Those appreciations are what we bring to the kin-dom metaphor. Baker Woman God hides the yeast in the dough and makes the lump into a loaf. We cannot discern the yeast at work. We can only discern the results of the yeast’s work, and that is the rising. The rising is what we expect of the dough, and we expect the same rising of the kin-dom in the world. That is the usual interpretation, and it is not a bad one.

Today, however, is different. Today, I am hoping for the unusual, the visionary, a total world-changing take on things. To get there, we need to explore two images, the yeast and the Baker Woman.

First, the yeast. If we see the yeast in a positive light, then Jesus’ hearers experienced the opposite. It is the unleavened bread that is the holy bread because the unleavened bread is the bread of the Exodus. When Moses was readying the Israel to escape Pharaoh and flee from Egypt, he gave the order that each household should prepare flatbread for the journey. There was no time to let the bread rise.

So, when the Jews of Jesus’ day and every day since, celebrate the Passover from Egypt to the Promised Land, from slavery to freedom, from

captivity to liberation, they eat the unleavened bread of the Passover, the holy bread. It is a sign to them that God saves.

If the parable of the dough were to match expectations, the Baker Woman would be mixing up a batch of matzah, a reminder of the time when the realm of God touched down in human suffering. Because the parable has yeast as the focus, it would have turned the heads of the hearers, shocked them, because God was using the unholy. What were they to make of this?

So, Jesus told of the Baker Woman God who used the unholy yeast as a metaphor for the kin-dom. If the leaven did not shock his listeners, the gender of the baker certainly would have. God is a woman, a Baker Woman. The baker of the bread of justice and peace is a woman with no status, no power, and with no place in the synagogue, and with no voice in religious circles or in the political realm. And, yet, she is expected to represent the holy. Who would be as crazy a choice for us? A baby in a manger? The guy who walks the main streets of Westdale, the talking to himself, dressed in a parka and boots when the temperature is 30C? A dancer from the local strip joint on the west side of Burlington? The Baker Woman was as mad a choice for the Jews as anyone of these would be for us.

So what about the parable? The holy realm of justice and peace is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened. In our scheme of things, God is making the bread of life rise. Hurrah!

In Jesus' scheme of things, even the unholy, even the least, even the unexpected, even the shocking is the place where kin-dom life is being created.

What does this mean for us? Scott gave me a clue when he told the story of a workshop on the parables which he led for GBLTQ students. After they had worked on the parable of the leaven, a gay man who had had a terrible response from family when he came out, talked with Scott. He related the story of what his family said to him when they learned about his orientation. He was belittled, humiliated, and cast out of the family circle. And, like most of us, he internalized the negative messages: unacceptable, worthless, not good enough.

The leaven parable turned his life upside down as he came to realize the even the less valued things of life are useful in creating the realm of the holy. Even what others despise is used by God to transform life into wholeness and holiness. To go back to last week's parable, like the unholy yeast, the weeds can become the stuff of transformation. It is no mistake that the wheat and the weeds are placed by editor Matthew near the Baker Woman and the yeast. If one doesn't grab your spiritual attention, the other might.

Today, we are challenged to think outside the box, to draw our circles wide, to expect to find God everywhere creating the promise. Even our shame

and regret, even our mistakes and our sin, even our longing and our tears, even our enemies can become the stuff of redemption and new beginnings.

Well, surprise! Surprise! God is a surprise!
Right before your eyes, it's baffling to the wise.
Well, surprise! Surprise! God is a surprise!
Open up your eyes and see.