

A couple of months ago, Mike and I had a mini-“retreat” to look ahead at texts and themes for the summer and fall months. I’ve never been particularly good at having a throughline for my sermons when we’re not in one of the more intentional seasons of the church year. I thought maybe we should look ahead into this Season after Pentecost, the part of the church year where we keep counting up the Sundays until the Festival of Reformation finally breaks into the forest of green.

So, I looked into the readings scheduled for the summer, and lo and behold, I found this pocket of readings that weren’t simply chronologically moving through Matthew’s Gospel but offered a few weeks that we would be immersed in parables. Maybe that would be a good time to provide some focus and continuity to my sermons, if only for a portion of the summer.

And then I looked at the calendar and it turned out this run of three weeks with a very clear throughline, this series of parables that Jesus would tell, just happened to be the time that we as a congregation would be hearing sermons from three different preachers. It would be, in fact, the opposite of what I imagined.

By the way, I’m still looking for a throughline for the rest of this season, so we’ll see how that turns out.

All that being said, as I sat down to work on this week’s portion of the parable series, it occurred to me that this probably was the **best** way to handle this collection of parables over the past few weeks. Because rather than trying to create one cohesive message in three parts, we’ve stuck to what Jesus was doing as he was teaching the crowd.

The parables, by their very nature, were never intended to be wholly cohesive. They weren’t intended to provide a concise message. They were intended to be a collection of stories and images, a variety of metaphors so that those who were listening would hear something meaningful about the kingdom of heaven. The nature of parables themselves is intended to create diverse thinking and a variety of ways to engage with the overarching teaching about the kingdom of heaven and what God is doing.

I have most often been pulled to the first in this series, the mustard seed planted in the middle of the field. But since I know that Pastor Melissa and Seminarian Kit preached extensively on agricultural imagery over the past two weeks, I decided to look elsewhere. And I found myself thinking about yeast.

Which is a little odd, because I don't bake. In fact, I'm pretty sure the only time I have ever dealt with yeast is that brief period of time when my wife and I were newly married, had been given a bread machine, and were baking our own bread. That didn't last long.

But if it's an image Jesus used, then I wanted to dig into it a little bit. "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." The kingdom of heaven is like yeast...

Wikipedia defines yeast as "any species of fungus that grows primarily in a unicellular form and reproduces via budding or fission." The kingdom of heaven is a fungus. The kingdom of heaven is a fungus that feeds on wheat (or any other flour) to create carbon dioxide and alcohols. That's not exactly how I've tried to imagine the kingdom. And that's not all.

The kingdom of heaven is a fungus that someone – in this case an unnamed woman – hides. "Mixed in" isn't the best translation of the word "enekrupsen" in Greek, that was used here. You hear in that the root of our word encryption. It's not about a woman doing the normal process of baking a loaf of bread. It's a woman taking a huge supply of flour and hiding a bunch of fungus in it to turn it all into an **overwhelming** abundance of bread. Taking the supply on hand to bake enough nourishment for over 100 people.

Think about that for a moment. In a world with very primitive storage technology, in a world where resources were almost always scarce – at least for most people – she introduces a biological process to force the stable supply of grain to become a perishable resource that needs to be consumed almost immediately. The static resource becomes active nourishment for those who are ready to eat.

That's the kingdom of God. To borrow from a different Gospel, it's not about storing the flour in a big barn, it's about making the bread. It's about creating nourishment. It's about spoiling the status quo so that something new and good and important can come into being.

This fungus that we call yeast chemically changes the reality of the flour so that it no longer is what it was.

If we're going to live in this analogy, then we have to look at how we have been formed to be part of this kingdom. How have we been chemically changed to create gas and alcohol...wait, maybe that's pushing the analogy a little too far.

How have our lives been formed to mimic this journey from flour to leavened dough to good crusty bread? I won't assign analogous equivalents to what has become gas or crust, but I will suggest that we can probably find times in our own lives that we have been kneaded into a life-giving dough by the hands of God. Sometimes it has been a simple process, and sometimes it has been a fight.

I don't bake, but I do make homemade noodles for boiled chicken pot pie. It's a PA Dutch thing and my mom taught me how to make the dough. And while it doesn't require yeast or kneading, it does "require" hand mixing so that I find myself fighting a sticky dough to form a workable ball instead of it being stuck all over my hands.

Everything we do, as individuals and as a community of faith, is formed through this process of leavening, rising, kneading, and baking so that we provide nourishment for the world.

I'm reminded of what it has been like to get our Preschool up and running again after missing a year of ministry. The push and pull of figuring out processes again. The patience in letting the dough rise so that it's ready to become bread, the figurative hiding of the necessary components within and among all that we're doing to plant seeds of faith. Please excuse the mixed metaphor there.

Every one of our ministries over the almost 75 years of this congregation goes through this process of being leavened by God's kingdom at work. Everything we've done and all the hopes we have for new ministries comes through the process of turning a static resource into a life-giving opportunity.

The kingdom of heaven is the yeast. The kingdom of heaven in which we live, is a life-changing fungus that changes us who are the dough. Without it, we fall flat. Without it, we stay static and unremarkable to the rest of the world. With it, we rise. With it, we are changed. With it, we become bread for the world.

And the world is starving. Amen.