

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Picture with me a five-year-old Jesus, hair tussled, dirt caked on his sandals, looking up to his mother, Mary, in the kitchen. As she hovers over the table, he watches her intently, as children are prone to do. In almost ritual fashion, Mary measures out the flour, dutifully plopping each off-white scoop into a gray stone bowl. With each measure, a cloud puffs up, the sunlight hits it just so. And just like that, it dissipates in the warm air. She then turns to her left, reaches up on the shelf and takes something down.

“What’s that?” the boy Jesus asks inquisitively.

“This is yeast, little one,” she explains, bending down and revealing a brownish slurry.

“When I mix it in, it makes the bread rise, puff up.”

“Why?” Jesus asks.

“That’s what my mother taught me, and her mother before her,” Mary says as she incorporates the yeast into the lump.

“Can I see?” Jesus asks.

“Of course.” Mary lifts him up and sits him on a stool. She kneads, turns the dough, kneads, and turns the dough.

“Is it working?” He asks wide-eyed.

Mary smiles. “Yes, it’s working.”

Fast forward nearly three decades, and this same Jesus, now grown, is pressed in on every side by those who are intrigued and enraged by his words and works. How to explain who he is and the community gathered in the name of God? Looking around and racking his memory, Jesus borrows familiar images, scenes that would have been assumed in everyday life. Last week we heard about seeds and sowing. This week, we have again scenes from agriculture, alongside real estate—the purchase of a plot of land, economics—a merchant, buying and selling jewelry, as well as the realities of fishing with a dragnet.

Although these parables use mundane images, they communicate the strange, upside-down character of God’s kingdom. When I think of kingdoms, I think of wealth, power, excess in all forms. To fathom that a kingdom—any kingdom, let alone the kingdom of God—would be equated with a mustard seed or pearl merchant who trades his entire livelihood for a single prized pearl must have sounded at best quaint and at worst absurd and foolish.

This morning, I want us to consider for a moment Jesus’s curious statement that the kingdom of God is like yeast mixed in with three measures of flour. I say curious because at only two places throughout the scriptures is yeast spoken of positively. Though ubiquitous, yeast and leavened bread carried with it dangerous connotations in the Jewish theological imagination. Yeast spoils, it ferments and opens up the possibility of rotting. And we know that it only takes a little bit of

yeast to affect a sizeable portion of dough. In the book of Exodus, for instance, leavened bread was prohibited at the altar: it was considered unfit for God. The weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread, immediately following the Day of Passover, was to remind Jews of God's quick and sure deliverance. Yeast and products with yeast were to be searched out and burned; any households who failed to do so would be cut off from Israel (Ex. 12).

Likewise, in the New Testament, Jesus most often speaks of yeast negatively. False teaching and hypocrisy are likened to leaven because they can spread rapidly and easily—"Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees," Jesus warns. So, contrary to today's reading, yeast most often spelled the harmful and corrupting influence of something seemingly minuscule that could infect something much larger. The Apostle Paul writes of yeast as the equivalent of vice, boasting and malice, that can easily spoil a faith community; those in Corinth, for example, were to be "unleavened," celebrating with simplicity and truth (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

But today's reading highlights the effects of yeast as a leavening agent to positive effect: the kingdom of God is like this small thing so potent with activity that it affects the whole dough. Like the small babe born in a feeding trough in backwoods Bethlehem, whose birth alters the course of the world, perhaps Jesus wants us to see that the true beauty of grace is that it can come in unsuspecting ways.

Sometimes grace comes in a smile, in kneeling down to speak to a child, in the embrace of a loved one in the pit of loss. Sometimes grace comes in the slow, plodding hours of caring for an aging parent or in the break room at work or in a word of affirmation and encouragement in the endless search for employment. Sometimes, for whatever reason, we fail to realize these things point beyond themselves to a God who loves the world, suffers with and for us, and guides us when night threatens to overwhelm. Sometimes the kingdom comes to us in small, subtle ways that, only in hindsight, can we recognize as altering our whole day, week, year, or life.

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Yeast is living, active; it transforms the dough in profound ways, doubling, sometimes tripling the mixture, pressing up against the side of the bowl and spilling over the edges of the bread pan. The effects of yeast are, in other words, anything but subtle. Sometimes the presence of grace is so plain, so visible, we could not possibly fail to see it.

Dear friends, do you see the kingdom around you? Maybe you see it on the front lines of protests for equal rights, advocating for those who have been shorted justice or dignity. Or perhaps you see it in the beauty of the liturgy, with the utterance of a favorite phrase, prayer, or hymn. Or maybe you see the kingdom in sharing a meal with neighbors on a summer evening, seeming to transcend time, place, and obvious difference. All of these are small, minuscule in the grand scheme and yet they can root deeply within our hearts and minds and affect the ways we live and think and love.

The good news is this: grace often comes to us in small, seemingly ordinary ways, incorporating its way into our lives slowly but surely, and moving us to love God and one another to profound

effect. Be mindful this week of the mundane, of the understated ways that love might be working in your life and in the lives of those around you. And consider how you might be called to be witnesses to that grace that can start small and nevertheless have incredible, life-giving effects.