

## The Kingdom of God is Like a Woman Baking Yeast Bread for the World

Matthew 13:35

I've preached this parable before, but I cannot preach it now as I did then. It's Amy-Jill Levine's fault, our Davis Lecturer next Sunday at 5p.m.

I've said it, only slightly tongue in cheek, that she's ruined more of my sermons than any scholar I know. I cannot preach them the same way now. And this week she has opened my eyes to a new way of hearing and preaching this parable.

My new listening is captured in the title of my sermon: "The Kingdom of God is Like a Woman Baking Yeast Bread for the World.

### I

If I were to take a survey on the smells we love the most, near the top of the list would be the smell of yeast bread baking in the oven. There's a Mrs. Baird's Bread factory in Ft. Worth, and people go out of their way to drive down that street. Oh, that wonderful smell!

Most scholars today—and a number of my sermons—have focused on the parable's leaven, or yeast, in a negative way: Its unclean, unholy, something bad.

And the way I've preached this parable goes sometimes like this: *Jesus makes holy unclean things*. Look at his dinner parties with sinners and tax-collectors. And he didn't hold his nose. Jesus works with the worst of us and worst in us to transform and bring something good.

Now this was a major theme of Jesus' ministry and teaching, but now I ask, is this what this parable was first about? Yes, Jesus did make us take a new look at what is holy and unholy, sometimes refocusing our eyes, but is this what this parable is about?

Amy-Jill Levine points out the problem of much preaching on this parable and of Christian preaching and scholarship in general: *We try to make Jesus look good by making Jews look bad*. So the parable is preached this way: yeast is bad, Judaism is bad. Jesus is using bad yeast to make something new and good.

The parable is often attached to this saying of Jesus in Matthew 16:6:

Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

But Jesus was talking about the *teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees he felt led us astray: like the overly legalistic teaching of the Pharisees of that time and the way the Sadducees cozied up to whoever was in power. But those problems are not Jewish problems, they are problems in most religions: religious

leaders who preach severe legalism and cozy up to power. I can think of a few today.

The Apostle Paul also used leaven as a metaphor for something negative: the leaven that spoils the lump, as in the saying “One rotten apple spoils the barrel.”

But what we need to see is that yeast can be good *or* bad. Yeast turns bad when it is useless, like the expiration date on those small red packets of yeast we buy at the stores.

But that’s not what the parable of the leaven is about. As Amy-Jill Levine says, leaven was like sourdough starter for sourdough bread. That sounds like something good!

## II

Now let’s move to the *woman* in the parable. Jesus often used women as heroes in his parables, and the gospel writers often joined two parables together, one with a man as hero and the other with a woman—like Luke’s parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. There were many women heroes in the Hebrew scripture, and Jesus showed women’s worth in many ways, including featuring them in his parables.

So now to the *kitchen*! Jesus elevated domestic life to something holy. Jews remove all the leaven, or yeast, from their kitchen during Passover not because it is bad or evil, but as a remembrance of the night before their Exodus from slavery in Egypt when they didn't have time to wait for bread to rise, and so took with them unleavened bread. It may also have lasted longer in the wilderness journey.

We do not normally associate the domestic chores of the household as something holy, but perhaps we should! Cooking for one's family is an act of love. Cooking for guests is an act of love, for an evening of friendship. There's a lot of love for this church and God that goes on in our church kitchen! There's a lot of *church* that goes on in that kitchen!

Isn't there something miraculous in the making and cooking of bread? You take a tiny bit of yeast, and add sweetness, some salt, water, heat and time—and bread, wonderful bread comes forth. A little bit of yeast, a little bit of love and people are joined to have a meal together.

Kathleen Norris, poet and spiritual writer writes of “the humble mystery of the inherited recipe.” It has passed through many hands to us as a liturgy of love.

The Gospel of Thomas in its version of the parable makes the *woman*, not the yeast, the subject of the parable: “The Father's kingdom is like a woman. She

took a little yeast, and made it into large loaves of bread.” (Thomas 96:1-2) Pay attention to the woman!

### III

Let’s turn back to the parable to underline some key words:

The Kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman hid in three measures of flour til it was all leavened.

Hid? We have heard it as the woman *mixing* the leaven, because that’s what we expect to hear, but the word unmistakably says “hid”!

This seems curious. But there’s great promise in these words. What is hidden now will become something wonderful. We may not see the miraculous processes of the kingdom at work, but it is at work nonetheless to redeem our lives and the life of the world. Jesus said once, “The kingdom comes *not* by observation!” This was to encourage us when we cannot see the kingdom at work. Like his parable of the seed growing secretly, the farmer plants seeds, goes to sleep, and while he is sleeping, his crop begins to grow.

We can despair about the state of the world, even our nation, but Jesus is saying, as in the West Side Story song, “Something’s coming, something good.” The bread is rising, the kingdom’s doing its holy work despite appearances to the contrary!

## IV

Matthew paired this parable with the parable of the mustard seed. They interpret each other, side by side. Hear it again:

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it grows it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

(Did you note that the two twin parables feature one a man and the other a woman?) This story is not botanically true, it is theologically true, spiritually true. The kingdom is grown from tiny things.

*From tiny things* is the truth of this parable. From tiny bad things, bad will grow, yes as one evil idea can vilify entire groups of people, but God is saying from the tiny things of goodness, great goodness will come. As Mother Teresa said: “Do small things with great love.”

So don't lose heart! What is hidden will become something wonderful, and from tiny things the kingdom grows!

## V

But there's one more often overlooked detail. The woman hid the leaven in *three measures of flour*. In that day that meant 40-60 pounds of bread! Enough

for a whole village. Such is the extravagance of God. Like Jesus turning jars of water into 120 gallons of wine at the wedding feast of Cana! We have no stingy God.

We see the extravagance of God everywhere in nature—in the bright colors of the wildflowers and the song of the birds, in the running streams that burble and sing, in the rainbows and sunsets. And we see it in the love of God made flesh in Jesus and in every human love. The extravagant kindness of God.

Here the woman is making yeast bread for the whole village; and the kingdom of God is bread for the world. Amy-Jill Levine writes of our ideas of heaven and of the kingdom of heaven:

...perhaps the parable tells us that despite all our images of golden slippers and harps and halos, the kingdom is present at the communal oven of a Galilean village when everyone has enough to eat.<sup>1</sup>

The common Jewish blessing at meals goes,

Blessed are you, O God,

Sovereign of the universe,

who brings forth bread

from the earth.

We have kneaded the dough, the bread is rising, the smells fill the air, and the kingdom is bread for the whole wide world.

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Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (N.Y.: HarperOne, 2014),137