

4. The Parable of the Leaven

(Matt 13:33)

As we continue our journey through the parables, we find another simple image that anyone could understand, which Jesus uses to teach us about the Kingdom of heaven.

So far, all of the parables we've been reading have been about farming: we have seen how a sower sowed seeds in different kinds of soil, and how a farmer planted wheat but his enemy planted tares along with them, and how a farmer planted a tiny mustard seed. In each story, we find some wisdom about how God's Kingdom can grow here on earth, and grow in our hearts.

These stories aren't just about things growing -- each story is about someone working. People are sowing seeds and raising crops, and a transformation occurs. Through a combination of God's blessings and the efforts of people, wonderful fruits (even spiritual fruits!) are growing.

The next parable Jesus tells is not about planting seeds -- but this one *is* about wheat!

We were just talking about wheat lately, so let's think back to the parable of the wheat and the tares. We remember that the farmer, who is like God, sowed his good seeds, and then his enemy, who is Satan or the devil, planted bad seeds in the same field. We remember how the tares (or weeds) looked just like wheat, so the farmer let all of them grow together and then separated them at the end, just as God will allow evil to live alongside goodness in this world, and he will wait until the end of days, and then he will separate the good and the bad, and the wheat will be in the Kingdom of God, and the tares will just be tossed away and burned.

The difference between the wheat and the tares, for the farmer, is that wheat is productive; wheat produces fruit or grains and the weeds don't produce anything useful. The grains of wheat can feed the family, or they can be sold for a profit. God wants us to produce fruit too, but it's a spiritual kind of fruit; when the Kingdom of God is growing inside of us and the Holy Spirit is present in us, we grow fruits like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Today's parable is about wheat too, but in this parable, it has already finished growing, and now the wheat has been processed. The farmers have grown the wheat and harvested the grains, and then sent those grains to a mill to be ground down into meal or flour, like you would use for baking. In fact, the parable is about a woman baking!

Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.” (Matt. 13: 33)

We don't use the word “leaven” very often, but it means “yeast”. If you have ever baked a loaf of bread from scratch, like when you bake prosphora for Holy Communion, you have done what this woman did! She had her big bowl of flour, and she mixed in just a little bit of yeast. When I make prosphora, I use four cups of flour -- which is kind of a lot -- and I only add about two teaspoons of yeast. There is a LOT more flour than yeast.

Have you ever seen yeast? Usually when you get it dry for bread-making it looks like little round seeds -- kind of like little tiny mustard seeds! Jesus has already told us how the mustard seed grows to be a big tree, and now he's telling us how this small amount of little yeast granules will transform everything -- all of the flour will be different.

You see, if you put flour and salt and water together, you'll get a really tough dough, something you might use as clay to make Christmas ornaments or something, but you won't get a nice soft bread. If you cooked it, it would stay flat and hard, like a cracker or maybe like a rock.

But if you want to use that flour to make a nice soft, fluffy loaf of bread, you'll need live yeast. Unlike flour and water and salt, yeast is alive! And good bakers know that if you kill that yeast, it won't work and your bread won't rise! The yeast begins cold and dormant and small, but then when you wake it up with warm water, it bursts into action! If the water's too hot, you'll kill it. Yeast is alive, like the breath of lives that God blew into us to create us: with a breath, He transformed us from clay to living souls, and now the yeast will start blowing into our dough! It creates bubbles, transforming it from a mere ball of clay into a beautiful, fluffy loaf of bread.

And the funny thing is, once you mix even a little bit of yeast into your flour, it can never be taken away. You can't separate it back out. The flour is “leavened” and now if you bake with it, you'll be making bread, not crackers. The flour can't make flat things anymore, but whatever you bake with it will be “leavened” and it will puff up and rise when you bake it.

“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

This woman took just a tiny bit of yeast, and she transformed all that wheat. From now on, it is filled with this life, this yeast, and now it will grow much bigger! Like the mustard seeds that start so small, these tiny granules will transform that flour into a big fluffy loaf of bread!

The Holy Scriptures talk about bread very often. You might even remember a story where the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness and they were so hungry! God told Moses that he

would send them food, and he did! He sent down manna, which was kind of like bread, and it fell from the sky and they were able to eat.

There is also a story about feeding people bread in St. John's gospel, when Jesus was teaching the people out in the countryside away from town. As night came, these thousands of people who had followed him out into the wilderness (kind of like how the Israelites had followed Moses out to the wilderness) and they got very hungry, but there wasn't much food. A little boy had five small loaves of bread and two small fish, and that was all there was! But Jesus told them to feed the people, and the disciples were amazed to see a miracle: they kept passing out bread and fish to everyone, and they were able to feed thousands and thousands of people! Just that tiny amount of food fed so many. This was one of Jesus' great miracles.

The next day, Jesus was talking with the disciples about this, and they asked Jesus for a sign, for proof that he is the Son of God:

Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do? Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."

(John 6: 30 - 35)

Isn't that interesting? Jesus is the Bread of Life. He is like spiritual food for us, and when we receive that food it gives us strength. Our bodies need food to live, and our souls do, too!

We receive the Bread of Life when we take holy communion, the Body and Blood of Christ. Here's an interesting thing about bread and wine! You must use leaven or yeast to make the bread puff up and rise, and did you know they use yeast to make wine too? They smash up grapes, and then they add just a little bit of yeast. The yeast starts bubbling just like it does in bread dough! In grape juice, that living bubbly yeast starts a process called fermentation, which turns the grape juice into wine. Just like you add a little leaven to the flour to transform it, you add a little leaven to the grape juice to transform that!

It's really beautiful, if you think about it:

- We take God’s simple gifts of wheat and grapes, and we inject our own energies, our yeast and our effort, and we transform them into bread and wine!
- We take bread and wine into the Church and we offer them up in love.
- Now what will God do with them? Like we did, He will receive our gifts and then add His own creative energy, blessing them and transforming them into the very body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Finally, he offers them back to us! We receive the transformed Gifts, the Holy Mysteries, and what happens? They transform us!

This is so beautiful – God offers things and we invest our energy to transform them, and then he transforms them and offers them back -- just lovingly offering things back and forth, while the world and our hearts become more and more wonderful. How amazing!

This is how we should live our lives. God gives us life and blesses us with communities and talents. When we take those gifts and invest our creative energy and offer them back to the Lord, He will transform them into something even greater, and offer them back to us. Our entire lives can be invested in this process of gratefully receiving and offering back to God, and we will be totally transformed.

So as we finish up, let’s ask ourselves what we have learned about God’s Kingdom for Jesus’ parable. He said, *“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”* So the Kingdom of heaven is like something small that gets planted in or mixed in with the fruits of your labor -- and it completely transforms your work into something different and wonderful! Like the mustard seed, that leaven looks like a tiny, dead thing -- but it has so much life inside it, and when you wake up that life, it bursts forth! When our tiny seeds of faith in our hearts are awakened and start to grow, the abundant life of the Kingdom bursts forth inside of our hearts!

QUESTIONS:

In the parable, where did the woman hide the leaven?

- *She hid it in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.*

How do we use leaven? Can you give an example?

- *Leaven helps dough to rise. For example, yeast is one kind of leaven that we put into bread dough. It makes the bread dough rise and get fluffy instead of baking hard like a rock.*

Tell one way that the Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven.

- Just like leaven is small but can make things grow so much bigger, when we do a small thing - like asking God to help us - the Kingdom of Heaven completely transforms our work into something different and wonderful! Or when the tiny seeds of faith in our hearts are awakened and start to grow, the abundant life of the Kingdom bursts forth inside of our hearts.

FOR DISCUSSION:

In this parable, we learned that the Kingdom of Heaven may seem small or even dead, but when it is mixed into our whole life, it grows into something wonderful. Can you think of another example of something that is small but grows big? Was there ever a time when something small in your life became something big? Talk together about that. And what about the Kingdom of Heaven? Did you ever have a “small” experience (maybe at Church, or somewhere else in the Kingdom of Heaven) that made a big difference to you or your family? Tell about it, then listen as others tell about theirs!