

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham
The Parable of the Woman Baker: A Teaching on Patience
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church
New Kent, Virginia
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
Ordinary Time
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Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

31 He put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³²it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

33 He told them another parable: '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.'

44 'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.'

45 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.'

47 'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

51 'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' ⁵²And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'

I went to the grocery store the other day and bought toilet paper without any problem. In fact there were several brands to choose from. Hand sanitizer was also available. Early on in the pandemic, I'm sure you remember not being able to easily buy these things. Another thing you couldn't get was flour. And after that, yeast. People turned to bread baking as an activity. Maybe it was partially due to having more time – we weren't commuting, so, less time in cars. Some people baked bread with their children as a family activity. Everyone could be involved.

There was also something more elemental involved. Bread reminds us of life. Bread is life-sustaining, nourishing, and comforting. If you want to sell a house, in addition to clean windows and a fresh coat of paint on the walls, the smell of freshly-baked bread is a plus! Bread evokes a kind of warm, home-centeredness in most of us. There is comfort there. During a public health crisis like the pandemic, baking bread has become a preferred activity.

Today's parables from Jesus highlight baking bread. Our readings include a rapid-fire succession of short parables: the mustard seed, the woman baker, the buried treasure, the great pearl, the fishermen. Five important parables. Jesus surely has something he wants us to understand. I can almost hear him firing off these stories, one after another. This! The kingdom of heaven is like this! God's kingdom is, after all, a pretty complex theological idea to wrap our minds around. The kingdom of heaven is all around us, and yet, we do not see it. It is hidden, but it is there.

What's it like? we ask Jesus, just like the disciples did. What does it mean that God reigns? That God rules in the world? It's like these things, says Jesus.

When we think of kingdoms, rules, and someone's reign, we don't naturally think of what Jesus taught, even though we're really familiar with the parables. Our familiarity, hearing them over and over, may have dulled us a little to the shock that the disciples must have felt at hearing Jesus' teaching.

Surely being a kingdom comes with power and showmanship, parades and things that make us say, "Wow!" Human kingdoms do. Kings wear crowns and carry orbs and scepters. The president lives in enormous, grand house, ride around in a limousine, and has an entourage to take care of him. Now imagine that on the level of a God. Imagine the grandeur and the glory that God's kingdom must have. Isaiah recounts his vision of the divine throne room:

"I saw the Lord sitting on a high and exalted throne, the edges of his robe filling the temple. Winged creatures were stationed around him. Each had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two their feet, and with two they flew about. They shouted to each other, saying: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of heavenly forces! All the earth is filled with God's glory! The doorframe shook at the sound of their shouting and the house was filled with smoke." [Isaiah 6:1-4]

Now here comes Jesus to tell his disciples about the kingdom of God. It starts small, he says. Like a mustard seed. It's hidden, he says, like leaven in bread and a buried treasure in a field. It's available, he says, to farmers, housewives, merchants, and fishermen. Daily, every day, ordinary people. When you look around at its beginnings you can only see it with the eyes of faith; by being a person who knows that it's there. That kind of person who has true knowledge of the kingdom of God is willing to sacrifice everything in their life to get it, to experience it.

As follower of Jesus, we aren't trading in our lives for a golden throne, a crown, and authority over other people. Instead, we're giving our lives over to something that perhaps others cannot see. Something hidden, but powerful.

Yeast is like that. It's so small you can only see it with a microscope. It's a single-celled organism. It feeds on sugar and gives off carbon dioxide. It's that that gives bread its rise. Yeast gives bread its distinctive flavor, and a delicious scent, but it also takes time and nurture. This is why on the night of the Passover God instructed the Hebrew people to eat unleavened bread. They needed to be ready to leave at any moment in order to be freed from slavery. No yeast – no leaven – no time to let bread rise. That was the presence of God in that moment, so fast, so powerful, so present that everyone needed to be prepared to go.

But in this moment, Jesus says God's reign is like leaven in bread. It starts small. A woman takes it and hides it in three bushels of flour – that's enough to feed a small village with bread. That small amount of leaven permeates all that flour and creates enough nurture to rise, and to turn the flour into bread. Bread. Enough to nourish and sustain a village of people.

That is what the kingdom of God is like. I think at some foundational level this is something we connect to, particularly in times of stress. Stress can make us believe that everything needs to happen immediately. Our discomfort when we are under stress can make us believe that something should happen right away to relieve us of that discomfort.

The rapid-pace of society adds to this expectation. We expect that when we want something, we should find a way to get it quickly. A few years ago there was a popular, and funny, commercial on TV. A woman walked into a coffee shop, and placed an order. "I'd like 'an iced, ristretto 10 shot, venti, with breve, 5 pump vanilla, 7 pump caramel, 4 splenda, poured, not shaken,' she said. Then when the barista turned around to make it, she interrupted him and said, "Excuse me! Where's my coffee?"

Partly it's funny because it's true. When we want something, we want it now. One of the effects of dealing with our current situation is that we want to be relieved from our discomfort, from our fears, and from the compromises we've had to make in our lives in order to keep each other safe. We want to get back to normal and we want it quickly. We haven't been able to do that safely, and I'll join right in with you in saying how irritating and disappointing that is. We want our lives back the way they were.

This time has helped us have some humility about our ability to control our lives. There are so many things we can't control and can't fix immediately. But there are some opportunities hidden in our situation to explore our faith and our relationship to God. Even now, the kingdom of God is all around us. It isn't flashy and grand and full of military might, power, and domination.

It's like a mustard seed. It's like yeast in bread dough. Small, but nurturing life. Expansive and full of potential. It will evolve into something that feeds us, sustains our lives, and gives us comfort. It probably won't give us exactly what we want in the moment that we want it. But God will give us what we need, in God's own time. We simply need to be patient. Rest in the ordinary things. Focus on what's important in life: family, friends, God. Feed one another on love and nurture. Check in with relatives. Tell people you love them. Remember your neighbors, even the ones that drive us crazy, and love them too.

Go to the store, buy some flour and some yeast. Practice making bread, and remember that in God's time, something good will grow. We might look back on this time with fondness. We've spent a lot of it in tight quarters with our families. We've been forced into our homes and we're experiencing time and our lives quite differently. Remember that we are God's people, and that in God's own time, not ours, God's nurturing reign will be visible. And that our relationship to God is the greatest treasure of all.

Amen.