

A Radical Recipe
June 7, 2015
Luke 13:20-21

Our Bible passage is among the shortest of Jesus' many parables.

And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Loving One we have gathered here this day with many expectations. Some of us bring mental lists and others carry recipes for what our time together should be like. We know what we expect and expect what we know. Remind us that your wisdom is often greater and more radical than we assume. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

A few months ago I shared with you how in recent years my wife Susan and I have been intentionally downsizing - moving to smaller and yet smaller residences. While I was truthful about the significant decrease in square footage, I omitted an important part of the makeup of our current home. Even as the overall size of our house shrunk to less than half of the size we had once known, our kitchen remained large. And, even more importantly, our kitchen pantry in our current home is the largest of all.

Even though it was the largest, we were not satisfied. We hired a closet expert to maximize the space. She removed the existing shelving and redesigned the pantry from the ground up to the 12 foot ceiling. When the project was complete the pantry hadn't grown, but its capacity for holding stuff had nearly doubled.

My family's chef, Susan, did a wonderful job of filling the custom pantry with all sorts of ingredients from which she could craft meals from a variety of cuisines. Now that she has relocated to Texas for her new job, 90% of the pantry contents go unused thanks to my much simpler menus with less sophisticated recipes.

So, it was with some fear and trepidation that I approached this morning's Scripture reading knowing it contained a recipe for a meal I

would never make. Before, however, I help you construct the shopping list needed for that rather unusual baking assignment I need to back up a bit.

Since this sermon is the first in a series of sermons based on Jesus' parables it seems appropriate to offer an introduction.

Arland Hultgren, a respected Lutheran academic who teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary writes:

Two things are generally known about Jesus of Nazareth that are beyond historical doubt . . . The one is that Jesus was crucified in the first century of the Common Era. The other is that he taught in parables."¹

Charles McCullough, a UCC minister and artist, believes that

. . . the parables bring us as near to Jesus as we can get. Biblical scholars agree that the parables are the most authentic words available to us from the life of Jesus.²

Parables were Jesus' go to method for connecting with his audiences. Within the pages of the four Gospels scholars count between 30 and 40 unique parables.³ In fact, more than one third of all of Jesus' recording teaching comes in the form of parable.⁴

Literarily, parables are stories. They are extended metaphors or similes. No matter how brief or how long parables are designed to draw in their audience using everyday imagery.

The parables of Jesus offer different content than the parables told by Rabbis. Most rabbinic parables explained passages of Scripture while Jesus' parables focus on the kingdom of God.⁵

¹ Arland Hultgren. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2000), p.1.

² Charles McCullough. *The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Word and Sculpture* (CopperHouse, 2008), p.8.

³ A few examples of scholarly attempts at counting the unique parables of Jesus include follow. McCullough lists 30 (p..251). Buttrick counts 33 but thinks only 20 can be traced back to Jesus with any real assurance [David Buttrick. *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p.xi.] Hultgren counts at least 38 (p.3). Kistemaker counts 40 [Simon J. Kistemaker. *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told*. Baker Books, 2007 and previously published as *The Parables of Jesus*, 1980., p.14.}

⁴ Maxie Dunnam. *Twelve Parables of Jesus* (Abingdon Press, 2006), p. 8. Originally published in 1998 by Cokesbury.

⁵ Richard Lischer. *Reading the Parables in Interpretation* (Westminster John Knox, 2014), p.29.

In the case of Jesus, more often than not parables are ways he teaches us about the kingdom of God.⁶ We as the listeners are called to embrace God's kingdom, reign, realm, kindom, empire and to turn away from any and all other empires.⁷

John Dominic Crossan, a renowned progressive New Testament scholar, drives this point home by labeling all parables as "participatory pedagogy."⁸ We are called not only to see ourselves in the parables, but also to live them out.

Which gets me back to this morning's parable . . . It appears in both Matthew and Luke. The only difference is one word. Matthew talks of the "kingdom of heaven" while Luke uses the "kingdom of God."⁹

The Parable of the Leaven is as difficult as it is short. I have chosen it to start our sermon series on the parables for a very simple reason.

Many of you are familiar with the work of the Jesus Seminar back in the 1980s and 90s. One of the things for which this group of scholars is best remembered is for voting on the historicity of the sayings and deeds of Jesus as found in the Bible. For each piece of Scripture the scholars cast votes using colored beads ranging from red (Jesus really did or said this or something a lot like it) to pink (Jesus probably did or said it) to gray (Jesus likely didn't do or say it but it is consistent with his ideas) to black (it didn't originate with Jesus).¹⁰

The Parable of the Leaven received more red beads than any other parable!¹¹ In other words, scholars find this parable to be authentic. Jesus really did say this or something quite similar.

Because 2000 years have passed and we live in a very different world, we need some help understanding this recipe. While it may look simple on first glance, you would be upset if you actually followed it. It is, quite frankly, absurd!

⁶ McCullough, p.25.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Dominic Crossan. *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (HarperOne, 2012), p.245.

⁹ Luke 13:20-21 and Matthew 13:33.

¹⁰ Westar Institute. "Jesus Seminar Phase 1: Sayings of Jesus." <<http://www.westarinstitute.org/projects/the-jesus-seminar/jesus-seminar-phase-1-sayings-of-jesus/>>

¹¹ Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. (HarperOne, 2014), loc. 1928.

Let me explain with the ingredients of this radical recipe.

1. 3 measures of flour. Scholars tell us this is around 50 pounds of flour or enough to make bread for 150 people!¹²
2. Yeast. Although our passage instructs the baker to “mix” in the yeast the Greek word here is better translated “hide.” While it may be possible to hide it temporarily in such a large amount of flour we all know that before long it will impact the whole.¹³

And, it is important to know that while we think of yeast in neutral or even positive terms that isn't what the original hearers heard. In fact the leaven described here is a “sign of corruption” and isn't yeast. It is a “chunk of leavened bread that has been stored in a dank place until it molds.”¹⁴ And throughout the New Testament leaven is used negatively even such that Paul tells the congregation at Corinth to expel a sinner since “a little leaven corrupts the whole.”¹⁵

Now that we better understand the recipe we are still left with the question about its meaning. What is the parable teaching?

Since parables are participatory pedagogy it is your job to answer that question. The good news is that there is no one right answer. Some of the choices scholars suggest include:

1. The surprising ability of something quite small to impact or grow into something larger. This meaning is often assumed when our parable is joined to the one beside it: the Parable of the Mustard Seed.¹⁶
2. The power of the kingdom of God to take the impure, the unclean, and the sinful and use it – even use us – to participate in and expand or grow the realm of God. It means that church isn't a place for perfect people.¹⁷

¹² R. Alan Culpepper. “Luke” in *The New Interpreters Bible: Volume IX – Luke and John*. (Abingdon Press, 1996), p.276.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Buttrick, p.147.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.149

¹⁶ McCullough, p.188.

¹⁷ Buttrick, p.149.

3. The need for nurture. Like the careful preparation of a huge batch of dough we can expect the kingdom of God to come when we nurture it.¹⁸
4. The importance of extravagance and generosity. The kingdom is a place where everyone has enough to eat.¹⁹

You have been given a radical recipe. Participate in it. Make real the realm of God on earth.

Amen.

¹⁸ Levine, p.124

¹⁹ Ibid.