

## **ROMANS 8:26-39**

<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

<sup>28</sup>We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup>And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## **MATTHEW 13:33**

<sup>33</sup>He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

## **SERMON**

When I was growing up, there was a series of books being published called "Choose Your Own Adventure." Some of you may be familiar with them from your own childhood, or perhaps your kids read them. The premise of these books is that you, the reader, get to choose how the adventure unfolds. So, the main character may be

walking into a cave, and suddenly he comes upon a split in the road. To the left, the cave gets smaller, but to the right, the cave looks larger and more open. Which way should he go? To turn left, flip to page 5. To turn right, flip to page 7. And on the story would go, each direction leading to a completely different story, a completely different set of choices and options for your character to encounter. You could, quite literally, choose your own adventure. The story would end a different way every time you read one of these books. Depending on your choices, the character may be led to safety...or he may end up at the bottom of a pit with a cave-dwelling bear as his new best friend.

And today's parable is sort of one of these "choose your own adventure" kinds of Bible verses. I'll warn you upfront: if you're looking for one, clear, concise, take-home message, you're going to be disappointed. This parable is very short, but the image of yeast is a particularly expansive metaphor, so there are at least a baker's dozen of ways you could hear this parable and interpret it. So, instead of telling you exactly what I think, I'm going to offer you a couple of thoughts to chew on, and then as you digest this parable, you can see how it nourishes you. In fact, as a side note, this is the work of biblical interpretation. Reading the Bible is a constant exercise in "choosing your own adventure" and interpreting the passage in front of you. Each of us sees the Bible through our own eyes, and we bring to it our own experiences and biases, opinions and hopes, and that shapes the kind of meaning we take from it. But instead of ending up in a pit with a bear, like the choose your own adventure stories, hopefully end up with something a bit more applicable and realistic.

In order to understand this parable, there are two images that bear a bit of explanation, the first, of course, is the yeast itself. Now, yeast is an incredibly important part of baking breads and other leavened goods, and brewing beer or even fermenting wine. Back in Jesus' day, they didn't have yeast like we do today, in those little packets at the grocery store. Yeast for Jesus was actually what we would call a sourdough starter, today. This is actually how The Mother Loaf down next to Milan Coffee Works and the OG makes their sourdough bread. If you were to take some flour and water, mix it together, and leave it out in a warm place, that flour-water mixture would capture wild yeast from the air. Those yeasts in the air, once they're in the flour-water mixture, they'll start to eat the flour and produce gas, which is what makes the bubbles in dough, which become air pockets in a loaf of bread, and that's why bread is light and chewy.

Yeast in and of itself isn't good or bad, it's just yeast. It does exactly what it always does. However, yeast in both the ancient world and today has a bit of an "ick" factor to it. When John and I lived in NJ, he decided to try and capture his own wild yeast. So, he made a bowl of flour and water and put it out on our porch. He captured yeast, and the bowl began to bubble a bit, and then he just left it there. And fresh yeast smells kind of nice, but two, three, four day old yeast? Well, it starts to stink. The sour smell gets very overwhelming. We lived on the second floor, and you could smell the sour stink of John's wild yeast culture as you walked by our building. Yeast is good, and we could have used that stinky wild yeast to make good bread, but when it's in that concentrated form, it's kind of gross.

And on top of that, yeast can be infectious. Now, we all know that if you mix a little yeast into a quantity of flour, it makes a big, puffy

loaf of bread. It doesn't take much at all. The yeast can infect the flour in that way. However, yeast can also infect your kitchen air. Back when we were in NJ, again, we would brew beer in the basement of our building with friends. Once we decided to try brewing a sour beer, which uses a special kind of yeast called Britt. The guy at the beer store warned us to be careful, lest the Britt yeast infect the area and kettles we brew in. Well, long story short, that's exactly what happened. The Britt yeast got into the basement of our building, and every batch of beer we brewed there for the next two years ended up being a sour beer, because the Britt yeast in the air got into the beer and infected it. A little yeast can go a long way, and it's surprisingly powerful.

But at the same time, yeast is weirdly weak in some ways. If you have a sourdough starter going at your house, you have to feed it more water and flour every day, because that's its "food." Once it runs out, the starter dies off, and you're left with a bucket of goo that won't bake into a puffy loaf of bread. In some cities, this is a real thing, people "board" their sourdough starters and pay people to take care of them while they go on vacation. Like a dog at a kennel. You have to tend to your sourdough starter, lest it die off and prove worthless.

So, Yeast, like I said, is a mixed image. It's yummy and important, kind of gross and putrid, and it's powerful and infecting, but can die really easily. I'm not sure what to do with all of that. Let's talk about the second part and then put them together.

The next image here is the flour, and specifically the "three measures" bit. "Three measures" in the Bible isn't a small amount,

it's somewhere in the range of 40-60 pounds of flour. Another word for this is an ephah of flour. For us, "three measures" sounds like maybe an arbitrary detail or a throwaway line. However, for Jesus' audience, "three measures" would have brought to mind very specific stories from the Bible where other people brought out three measures of flour. The first is the story I read to the kids this morning, of Sarah and Abraham and the three angelic visitors. When the visitors arrive, Abraham tells Sarah to run inside, gather three measures of flour, knead it, and bake cakes to share with the men. Now, 40-60 pounds of flour would make a ton of cake, way more than a few people could eat together. But Abraham was known far and wide for his generosity and hospitality. So, this vast quantity may have something to do with that.

The second story Jesus' audience would remember is that of Hannah, when she brings her son, Samuel, to the temple to be dedicated to the Lord, she brings three measures of flour in offering, along with a bull and some wine. It's a generous, bountiful offering. Again, I hear hints of hospitality and lavish generosity here.

Finally, Jesus' listeners would have been reminded of the story of Gideon. Before battle, Gideon eats a meal of cakes made with three measures of flour, but he doesn't have time for them to rise, so he eats them unleavened. Gideon says "My clan is the weakest, I am the least" and then he goes on to win the battle. In this story, there's a hint here of the smallest going on to great things...a little yeast leavening all of the flour.

And so, here we are. We have this image of yeast: important, delicious, smelly, powerful, and weak all at the same time. And a

large quantity of flour, which brings to mind these other stories of baking and sharing food, with visitors, with God, before a battle. There are numerous ways we could bring this together to help us understand the kingdom of heaven...which is like yeast.

Traditionally, preachers have said something along the lines of, “the Kingdom of Heaven is small and powerful, it only takes a little yeast to leaven the whole loaf. It only takes a little Kingdom, a few good words or actions, to change the world.” That’s a fine interpretation, but honestly, it’s a little boring. A little “white bread” as one writer put it.<sup>1</sup> It seems too easy, like the Kingdom of Heaven just sort of happens all on its own. It’s an interpretation that ignores the woman and her work in this parable. Instead, I’ll offer two other ideas of where this parable may be going, and you can take it from there.

First, I wonder if this is a parable about nurturing the kingdom of God. When people were evacuating from New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, the baker at Emeril Lagasse’s restaurant actually went to the shop to pick up his sourdough starter and took it with him when he evacuated the city, so he could feed it and care for it. When they returned to the French Quarter a bit later and reopened the restaurant, they were so proud to be able to say that they were baking the same bread as before. Their sourdough leaven became a touchstone, this reminder of life before the storm. And the reason they were able to keep that tradition going is because that baker carried the starter with him, he tended to it and fed it with flour and

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill. Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015. Pages 108-109.

water and kept that yeasty starter alive. These starters require attention, and if the kingdom of heaven is like that, I wonder if there's something in this parable about tending to the kingdom here and now, looking for ways to tend it daily, giving it the flour and water of our words and actions to foment peace and justice around the world. Like yeast, the kingdom of god must be tended. It's not just that the kingdom of God is like yeast and acts all on it's own, growing like crazy, but to do so, it requires our hands and feet, our work and worship.

Or, as a second option, maybe this is a parable about generosity. Abundance and hospitality is all over this parable. It's always present when Jesus brings up food, for a start. Jesus is all about sharing food and being at meals together, giving bread to the poor, being the bread of life, feeding the 5,000. You get the picture: for Jesus, food and generosity go hand in hand. And in this parable, the direct connection to the other stories highlights generosity: Hannah's offering at the temple, Abraham and Sarah's massive cakes, even the sheer volume of this measurement: 40-60 pounds of flour makes a lot of bread! If the Kingdom of God is like the yeast, maybe it leavens and enlivens the gifts we bring, like flour, to share and the hands we offer to knead the flour and yeast into bread. I loved what one author posited: "the kingdom is present [...] when everyone has enough to eat."<sup>2</sup> That works for me, and it's a pretty compelling invitation to act. To be generous and abundant in our hospitality, to make sure everyone is fed with good bread.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Page 125.

These are just a couple of possible ways you could hear and interpret this little one sentence parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." My prayer for us is that we would carry this little story with us in the day and week ahead, mull it over, consider the possibilities it affords to us, that we would, in a sense, eat this bread and allow the leaven and flour of these words to feed our souls and call us into the work of the kingdom here, on earth, whatever adventure we may choose along the way.