

FPCU

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*Speaking in Parables*

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*Text: Matthew 13:31-35*

<sup>31</sup> He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> it 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.” <sup>33</sup> 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.” <sup>34</sup> Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. <sup>35</sup> This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden since the foundation.”

In a Peanuts cartoon strip by Charles Shultz, Lucy is being obnoxious. She yells at younger brother, Linus, as he is watching TV, “I don’t wanna watch that program. I wanna watch my program. “All right,” he says, “I’ll go upstairs and listen to the radio.” But Lucy follows him upstairs and says, “I don’t wanna listen to that program. I wanna listen to my program.” So he goes to listen to some records, and again, Lucy follows him in, saying (you guessed it!), “I don’t wanna listen to those records. I wanna listen to my records.” So Linus says, “All right. I’ll go outside and look at the stars for a while.” Lucy follows him out, and begins, “I don’t wanna look at those stars. I wanna look at my....” And looks up at the canopy of stars. Silence, a big “Sigh!” and she leaves.

This is a parable, points out author Robert Short. It’s far more powerful than any sermon or lecture about who God is and who is really in control, isn’t it? Parables, Short says, can work in different ways. Some are mirrors of the current reality. Remember the parable the prophet Nathan told King David after he stole Bathsheeba from her husband and got the husband killed? The parable was about a rich man who had lots of sheep but stole the one beloved sheep from a poor man. King David was outraged at this rich man, until Nathan pointed out that he, the king, was that rich man. And David understood this mirror held up to him, and repented.

Sometimes a parable is a lens, allowing the listener to focus on what’s important and how they are called to act. Jesus would sometimes end these with, “go and do likewise,” as he does at the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. These lenses can, however, be radical and shocking to the listener.

The parable, however, can also become what Short calls, “through a glass darkly.” The story, instead of being a mirror of insight or a lens of action, provokes a whole new question. Jesus would often ask then, “What do you think?” These are probably the most troubling ones for us. However, all parables can be challenging. Jesus told them using common places and things – barns and fields, yeast and money, seeds and weeds. He told them with exaggerations to emphasize the ideas, as is done in the Book of Esther. He used, we think, common jokes and stories and turned them on their head to shock or provoke.

Parables, then, are often more effective than any long speech or sermon. They get into your mind, under your skin without you realizing it. They turn your world upside down; they turn you around – which is, of course, what “conversion” means. In the months of July and August, Matt and I will be preaching on the parables of Jesus. Many of these are very familiar and have even become cliches in our American culture – as, for example, the easy way we call heroes and helpers “Good Samaritans,” which completely misses the point of that parable.

Today I am beginning with my favorite, the Parable of the Yeast. It is often paired with the parable of the Mustard Seed, although Matthew has also grouped them with “the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat.” If you want to study parables, a great place to start is Chapter 13 of Matthew where many of them are located. In this chapter, Jesus is teaching the crowds, and especially his disciples, what the kingdom of God is like (the kingdom of heaven, for Jewish Matthew who could not speak God’s name). And the stories are shocking. Why? Let’s start with what “kingdom” means to his followers and to us.

If God and God’s Messiah create a kingdom on earth, what do we expect it to look like? Large, powerful, rich and sumptuous, beautiful, safe – with lots of land and forests and resources; with palaces and sailing ships; gold all over the place like Versailles. Jesus says instead, “a seed, a handful of yeast.” What?!! The oppressed people of Palestine in Jesus’ time were expecting an army of angels, the overthrow of the oppressors filling their streets with ruthless soldiers. They longed for plenty of food, and water, and a lasting peace. And the oppressed, the poor, and those of us tired of wars and injustice and anger and hatred can’t help hoping for something like that also.

A seed? A handful of yeast? Really, Teacher? They are tiny! Yes, relative to their size they are strong, but they act slowly. How long will it take mustard seeds to become large bushes, if they ever do? Have you ever waited for dough to rise, to “proof” as cooks say? Hours! And if the dough doesn’t rise properly you wind up

with hard, sour, bread. I know, because it happened to me several times in my bread baking days. These are images of God's kingdom?

The yeast image is even more shocking. The religious leaders, including Jesus himself, often used yeast to describe the way sin and evil worked. In Mt. 16:6, he tells his disciples: *"Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."* Wrong thinking and doing leads to more wrongdoings; evil deeds create more evil deeds in the dough of society. But here, Jesus uses yeast to describe the kingdom of God! I bet some people left in disgust when they heard this.

If we think of God's reign as yeast, though, we come to understand some important truths. I was helped by a Latin American theologian, Juan Segundo. He points out that churches often act like country clubs – you join and get special privileges. People in the church are the "ins" and those not in the church are the "outs." They are sometimes seen with condescension and superiority by the "ins." But that is not what Jesus wants us to be. Jesus wants us to be yeast, bubbling in society so that society can be transformed, changed into the kingdom of heaven.

Think of the importance of leaven to make a rich bread. If you don't want a simple, flat bread you need something to change the simple water and flour to make it rise, usually yeast (although it can be also be a sourdough starter). Yeast and bacteria consume sugars in the dough, releasing carbon dioxide to create an airy rise and producing alcohols and acids that develop complex flavors. They are creating air bubbles that makes the dough breathe and double in size. And after baking, you have a wonderful tasty loaf of that basic food, bread.

So let's play with the idea of what it means for us, as a church, to be yeast transforming society. Presbyterians and Reformed churches, from their beginnings, have believed that God calls us to transform the society we live in. (We Presbyterians are Reformed and date back to the Reformation in the 1500s). Our *Book of Order*, our Constitution, in the section written in 1910 about our faith and what we believe, states that a theme of our tradition is:

*"The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God."* (F-2.05).

It also lists as two of the Great Ends of the Church (what Jesus calls us to do):

*"the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."* (F-1.0304)

To be yeast means to demonstrate to the world what the kingdom of God looks like through our behavior. To people who come into our church gatherings, and who meet us out in the world knowing we are Christians – to these we model the kingdom of God, a kingdom of love, mercy, justice, peace. We bubble into the world and we change it. Hasn't the church often done this when it was at its best? Slaves were freed and hidden by church people on the Underground Railroad. And Christians led the fight against slavery – just to name one example.

Our own American Declaration of Independence and our Constitution which we celebrate this weekend carry many of these Christian principles of freedom and liberty and justice for all, principles of equality and freedom of speech and freedom of religion and beliefs. And like yeast, it has bubbled and changed our nation along the way -- as we woke up to the implications in this document. Like yeast, it changed us to realize that not only were all men created equal, but also women, and slaves, and immigrants and indigenous peoples and people who look different from us. We are coming to understand (even though it's uncomfortable) that other points of view and other religions are protected.

So it is with us as Christians. We have the greatest document of all, the Bible, with words from the Savior himself, and his Holy Spirit, to guide us and give us wisdom on how to exhibit God's kingdom here and now.

The thing about yeast is that it works in a clump, as a group. You don't just use one grain of yeast. That's helpful for us to remember – it's not up to me by myself. We work together, as a many – and so we are not alone. Together we are strong – we can change our world!

What needs to be transformed? Where is God calling us to bubble and help? We did it last week at VBS – what a good work of outreach that was to 90 children in the community! We do it in many ways already. And as we move forward God will show us new ways we can serve and bring God's love to situations that need transformation.

One final thought about God's yeast and its transformative power. I think that's what is also at work in each one of us. God's Spirit as we open ourselves to God is changing us for the better. I remember what an impatient person I was as a child and young adult. And yet now some people have thanked me for my patience. Not my patience! It's the Spirit at work!

So let's open ourselves to God's yeasty Spirit to change us and change our world. Are you ready to go into the world and bubble? Amen!