

Waiting to Grow
Sunday, March 10, 2019

Jesus was a storyteller. He knew that the concepts he was trying to talk about – the realm of God, the kingdom of heaven, the fullness of love and justice among all people on earth – were so big, so deep, so wide, that you couldn't pin them down in a didactic explanation. He could only offer glimpses of the truths he wanted to convey through metaphor and simile. He was a poet in prose. As Emily Dickinson advised, he

*[told] all the truth but [told] it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise.
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —*

So one day when someone asked him, “What is this kingdom of heaven you keep talking about?” he told offered these slanting images:

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches...

And then he added another image: *The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened. (Matthew 13: 31-33)*

And it seems he used these images over and over, telling it each time in slightly different words, as any good story teller does, for the *Gospels of Matthew* and *Luke* as well as the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* have Jesus telling the story of the mustard seed, and those three as well as the *Gospel of Mark* tell the story of the leaven.

So why were these stories so important? What do they say to us? First, a parable is not an allegory. An allegory is like a code – this stands for this, that stands for that, and once you decode it you understand its meaning. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, for instance, is an allegory about the Russian Revolution and the rise of communism, with the different animals standing for different social classes. Or in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Aslan is an allegory for Jesus; the White Witch represents evil; and the children Susan and Lucy stand for Mary Magdalene and other women disciples who were able to stay with Jesus through the end and then become the first witnesses to his resurrection.

But parables aren’t so neat. That’s why Bill and I are using a Jungian approach in the study we’re leading – it’s an approach that plays with the images as we did with Burns’ image of his love like the red, red rose. So let’s look at what these images might offer us.

First, notice Jesus’ phrasing. These two stories are usually known as the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast – or leaven. But Jesus doesn’t say, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed or like a grain of yeast.” The kingdom of heaven is not like a thing. The kingdom of heaven is like a man planting seed which grows into a tree which offers shelter to birds and healing food to human beings; the kingdom of heaven is like a woman making bread which will feed many people. The kingdom of heaven is in relationship and in action, not in stasis. The kingdom of heaven is always transforming to greater and greater life.

And the kingdom of heaven is jarring – in ways we don’t hear today. So a little background – a mustard seed is a very small seed, though not the smallest on earth, but it doesn’t grow into a tree. At its biggest it might grow to be 10 feet tall, but that’s a giant mustard plant. More often it’s like a tall greens plant. Mustard greens were thought to be healing herbs, used in food and as poultices. The seed spiced food as it does today. But while people used it, they usually didn’t plant these

good seeds – the mustard plant re-seeds itself – as you may have found in your garden – mostly they left it alone to grow. But Jesus has the man sowing the seed – perhaps to make sure the seed grows where it could be most beneficial - or somewhere where it wasn't otherwise growing.

And in the parable of the woman baking bread, she's not kneading in yeast. There were no little packets of yeast in Jesus' time and yeast hadn't been isolated – bread was leavened with a sourdough starter made from water and flour left to ferment, with the natural spores in the flour providing the rise – the starter is the leaven. So the woman has taken a knob of her starter and hidden it (interesting word) in three measures of flour. When I read this, I was picturing three cups of flour – that's about what I use when I bake bread. But a measure isn't a cup. Three measures of flour is somewhere between forty and sixty pounds. That's 8-12 5 pound bags of flour. So again we have someone doing something one wouldn't usually do, this time, hiding leaven in a huge load of flour and producing something amazing.

In both stories, we have someone taking something alive on its own – the seed and the leaven – and hiding it – in the earth and in the flour – where it transforms into something else which offers healing, shelter, and nourishment for many more than the person who originally interacted with them. In both stories, the object – the seed and the leaven – are part of the basic needs of life – which for lack of people die. Each, the seed and the leaven, has a life of its own – but when buried in the earth or the flour and allowed to grow, offers benefits to many others. And each needs to be left alone after being hidden. The sower may plant and the baker knead, but over-working – over-watering or over-kneading, can prevent the seed or the leaven from sprouting. Baking and planting require trust and patience as well as knowledge and skill.

Now that we've unpacked the images a bit, let's put ourselves into the stories. Traditional interpretation always puts God as the one

acting – the sower or the baker – but Jesus doesn't say that. What if we put ourselves there? What if we are the sower or the baker in the story, performing an action which offers life to others? And what if God is the ground or the flour where the seed and the leaven are buried to grow? The theologian Paul Tillich called God "the ground of being." Tillich had served as a chaplain during the First World War and the horrors he saw left him no longer believing in a God "up there" who benevolently and firmly guided the world. Instead he developed the idea that God is intimately connected to us as the ground which always holds us up even when we aren't conscious of it, as most of the time we are not. Take a moment now and reconnect mentally with the ground which lies under this church, under our feet.... And the ground of being doesn't just hold us up - as soil offers the nutrients that plants need to grow, God is the power of life which we need to grow. So planting seeds or leaven in God might be as simple as writing a letter to the editor and trusting that it will help others gain a new understanding of an issue, or giving seed money to a women's cooperative in Afghanistan and trusting that your gift will benefit the entrepreneurs, their families, and their communities perhaps for generations. All artists, writers, composers, performers, and inventors are sowers of seed and bakers of bread – planting their creations and trusting them to feed people they will never know in ways they can never imagine.

That's one take on the story. Let's try it now from another angle: what if we are the dirt and the three measures of flours, carrying life which will transform into larger life? All who parent and teach and mentor children and youth act as flour and dirt in this way. How else do you see seeds being nurtured and leaven being left to rise in your life and in our world?

Or what if we are the birds of the air finding shelter in the branches of the tree, or sufferers being eased by the tincture of its leaves, or among the hungry fed by bread we didn't bake? Perhaps that's the easiest role to see for ourselves in the story for we have all, as

the book of *Deuteronomy* puts it, "[drunk] from wells we did not dig... [and been] warmed by fires we did not kindle." Just take this church for example – none of us built this sanctuary; we find refuge, freedom, and community in structures others erected for us. And outside these walls, our minds have grown from ideas we did not originate; our bodies have been healed by medicines we did not develop; our hearts have been lifted by music we did not write.

Or what if we are the seed and the leaven? We were all once children being nurtured and allowed to grow by others' care. Or in a slightly more allegorical take on the story, those who lay down their lives that others might live served as seed and leaven – people like Jesus and Oscar Romero, but also journalists who offer their lives that truth might live and grow; peacemakers who place themselves in war zones – literal and metaphorical; or Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland, whose deaths led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement with its work of bringing the realm of love and justice more fully among us. For unlike the baker and the sower and those who are nourished by them, the seed and the leaven do not choose what happens to them. But their deaths may be transformed into greater life for others by the sower and the soil or the baker and the flour.

So we are all always those who are fed and healed and sheltered, but we are also the sower and the baker, the bread and the dirt, the seed and the leaven. We may play all these roles in these stories and so in the kingdom of heaven.

These stories of a man sowing seed which grows unbelievably tall and a woman kneading the hugest batch of bread ever mixed by hand tell us tell us that the kingdom of heaven, the realm of love and justice, is not a future afterlife but here and now in the ordinary actions of our lives. The kingdom of heaven is revealed when we offer love and assistance to the universe. Equally, the kingdom of heaven is revealed when we receive love and assistance from the universe. The kingdom of heaven is present when we act unselfishly to care for others as well as

when we are cared for. The kingdom of heaven is in relationship – not just the close ties of family and kin, but the ties of being human, of being, as Jesus might have said, all daughters and sons of God, children of God by virtue of only of being human. The kingdom of heaven is present in the web of life which ties each to all.

How can we at First Parish support one another in our roles of making visible the kingdom of heaven? How can we help one another discern our parts in the story and live them out to their fullest? Groups like the ones meeting to discuss Brene Brown do this (and I invite you to speak to me if you're interested in becoming part of the one forming now); Monday meditation offers a time for discerning and sharing the leadings we are sensing; Men's Ministry offers a way to plant seed and hide leaven. How else may we take on our roles in the kingdom of heaven - that the realm of love and justice – which is here and now among us in the ordinary components of our lives - how may we help to make visible that love, that justice for all?

-Pamela M. Barz

