

Sermon, 6 Pentecost
July 12, 2020
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A New Bread

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.

We have been making our way through the Gospel of Matthew this summer. Today's lesson is one in a series of parables on the Nature of the Kingdom Heaven.

As I began interacting with this passage, I referred to a favorite book titled, "Short Stories by Jesus: the enigmatic parables of a controversial Rabbi". The book is written by Amy-Jill Levine, New Testament Professor at Vanderbilt's divinity school.

This little parable is highlighted in her book. She invites us to consider the three keys in this parable as Jesus taught it. Yeast. Mixing. Flour.

First, the yeast.

When I hear this parable, I imagine my Grandmother dissolving a cake of Fleischmann's yeast in water and then mixing it into flour to form a nice loaf of bread dough. Dr. Levine observes that 2,000 years ago, yeast wasn't available in convenient packets at Kroger's. Instead, every home had a jar of something that today we call sourdough starter. A mixture of flour and water where naturally occurring yeast and bacteria form a living culture.

The Second Key of the parable is the woman and what she does with her yeast. Our version of this text reads "a woman took and mixed" the yeast into flour. In the original Greek text, the word we've translated to mixed is *enkrypto*. The root of *enkrypto* is "to hide". So a better translation of the original intent of this passage would read, "a woman took and hid yeast in flour".

The third key is about the flour.

Three **measures** of flour. I wondered what "three measures of flour" meant 2000 years ago. Was this like 3 cups? Using google, I discovered that 3 measures is more than 46 pounds of flour.

The image that Jesus drew for his followers was a woman mixing sourdough starter into 46 pounds of flour, by hand, until all of it was leavened.

The proportions are mind-boggling. I don't know how many loaves of bread this recipe would produce; it calls to mind the feeding of thousands with a few fish and loaves. This is a parable that speaks of Divine Abundance and Generosity.

Pilgrimage is about a new way of seeing things...and I wondered what I might learn by taking a pilgrimage into this parable.

So, I called a friend who bakes a lot of bread and asked if she had any sourdough starter. Well, normally she would have some, but she hadn't been able to maintain her starter, so she had thrown it out.

My next step was social media. I posted a question on FB: if you were looking for ready-to-go sourdough starter in the df/w area, where would you look? Within half an hour, there was a mason jar of sourdough starter on my welcome mat. I just happened to see Julie Sutton, one of our St. Martin leaders, as she was walking back to her car. I thanked her and asked what I should do next. She said, "well, Paula, I'd feed it over the next day or so".

Feed it? It hadn't really occurred to me that sourdough starter is alive...alive in the way of needing more flour and water, in the right proportion, to sustain healthy life and grow. Without feeding, the starter deteriorates and eventually dies.

Another response to my FB post came from a childhood friend. I've known Chris my entire life, and perhaps *because* he's known me that long, he sent a wonderful video about making sourdough bread and maintaining sourdough starter.

I watched the video many times....pausing just long enough to order a kitchen scale from Amazon. The chef pointed out a few keys to sourdough starter. First, every kitchen's starter is unique. The starter Julie gave to me has a name...she calls it: **Yeast-ivus—bread for the rest of us**. That's quite a pedigree! But the Chef's point is that once it is in my kitchen, it becomes new....by the kind of flour I will use to feed it, the water available in my town, and the bacteria that is naturally occurring on my hands.

With enough information under my belt, I mixed Navajo flour into water.... and then added it to the starter. With a sharpie, I drew lines on the mason jar so I'd remember the level of starter before and after feeding. By the next morning, I could see that my starter had grown substantially in the jar. It is alive and healthy!

I mixed sourdough starter, water, flour, and non-iodized salt, formed the dough into a ball, and put it in a bowl. The bowl was covered and left on my kitchen counter for 24 hours. After allowing the dough to rise a second time, I baked it for 45 minutes. The result was an amazing loaf of sourdough bread.

To the world in front of the text...

With a buttered slice of bread in hand, now I could reflect on this pilgrimage. What had I learned about Jesus' message to us?

In the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, We, the Church, are like sourdough starter. God plants in each of us desire to know God. Feeding that divine desire keeps us spiritually healthy and reaching for God. Worship, Prayer, learning—each of these builds up our capacity to participate in God's work on earth.

Like each batch of sourdough starter, each worship community is unique. The folks who come to St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church are not the same folks who attend other churches. Our parish is influenced by our location, in the United States, in the South, in Texas, on the borders of Southlake and Keller. Geography, culture, education,

race, income, and on and on ... we are unique. And our discernment of God's call to parish ministry is unique.

The work of the Church, Capital C, is to restore *all* people to unity with God and each other in Christ. St. Martin's has discerned her mission to be the Heart and Hands of Christ in the world. How are we feeding ourselves to grow into this mission?

America is engaging a deeper conversation about racism. Colette Bancroft, online journalist, wrote on June 10th, "People aren't just marching to support change in racial attitudes. They're doing their homework. In the weeks since George Floyd's terrible death, books about race and racism have [become national bestsellers]."

The Corona Virus continues to surge in our area. Yet we all notice that many people do not wear facemasks. We know that many people believe the virus is a hoax or conspiracy. Truth is becoming a word that means "In my opinion".

How do we help our youth find their footing in a world that tosses around half-truth and mis-truth as if they were Real Truth? What does Hope look like?

These are the 3 measures of flour that have been heaped upon our table in this time and place.

So, in the Fall, we will begin an adult learning program about white privilege and racism. We'll intersect our learning with Scripture: How did Jesus interact with privilege? Having fed our sourdough starter, how can we be the Heart and Hands of Christ in this movement toward social justice?

We will also begin an intergenerational curriculum using Patricia Lyons' book, *Teaching Faith with Harry Potter*. Harry's journey teaches us how to find and nurture hope and love in the midst of dark times.

Dallas Willard said, "The gospel is less about how to get into the Kingdom of Heaven after you die, and more about how to *live* in the Kingdom of Heaven before you die."

Jesus invites us to feed our desire to grow in Love, to live abundantly and generously. But the parable doesn't end there. We must be mixed into the flour of our time to **become** the Bread of Heaven on Earth. A new Bread, unique to this time, this place, and this parish.

Absent a pandemic, I would never have spent time making sourdough bread as an intentional pilgrimage into the parable...I wonder what else God has hidden in within this pandemic to help us discover the Nature of the Kingdom of Heaven.