

Like a Woman Who Took Some Yeast

Crieff, 26 July, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 18:1-8, Psalm 128, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

This morning we read six of Jesus' parables. Six short little stories that seem to be about the most ordinary things – planting a seed, baking some bread, going jewelry shopping. Obviously, Jesus liked telling parables a lot. But why did he like them so much?

Was it because he was such a great storyteller and loved to spin a good tale? Oh, I am sure that he enjoyed the storytelling process, but he had a deeper purpose in telling them. You see, each little story was packed with all the wisdom his disciples needed to live out the reality of the kingdom of God successfully. Each and every one of them.

19-Word Story

Now I can see that some of you are looking at me very doubtfully. Some of these stories are really short, and they all seem to be focused on quite ordinary and everyday things. Take the parable about an ordinary person making ordinary bread. That "story" is only 25 words long in English. It is even shorter, only 19 words, in the original Greek. *War and Peace* it is not!

And here this preacher is trying to tell us that, in those 19 words, Jesus lays out an entire program for us to follow in this world to establish God's kingdom. Well, he is going to have to show me some proof before I accept that.

Well, if that is how you feel, then challenge accepted. Let's look at some of those 19 words and see just how much Jesus is saying to us in the careful choice of them.

Woman

Let's take the word "γυνή" for example. That was the common Greek word for a woman (the word that we get words like "gynecologist" and "misogyny" from). And let us pause at that word for a moment to notice that Jesus made the main character of this story a woman. To tell a story from the point of view of a woman is hardly a shocking thing today, but it was in Jesus' time. So, let's assume he didn't do that lightly.

When people interpret the parables of Jesus, they often make the assumption that the main character represents God. Now, I am not entirely sure that people are always right to do that, but it is a tendency we have.

Imagining God as a Woman

But here's something I have noticed: I've never heard anybody do it with this parable. But why not? Why wouldn't Jesus have been inviting his listeners to imagine God as a bread-baking woman? And why might we have problems accepting that he might have done so?

In this one word, we have a very important teaching about Jesus' understanding of how the



kingdom of God spreads. Whether the woman in the parable was meant to represent God or not, she certainly represented someone who was not normally given agency or power in that world.

Jesus is teaching us that the kingdom does not require the influence of powerful people to spread. In fact, he's letting us know that God loves to use the forgotten, the powerless and the outsiders to spread that message in powerful ways. So, whenever we complain that we don't have the power or influence to have an impact on the world, remember who the main character of this parable of Jesus was.

Yeast

The next word I want to look at is the word yeast or ζύμη in Greek. Yeast is an incredible organism. It can take a flat, hard pile of dough and turn it into a light and fluffy loaf. It is the secret ingredient that turns grape juice into fine wine and mash into beer. Together with bacteria, it can also turn milk into yogurt and cheese. Life without yeast would be a miserable existence indeed!

And the people of Jesus' world appreciated all of that about yeast. But they also had some mixed feelings about it. For yeast was forbidden in Jewish households during the season of Passover according to the law. And so, Jews like Jesus knew very well how pervasive it was.

During Passover, they would have to clean their houses from top to bottom, going deep into every crack and crevice. They knew all too well that yeast had a way of getting everywhere and into everything. They knew exactly how hard it was to get rid of it.

What Jesus Was Saying

So, what do you suppose that Jesus might have been saying about us and about how we can represent the kingdom of God on earth by saying that it is like yeast? I think that, a lot of the time, we fall into the assumption that, for the church to accomplish anything, it has to be big, and it has to be able to use a lot of influence and have connections to people in power.

But if the kingdom is like yeast, that gives us a very different perspective on what we can do. Yeast is added only in small amounts, yet its transformative power is massive. It can pervade and transform a huge amount of dough. How much dough? Well, actually the amount is literally unlimited, as we will see in a moment.

The church doesn't have to be big to have an impact. It just has to be like yeast. Rather than size, we should be concentrating on infiltrating, bringing life and hope to every bit of dough we encounter. And when we do that, we will discover that, just like yeast in a Jewish household at Passover, the church will be very hard to eliminate from society.

Mixed

But then we come to our next word. It has to do with what the woman does with the yeast. In our English translation, it says she "mixed" the yeast with the dough, but I am here to tell you today that this is not what it says in the original Greek.

The word that is translated as mixed is ἐνέκρυψε, and that doesn't mean mixed. It is actually the Greek word that we get words like *encryption* and *cryptocurrency* from. It means to hide something. So the woman didn't mix in the yeast; Jesus said that she *hid* it in the dough.

That word choice is clearly not an accident. Jesus often described the kingdom of God as something hidden or secret, like, for example, when he said it was like a treasure hidden in a field.

A Hidden Kingdom

So, what does that word, “hid,” teach us about being faithful citizens of the kingdom of heaven today? Well, we live in a world that is largely oriented around attention. If you want to be considered a success these days, you must get a lot of people to pay a lot of attention to you. That seems to be the entire basis of our celebrity culture, our politics and 90% of our social media.

And it is easy for the church to get sucked into that attention culture. We judge our success by how many people are noticing what we are doing. But Jesus understood that attention is not just an end in itself. We are called to bring about transformation, not to get attention. It is through acts of mercy, love and kindness, which are carried out without seeking attention, that we will have the greatest impact on the spread of the kingdom of God.

Measure

The next word I want to look at in this short parable is the word translated as measure. Now, when you read that a woman “mixed” some yeast with three “measures” of flour, how big do you imagine that “measure” to be? I always assumed that we were talking about something about the size of a cup. I mean, with three cups of flour you could probably make a decent loaf of bread.

But the word that is used in this parable does not mean a cup. Nor is it the common everyday Greek word for measure, which would be μέτρον (the word we get meter from). No, the word that is used in this passage is not even a Greek word, but it refers to a specific quantity of flour.

A Hebrew Measurement

Jesus says that the woman took three σάτα of flour. And σάτα is a common *Hebrew* measure that is used in the Old Testament.

The fact that a Hebrew word appears here is significant because Jesus didn’t speak Greek; he spoke Aramaic, a language closely related to Ancient Hebrew. So, it seems the Gospel writer has translated this entire parable into Greek except for this one word. And I wanted to know why. I hope the reason blows your mind as much as it did mine.

Σάτα is the plural for a Hebrew word for a specific quantity equivalent to 7.3 liters. Think about that for a moment. This woman didn’t take three cups of flour; she took three times 7.3 liters of flour. That is... almost 22 liters of flour. Since we normally buy flour by weight, we are talking about maybe 14 kg of unsifted flour. That is about as heavy as two 10-pin bowling balls.

That’s A Lot of Dough

I have a few questions. How much bread is this woman baking? With 14 kg of flour, I could easily make about 25 loaves of bread. How many peanut butter sandwiches could you make with 25 loaves of bread?

So, what does this tell us about being part of the kingdom of God in this world? It tells us that we might be very small – like a small little bit of live yeast – but we can have a huge impact. But

that impact does not come in the form of influence or power. I don't see anywhere in the Bible where Jesus tells us to pursue those things. It comes in the form of service.

Same Amount as Sarah

But there is one more thing I want you to note about the amount of flour the woman takes. It is exactly the same amount of flour that Abraham tells his wife Sarah to take in our reading from Genesis this morning. And that, I assure you, is not a coincidence.

When three strangers turn up in front of Abraham's tent, he makes them a seemingly limited offer of hospitality. **"My lord," he says, "if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves."**

But then Abraham goes and immediately tells his wife to take three measures – three σάτα – of flour. He tells her to make cakes with what we have established are 14 kg of flour. He also slaughters and cooks an entire calf and makes soft cheese for his guests.

Not Very Practical

Now, such an extravagant meal doesn't seem very practical. I mean, there is no way that three strangers would eat 25 loaves worth of cheese sandwiches and an entire calf. And how long would they have had to wait for all that food to be prepared? But the practicality is not the point of the story. It is simply an illustration of hospitality that is so extreme that it borders on the ridiculous.

And I suggest to you that it is no mistake that Jesus refers to the same extreme amount of flour in this short parable. The promise in that story in Genesis is that when we practice extreme hospitality, we will encounter God. Because, of course, in case you didn't know, those three strangers that Abraham offered hospitality to turned out to be God.

Practicing Hospitality

So, what is Jesus promising us with this parable? He is promising that if we practice hospitality as a church, if we welcome people just as they are and no matter where they are coming from with kindness and generosity, something amazing will happen. We will know the presence of God among us. And that, more than anything else, is how the kingdom of God will be made real among us.

So, we have this one parable, and in only 19 words it teaches us so much that we need to learn about the spread of the kingdom of God. What have we learned?

Lessons of the Kingdom

We have learned that the kingdom of God is led by the very people that the world has discounted, that it may be small like yeast, but it also spreads and infiltrates like yeast and is even harder to get rid of. We have learned that it is hidden – that it does not seek attention – but that it has the greater impact on society for that reason.

And we have learned that it is like 14 kg of flour – that it is never cheap or restricted when it comes to reaching out. And, most of all, we have learned that our practice of hospitality towards all is what is going to drive the growth of the kingdom of God into the future.

Not bad. Not bad at all for one little, short story!