

ENCRYPTED KINGDOM

Matthew 13:33

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs
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[Jesus] told them another parable: “The kingdom of God is like yeast [*zuma*] that a woman took and mixed in [*enekrupsen*] with three measures [*sata*] of flour until all of it was leavened.” - Matthew 13:33

I.

Why did Jesus teach in parables? Matthew tells us it was the only form he used. Chapter 13, verse 34: “without a parable he told them nothing.” Matthew also tells us that Jesus taught in parables to fulfill scripture, namely, Psalm 78, verse 2: “I will open my mouth in parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old.” What would it have been like to be around Jesus teaching only in parables? Would it have been fascinating, or tiresome? Would you have been tempted to say something like, “Nice story, teacher. Now tell us what it *means*.”

Perhaps Jesus taught in parables because what they meant was what they *did*. Jesus’ parables do a lot. They perplex, cajole, confront, upend. They hint, tease, mock, and lure. Most astounding is the extent to which they risk. By teaching in parables, Jesus took a risk, the risk that he would be misunderstood. But the risk was worth it because what he sought to communicate was nothing less than the kingdom of heaven, the reality of God hidden in the midst of the world, hidden the midst of everyday life. The reality of God is elusive and yet always present. The reality of God resists domestication, and yet is somehow always being offered. It cannot be controlled or commodified, packaged or processed, marketed or manipulated.

II.

These are the qualities of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus, the wisdom teacher, is attempting to share in his parables found in Matthew’s thirteenth chapter. Let us spend some time on the one verse parable of the yeast. Chapter 13, verse 33 reads: He told them another parable: “The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

At first hearing, this might seem like a nice, pithy parable which imagines a woman at work in her kitchen preparing bread for her family. Jesus used domestic scenes such as this to connect with people in their everyday lives. Many of his hearers could relate immediately to this scene. But listen more deeply and intently to the text. Like yeast in dough, the kingdom of heaven hides in the words of this tiny parable. Far from the comforting image of a woman making bread, this parable moves us from Stepford to stupefying, from nice to spice, from domestic to majestic, from controllable to what just happened? And such is the work of the kingdom of heaven, which seeks not to be understood, but to do something to us.

First of all, consider how powerful it is for Jesus to be describing the kingdom of heaven to a woman working in her kitchen. Consider in our own day the suggestion that, with all that is going on in the world, with all of the machinations of power and wealth and fame, that the kingdom of heaven, the most important reality that we can ascertain, can be glimpsed in the work of a woman in her kitchen, mixing yeast with flour. In other words, the kingdom of heaven is best conveyed in the ordinary experiences we take for granted and even ignore. What are the ordinary, everyday, commonplace moments in your life? There, Jesus is saying, in those places can the likeness of the kingdom be found.

Not only that, but by using this image of a woman, Jesus is describing the divine with a feminine image. The reality of God is like a woman making bread. Notice the word “like” in this sentence. All language about God is beholden to this word. All language about God is metaphor, which means that God is not male, but sometimes God is like a male, and, as Jesus observes, like a female. God is a bread baker at work in her kitchen.

Still, that’s a pretty comforting image. But what if the words of this parable suggest that God the bread baker is up to something? What if she is doing something unexpected, even forbidden? Most of us, when we think of yeast, think of a little package that we keep hermetically sealed in our cupboard. In the ancient world, yeast needed to be controlled and kept separate from food. For this reason, in the New Testament, yeast - the Greek word is *zuma* - is used exclusively to suggest a corrupting influence. Yeast was a metaphor for people in a group who could cause problems. You did not want a fermenting influence in your close-knit community. Jesus says, in this parable, “The kingdom of God is like yeast.” This is like saying, “The kingdom of God is a corrupting influence. It just might ruin everything.”

Not only that, but the kingdom of God is like *zuma* that a woman mixes in. In fact, the Greek word translated as “mixes in” is *enekrupsen*, which would be more closely translated, “hides.” *Enekrupsen* shares a common cognate with our word *encrypt*. She encrypts the corrupting yeast into the flour. Mixes it in so that it can’t be noticed, and when it’s noticed, too late. It’s everywhere.

And notice how much flour she uses. Three measures doesn’t sound like much, but the word translated as “measures” is *sata*, and one *sata* is enough flour to feed a household for months. Three measures, or three *sata*, are enough to make several hundred loaves, enough to feed guests at a large wedding banquet. So, not only does she hide, or encrypt, this *zuma*, or corrupting agent in the flour, it is an exorbitant amount of flour, an abundant waste of meal.

III.

What do we do with image of the encrypted kingdom, the corrupting influence of God’s reality, the clandestine and suspect activity of this unassuming woman in her kitchen? If we like our faith predictable and safe, we’d better ignore this parable. If

we like to be able to manage God's presence in our life and in our world, we'd better keep this parable in the back of our cupboard. If we are planning on getting the rest of life in order before working on being more faithful and attentive to God, we'd better not open up this packet of gospel again. If we like our god to remain in the background of our life, showing up when we need him, asking him to help us be nice people, then we'd better forget we ever heard this parable.

Because, if we're going to take Jesus' parable of the yeast seriously, it's not going to be pretty. According to Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is like something you want to avoid because it's going to get into everything and mess it up. It's like a germ that your mom slips into your lunch bag. No, it's like a germ that your mom deliberately spreads on your peanut butter and jelly sandwich and wraps into a napkin that say, "Have a great day at school, honey." No, it's like a germ that your mom deliberately spreads on your peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and then, while you are at school, she spreads that same germ into four hundred jars of peanut butter she keeps hidden on the top shelves of the pantry, your lunches for the rest of your schooldays.

What is our God up to? Can't she just leave us alone? Why doesn't she simply tell us what she wants of us? Why all this sneaking around, covert ops and such? Would we listen if she just came and told us? Or perhaps she's looking to get something done in us and to us, something that can't be explained and offered outright. She's got to do it on the sly because if we figured it out we'd try to control it, turn it into a program or a lifestyle. Underneath what you call your life is a yeasty dough that is rising and there is nothing you can do about it.

You may catch a whiff of it when you realize that you're no longer satisfied with the way things are, no longer willing to simply go through the motions as if none of it mattered.

You may get a sense of its enormity when the distractions you've placed in your life - no longer feed the hunger that is within you.

You may get a taste of the conniving, corrupting, encrypting work of God in your life on those days when you realize you've done all of the right things but there is one thing still missing.

IV.

Of course, maybe you're fine. Maybe you're content with the way things are. Maybe you like your life to be safe and predictable and, above all, nice. And that's totally okay, you know. Don't even worry about it for a second. I'm serious. But also, don't listen to Jesus, because he only teaches in parables. He doesn't make things plain. Instead he's always hiding his meaning in little stories. If you want a God that is easy to understand, don't listen to Jesus. The God he speaks of demands too much, is too mischievous, is too intent upon changing you, changing all of us. God's greatest parable, Jesus himself, takes too much work to understand. His life, death, and resurrection are too hard to explain. So why bother?

It might be better to do something familiar, something ordinary, something safe.
Go to your kitchen.
Take out some flour.
Some water.
Some yeast.
Uh oh.