

Earthy Wisdom: Jesus' Parables of Creation
Part 3: Parable of the Leaven

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Genesis 18:1-16; Matthew 13:34-35

I. The Leaven of Wholeheartedness

This morning we turn to not only the shortest parable in our series, but the shortest parable Jesus ever told. The Parable of the Leaven:

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. (Matthew 12:34)

On its surface, the parable's meaning is quite simple. It's like Jesus is saying, "If you work even a tiny experience of heaven into someone's life, it is capable of transforming their entire life."

This leaven analogy rings true to my experience. How about yours? Have you ever been spellbound by a vision of Reality that lasted just a few seconds, or a few minutes, but seemed to convey the eternal to you?

When many of you participated in the one-on-one "getting to know you" conversations after I first arrived in Niantic – conversations that are still continuing, by the way, if you'd like to sign up¹ – a number of you shared stories of God-moments you experienced as far back as early childhood. It was clear that these experiences set you on a course that you have been following ever since. That little bit of leaven – or taste of heaven – gradually worked its way into your whole life.

When I spoke with my friend, Imam Jamal, about this parable as we were taping the Converging Paths Podcast, he saw a similar dynamic at work not simply in that bit of heaven that God introduces into our lives, but in the bit of heaven we seek to give back to the world in response. He observed that when we sincerely strive to serve God in some way – serving *wholeheartedly*, not half-heartedly – we can expect to produce something that, like bread, feeds not only ourselves but many others.

Of course, when we think of serving God, often we get this picture in our mind of Sunday School teachers, ministers, and other people who do "church stuff." But in keeping with Jesus's analogy about heaven being conveyed through adding leaven to bread dough, I would encourage us to think about serving God in broader terms. Taking a cue from Imam Jamal, if we focus on the sincerity, or wholeheartedness of our efforts – not the

¹ Just scroll to the bottom of any NCC Wednesday email and you'll find the invitation. Or, use this link: <https://www.videoask.com/fafihi11c>

churchiness - then what Jesus is saying, essentially, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who labors wholeheartedly. The results of her sincerity spread far beyond the amount of her labor.’”

Anything we do wholeheartedly can become a ministry that works God’s realm further into the world like leaven. Even breadmaking itself! In the Children’s Moment video this morning, Ellie Pegler, owner of the “Farine + Four” bakery in Omaha, Nebraska, told us about how, years ago, she decided to drop her plans to attend law school to become a lawyer in favor going to New York City for several years to become a professional baker. She swapped law for baking when she realized that baking was her true passion, not law. It was something she could do *wholeheartedly*, rather than *halfheartedly*. In this respect, Ellie made choice to forgo a *job* for a *Calling*.

If you wonder if secular vocations can be as high and sacred as ministerial vocations, all you need to do is try a sample of Ellie’s work and you’ll never ask that question again. If you go to Sift in Niantic or Mystic and order a Pecan Sticky Bun, you’ll likely have the same experience. You may even want to call a baker as your next minister! There’s a lot of heaven in their leaven ...

The late Rev. Howard Thurman was once asked by a student how he should go about choosing a Godly career path. Thurman responded, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

In other words, what the world needs is people who serve the world wholeheartedly, not half-heartedly, because when you are wholeheartedly engaged in something you are most apt to be using the very skills and interests that God invested you with before you were born, and meant you to use.

These are wise words not just about careers, but anything we do in life. More often than not, when our actions are sincere and wholehearted, we are serving both God and the world in some way.

Last Friday evening, I attended the concert in McCook’s Park featuring a band that NCC member Denise Walstra fronts, called Fusion. Nan Rigdon and her Sea Coast Youth Chorale also made an appearance. The concert was fabulous, of course. And it was clear why the crowd loved it: From Denise and her band, to Nan and her chorale, no one was simply “phoning it in” that night. Everyone was fully engaged in their part of the performance. The positive energy they were sending out went through the crowd like leaven working its way through a large batch of dough. Their energy caused all of our energies to rise.

I. The Leaven of Extravagant Hospitality

Now, when I started this reflection, I mentioned that Jesus’s brief parable is quite simple to understand *on the surface*. So far, this has proven true, hasn’t it? There are other meanings

in this parable, however, that are less apparent. Mostly, they're less apparent because we aren't Jewish, not because something is deeply hidden in it.

For instance, the amount of flour the woman uses is said to be "three measures." You may have been thinking that "three measures" is something like "three cups." "Three measures" – or *saton* – in Greek, is about 50 pounds. That's an enormous amount of flour this woman is kneading – a fact that wouldn't have been lost on Jesus's ancient audience.

Another thing that any first-century Jew would have picked up on is that this is not the only story in the Bible where a woman kneads a little leaven into exactly "three measures" of flour.

Do you think Jesus picked "three measures" of flour at random, and that quantity just happened to correspond to the most famous story in the Old Testament where a woman kneads bread dough? If you are familiar with Jesus and his teachings, you know it is unwise to assume that he picks *anything* at random!

I made it easy for you to guess the story I'm referring to. It's part of our scriptures this morning – where Abraham's wife, Sarah, bakes bread for three strangers who walk by their camp, using exactly three measures of flour.

Jesus seems to want us to focus on this story when he tells his parable, so why don't we look at it a little more closely?

Both Abraham's and Sarah's reactions to the three strangers seem a bit extreme. Abraham essentially begs these men to turn aside from their path so that he and Sarah can attend to their every need. He offers them water to wash their dusty feet. He insists on bringing them "a little bread" to refresh them. When they consent, Abraham instructs Sarah to take "three measures" of flour and make bread. That 50 lbs of flour could have fed all of them quite well for a month! But the hospitality doesn't stop here.

According to Abraham, "a little bread" means not only "a mountain of bread" but an entire fattened calf worth of roast beef, along with fresh cheese curds and milk. My stomach is hurting just thinking of all the food.

While Abraham's and Sarah's actions may seem extreme – and they are – what is happening in this story can be understood against its larger ancient Near Eastern context. In ancient cultures throughout the region – and even up to modern times to a certain extent – a very well-established custom existed of offering extravagant hospitality to strangers.

Think about it. If you were traveling from one country to another in ancient times, you were often crossing vast areas where there was no food or water. Nor was there a Stop & Shop or MacDonalds, nor a Holiday Inn or Motel 6. In other words, if you ran out of food or water, or the shelter you were packing along failed, you were in dire straits. You could

die out there if you weren't well supplied. Everyone was aware of this reality, and no one wanted to face such a circumstance themselves if they were travelling.

So, the time-honored custom was that, if you were from far away and entered a village, people would immediately recognize you as a stranger. It wouldn't be long before someone would inevitably come up to you and practically beg you to come stay with them. The custom was to refuse the invitation at first, and then for the host to become more insistent in their offer.

"Surely, friends," the would-be host would say, "you must be famished from your day's trekking. I'm sure you have plenty of food, but why spend the energy preparing it after this long day when we have food practically coming out of our ears at home? You would be doing us great favor by helping us get rid of some of it before it spoils!"

Then the potential guests might respond, "We sincerely appreciate your generosity, but we are in a bit of a hurry and are just passing through long enough to draw water from the village well."

To which the host might respond: "Why draw water from that dirty bucket at the well when we have plenty of cool, clean water at our home – and a nice tub to soak your tired feet in? My family would be grateful if you would do us the honor of having dinner with us and telling us of your travels. In fact, we would be honored if you would spend the night in one of our super soft beds. That way you could rest up for your long day ahead. In the morning, we'll send on your way with a few leftovers ... that is, if you wouldn't mind helping us get rid of a little more of this food that will only spoil if someone doesn't take it off our hands ..."

Back and forth the exchange would go, until it was clear – at least in fiction, if not in fact – that the guest wasn't needy or begging for anything, and the host wasn't imposed upon in any way and was offering hospitality not out of duty, but out of genuine interest, if not need.

Since there was no television, radio, or internet to bring the latest news into people's homes, potential hosts often were truly interested in having foreign company over. Frequently, they'd invite a bevy of friends and relatives over, too, so that everyone could feast and hear news from abroad.

This is the backdrop of the story of Abraham and Sarah entertaining the three strangers. While knowing this background may make their actions more understandable, the story is clearly trying to paint Abraham and Sarah as being the ultimate models of hospitality. What they offer is extravagant even for their day.

Incidentally, when one of the strangers later tells Abraham that Sarah will conceive and bear a child when he returns "in due season," 90-year-old Sarah overhears the outrageous prediction and chuckles to herself. When Sarah is overheard and called out for laughing, she denies it, provoking one of the men to insist that she did, in fact, laugh.

Awkward!

This odd exchange is a little less odd when we later find that a child is born just as the stranger predicted and is named *Isaac*, which means, “He laughs.”

Jesus’s parable of the Leaven, which seems clearly to be connected to the story of Sarah and the strangers, offers us another layer to the message of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Yes, it is like acting with wholeheartedness, or passion, but it also is about wholeheartedly offering extravagant hospitality to strangers.

III. Sabbath Leaven

Finally, there is at least one other significant message in the Parable of the Leaven which any first-century Jew would have picked up on. In a Jewish household, it was the woman’s job to make fresh bread for Shabbat, or the Sabbath. She would knead the dough and bake the bread, then at the beginning of the meal, she would light the Shabbat candle and lead the family in a special blessing of the bread.

You may recall that the Jewish Sabbath extends from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. It is a time when you gather for a great meal with family and friends – a meal that is supposed to be worthy of royalty. Then, for the rest of the Sabbath, your “job” is, in as far as possible, to replicate what an experience of heaven-on-earth is like.

As I mentioned two Sundays ago, a rabbi once told me that replicating heaven on earth on the Sabbath typically involves not doing anything that remotely resembles work in order to have plenty of time for three activities. Praying, playing, and “practicing” (that is, “practicing” not only hospitality but conjugality). I think a few of our members aren’t with us this morning because they heard about this last week and have converted to Judaism!

The fact that bread was baked by women specifically for the grand and joyous Sabbath meal would not have been lost on Jesus’s audience. The “three measures” of flour used would have brought Sarah and the three strangers to mind, to be sure. Yet, they also would have thought about a typical Jewish mother making Sabbath Challah for an unusually large crowd.

Since keeping the Sabbath is all about replicating the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, and Jesus’s parable is meant to teach us about what the Kingdom of heaven is actually like, what Jesus’s first-century audience would have heard in this parable is something like this: “The kingdom of heaven is like a large Sabbath meal, wholeheartedly prepared. One that includes your family, your friends, and a handful of people whose need for a good meal may be greater than you think.”

Curiously enough, the obligation to keep Sabbath was meant not only to replicate an experience on heaven-on-earth on the seventh day of the week, but to help a person connect with God and others in ways that help them through the other six days. In other

words, the Sabbath is like leaven that makes its way into the dough of our whole week. And Jesus is saying, so you may as well be wholehearted about it!

When is the last time you experienced a whole-hearted Sabbath?

Why not make it today?