

*"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."*

A special treat in my family growing up was what we called Norwegian Brown Bread. When my mom married into the Moen family, she found out the secrets of this delicious bread the Moen family liked so much were oatmeal and molasses. When I was pretty young, she showed me how to make this favorite of the family, and backing the bread quickly became my occasional chore. The only thing better than smelling the bread rising was eating the bread all slathered in butter on a cold winters day.

I grew to appreciate the baking process almost as much as the enjoyment of the finished product. Maybe that's why I have always loved this parable about the kingdom of heaven.

God's in-breaking into the world can be thought of as the **active, living yeast** that transforms flour dough into risen bread. In this parable, I think Jesus is pointing to **God's abundant giving, God's powers of transformation and the ability and intent of God to reverse our expectations and guide us toward justice.**

Jesus says that the woman uses 3 measures of flour - we learned in the children's sermon that 3 measures is approximately 50 lbs of flour. That's a lot of flour. That's flour in extravagant amounts!

She must be preparing for a huge crowd.

*Where was this woman when Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd who was listening to him preach?*

*Why so much flour?*

*Why does Matthew give us these details?*

First of all, the crowd listening to Jesus' parable would know that the baker woman was mixing up enough dough to feed a whole lot of people.

Even Betty Crocker could never handle that much dough by herself!! Those people had never *seen* that much bread.

That's because they were living under the reign of Caesar, and the policies of *his* empire created hunger on a large scale. They were mostly poor, mostly hungry, and mostly praying for *daily* bread.

But that's just it - in God's empire - the kingdom of heaven - God's willingness to give in abundance is more than we can imagine - ever. God doles out bread until all are satisfied.

As live yeast turns flour into nourishing bread, in the kingdom of heaven it is the power of God that turns despair into hope, death into life.

There is also a scriptural connection to 3 measures of flour. *We* don't make the connection to Scripture, but if you were in the crowd listening to Jesus, you'd know your bible stories, so you'd remember that when

**Sarah** bakes bread for the three angels who bring news of her pregnancy, she uses 3 measures of flour.

**Gideon** makes bread from 3 measures of flour and offers the loaves to an angel of the Lord.

When **Hannah**, the mother of the prophet Samuel, dedicates her son to the Lord, she brings 3 measures of flour to the temple as an offering.

The point is that **three measures of flour are how much you need for a holy celebration; it's about the right amount for a feast with God.**

Another thing that would have drawn the attention of the first century listeners is the leaven in this parable. Most of us like to eat leavened bread, so we think yeast is a pretty good thing.

What we don't think about, or know as well as our ancestors in Palestine did is that leaven is not a positive element in Scripture.

**Usually leaven represents evil or corruption.**

Still today, unleavened bread is eaten at Passover recalling the quick exodus from slavery in Egypt.

Leviticus requires unleavened grain to be used for sacrifices. The people listening to Jesus would understand unleavened not leavened bread as sacred and holy.

In Matthew Jesus warns his disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees" - beware of false teachings, a little can spoil the whole and lead a lot of people astray.

And, Paul portrays leaven as corruption and encourages the Corinthians to get rid of old, contaminated yeast, in order to make room for the new.

So, it would have been an unexpected twist for Matthew's listeners to hear Jesus use leaven in a parable about the kingdom of heaven. Some say that is just the point of this parable -

**that God's kingdom includes, not excludes.**

**That God's kingdom reverses,**

**turns upside down the injustice, judgment and suffering.**

Jesus continually welcomed those whom society regarded as unclean. The poor, the outcast and the marginalized are the yeast that leavens our community and brings out the rich flavors God intended for us to be. Think about who is making the leavened bread - that's right - a woman. A woman, unclean in the eyes of many, physically touching the kingdom of heaven. This parable says God is big enough, powerful

enough, merciful enough, loving enough to knead all people together and expand the kingdom of heaven.

As the yeast and flour are mixed together, the yeast becomes invisible, or hidden. Yet the leavening of bread is a natural process set in motion by the bread baker.

**The leavening works because that's it's job.**

**God works to bring a kingdom of justice, grace and mercy because that's what God does.**

One person I talked to this week, said, "yes, the kingdom is mystery, and it is here and now". When I asked if he saw it all around, he said, "I see it pretty much in the morning when I wake up, and then not for the rest of the day".

That's understandable when we look around and see injustice, pain, need, and suffering. By his preaching and teaching Jesus set God's leaven of love, grace and mercy to work in our world.

**By his resurrection we are assured God's leaven continues to work, even when we can't see it.**

There is sure to be some bubbling, fermenting, expanding and maybe even exploding in the rising of the kingdom of heaven. The tensions or detours or seeming impasses among God's people are all part of the process. There is surely to be some kneading as the kingdom of heaven is rising, and not all of the kneading will come from God's own hand.

One of my favorite steps in baking bread is to punch it down. Sometimes this is an apt description of how it feels to be living in our time. This week I went to visit an 88 yr old woman who eats downstairs, sleeps at CCNV - the shelter at 2<sup>nd</sup> and D. I went to visit her in a nursing home because someone had pushed her down and she had broken her hip. This woman and her husband came from Austria

after the war. She said times were tough then, but not as tough as they are now after she lost her home in a condo conversion of her building. With tears in her eyes, she looked at me and said, "this is not even wartime, but it is much worse out there".

Friends, there are some serious pockets of air in the kingdom of heaven that need to be popped so the reign of God will rise.

**Air pockets of injustice and inequality.**

This week the WP had a picture of 450 disability-rights advocates marching to the U.S. Capitol. They carried a sign that quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

A sign for us of God's leavening is people mobilized and "interrupting injustice with grace" so that the kingdom of heaven will rise.

God enlists all of us: some to gather the grain, some to grind the flour, some to be the yeast, some to knead and some to punch out air.

God's hands feed and ferment, knead and let rest our best flour-covered efforts toward ushering in the kingdom of heaven.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.