

In two millennia, few subjects have spawned such controversy as the identity of Jesus - Was Jesus God and how. Wars have been fought. Churches have split. Families and communities destroyed. In all of the controversy, there seems to be one thing upon which scholars, believers and skeptics have always agreed. Jesus was a brilliant teacher and storyteller.

When Jesus addressed his disciples and the crowds, he painted vivid word pictures, borrowing and modifying stories already in circulation. He also came up with some doosies of his own. (as my grandmother might say). Today's Gospel text is a collection of five parables of the kingdom of heaven — each including the words, "the kingdom of heaven is like." These parables do not describe the kingdom in a systematic way, but show us a series of snapshots taken from different perspectives. No single picture is definitive, but each provides a glimpse that adds to our understanding

First Jesus likens the reign of God to a mustard seed someone sowed in his field, that grew to a great shrub, and then to yeast that a woman mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, like a merchant is search of fine pearls,

and a net thrown into the sea drawn ashore full of fish. Provocative and engaging imagery for his first century listeners.

These five parables are traditionally divided into two sets. The “Insignificant beginnings/ Magnificent ends.” Group. And the three Parables of Joy. Today I’d like to focus on the first. Both the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven contrast the smallness of the kingdom with the greatness of its effects. Since articles and sermon reflections about the mighty mustard seed abound, let us take the road less traveled by, the road to the bakery.

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." To appreciate the impact this image would have had on its original audience there are a few things we must know.

Three measures of flour is about eighty pounds. It is enough to bake bread for 100-150 people. This woman is emptying sixteen five-pound bags of flour into a bowl (?). She's pouring in forty-two cups of water. She's got a mass of dough that weighs over a hundred pounds! Kneading this lump of dough, shaping it, pounding it, – its a first Century I love Lucy . It is highly likely that Jesus’ audience would have considered this depiction of the Kingdom of God funny, like Lucy funny.

Another consideration is the “yeast ethos” in the Jewish community. During Passover, we know Jews refrained (and still refrain) from eating anything leavened, signifying the fact that the Hebrews had no time to let their bread rise as they made a hurried escape from Egypt. Then and now, Orthodox Jews completely removed leavened grains and any food that had come in contact with them from their homes. These labor-intensive cleaning processes include scouring Sinks, refrigerators, ovens, and stoves, heating and cooling silverware and cleaning pots inside and out. Thus, at least for seven days a year, yeast was considered unclean. For some its association with impurity extended long beyond the Feast of Unleavened Bread making it a most unlikely candidate for Kingdom comparison.

The Gospel of Matthew’s primary intended audience was Jewish. It was a jarring choice Jesus made. The Law had commanded the painstaking extraction of Leaven. And Jesus, with his simple Baker woman parable, puts it all back in. (He’s trouble.) Again, the story was still about the power of little to do a lot, but in this case it was an unclean little. In this case, it was them, fishermen, homeless disciples, tax collectors and other sinners, that unclean little upon which the Church was built.

So, back to Lucy's huge mass of dough, which is suddenly more than just flour. There is a mystery bubbling inside, invisible, but everywhere, the spoils of the workings of yeast. In the context of first century science, there were myriad assessments of what yeast actually was and did—it was a puzzlement. Bread sat, and gradually, rose, as the workings of the yeast moved from invisible mystery to bold manifestation. Magic!

A parable of a funny, jarring, and magical kingdom. A baker woman and her yeast. Advancements in the science of yeast have stolen none of the delight and the social effrontery from this tale of the holy dough.

Let us consider:

1) Yeast is an organism classified in the **kingdom of fungi**. 1,500 species of yeast have been described. Only 1% of all yeast species have been described.

Kingdom of God is always morphing and growing in amazing and outlandish ways. We have only just begun to see what this kingdom is and can be.

2) Yeast is a living organism that eats stuff, sugars and other words that end in -ose. Then the yeast converts fermentable sugars in the dough into carbon dioxide---or Gas. It eats and releases gas. (Still funny.) Yeast comes from the old English “gyst” and ultimately from the Indo-European root “yes. “ Meaning boil, foam or bubble. Ethanol, its waste product, gets burned off. The bubbles, meanwhile, cause dough to rise.

The kingdom of God is a process of organic interaction that involves breaking down and building up and yes, this process produces Gas. From this parable we learn that gas production is not necessarily bad. In fact it is essential. Without it the dough will never rise and become nourishing bread.

Today is the day 11 of the Lambeth Convention in London, a gathering of 800+ bishops that takes place every ten years at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is the one occasion when all bishops are invited to meet for worship, study and conversation. Archbishops, diocesan, assistant and suffragan bishops are invited. Ours are present. A number of bishops are not present. An alternate gathering took place last month in Jerusalem of Bishops who are opposed to the ordination of women and gay people. Bishop Gene Robinson is present but

is not seated, meaning he was not formally invited and has no voice or seat on the floor.

Here's the thing. Yeast is a living organism that eats stuff. Yeast converts stuff it ate into gas. The bubbles make the bread rise. And bread nourishes. It's the kingdom of God.

Earlier in the week one of my favorite contemporary theologians was a featured speaker at Lambeth. Brian McLaren has become someone to whom the older generation looks for insight into the next. When asked about this generation's view about human sexuality he said "most importantly young people want to know how Christians love one another when they disagree."

The world is watching. They know we have conflict, we can't and don't need to pretend otherwise. They have watched us attack and devour one another for many years. The result of our consumption of one another is stinking, foul smelling gas. And yet the thing that is unique and beautiful about his church is that we have always emerged battle scarred, but intact. We have been able to display to the world and to the next generation a better way. I wonder if this isn't part of the

church's decline. I hear so many indictments of this generation, lazy, selfish, materialistic. They are hungry, but I wonder if they aren't coming to church because they aren't seeing any bread in our window. And they're hungry.

Have we modeled a kingdom where struggle and conflict lead to truth telling, patience and ever more profound loving? Have we mocked? Have we derided. Have we wished others would just leave.

We have a choice. We can move in a different direction starting right now. We can embrace the bubbles. We can celebrate the working of the yeast in and among us. Its OK. its messy. God set It up that way. The bubbles make the dough rise and the gunk is burned off in the mix. Such is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of reconciliation, the reign of peace. What would happen if we chose to allow ourselves to be inspired and nourished by the tensions and conflicts in our church both globally and locally? In London and in Old Saybrook. Just business as usual in the Realm of Love. Up, (point) bubbles. Must mean dough is rising. Now THAT would be magical BREAD. Life giving bread. The bread of Life.

Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.