

The Hiddenness of the Kingdom (Matt 13:33)

Series: *Earthy Stories with Heavenly Meanings: Matthew Parables #3*

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Preacher: Elliot Rice

Where's the kingdom?

I can't claim to have had much in common with John the Baptist . . . I've never been mad keen on his sense of fashion, his taste in food, his ascetic wilderness lifestyle, or his aggressive preaching style. Nor have I shared in his fate of imprisonment or death by beheading for upbraiding politicians—not yet anyway. And yet, there's one thing I do have in common with John the Baptist—and maybe you do too . . .

Before his death, the last thing we hear from John is his final question to Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Back when Jesus first went public it was John who came declaring that the kingdom of heaven was near. He believed that Jesus would make the kingdom of heaven visible; that through him the royal reign of God would show up, overthrowing the Romans. Now, as the dust settles on the early part of Jesus' ministry, John's stuck in a prison cell, and the Jesus fellow doesn't seem to be doing much about it. "Where's the kingdom?"

And I can relate to that. Maybe you can too . . . When loved ones die earlier than we hoped, it's hard to believe the kingdom of heaven is at hand. When relationships are characterised by in-fighting and bitterness, or ending in divorce, we struggle to see how Jesus reigns. When we continue to fall for the same old temptations, and the way of sin feels more obvious than the way of righteousness, it's easy to doubt that God's peace rules our hearts. And when wars start, fires burn, and waters flood—earth-shattering destruction—it doesn't really feel like Jesus actually won . . . Where's the kingdom, Jesus? If the kingdom of heaven is at hand, why can't we see it?

Little things having great effects

He replies with a parable about baking: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about 27 kilos of flour until it worked all through the dough." 27kgs of flour—that's a lot! Think of your baggage limit when flying internationally—it's heavier than that! Yet only a small amount of yeast is required to make all that flour rise.

Little causes can have great effects. Paul used this proverb sometimes too: "Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" (1 Cor 5) "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." (Gal) James reminds us that we put a bit into the mouths of a horse to make it obey us, so we can turn the whole animal. "Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark." (Jas 3:3–5) In the wake of Christmas, I'm still thinking of the lyrics in Bruce Cockburn's song: "Like a stone on the surface of a still river, driving the ripples on forever, redemption rips through the surface of time in the cry of a tiny babe."

Like the small measure of yeast mixed into a large amount of flour, Jesus the Nazarene came to impact the whole earth with his kingdom proclamation. Stan Hauerwas says "Jesus is teaching us to see the significance of the insignificant. At this point in his ministry, he's not even commanding the attention of the Roman authorities. From the perspective of those in power, Jesus is no more than

a confusing prophet to a defeated people in a backwater of the Roman Empire.” “Where’s the kingdom?” we ask. And Jesus replies, “God is at work, even though human eyes may fail to perceive what is happening.”

The call to be spiritually discerning

If John was asking, “Where’s the kingdom?” in the movie *Hook*, Robin Williams’ Peter Pan was asking, “Where’s the food?” There he was with the Lost Boys, sitting around a table covered in roasting trays and set for the meal. But when he hungrily removes the nearest lid, he’s disappointed to find it cold and empty. He looks around at his fellow Lost Boys, confused. “What’s the deal? Where’s the food?” And yet the Lost Boys are hoeing in to a meal he can’t see: one wraps his lips carefully around what looks like a spoon of hot soup, except there’s no soup; another stretches his jaws wide to clamp down on a whopping chicken drumstick, except there’s no drumstick . . . “Is this the meal that is to come, or should I expect something else?”

Frustrated, Peter picks up his spoon, scoops it an imaginary bowl of dessert, and flicks it at a Lost Boy across the table . . . when suddenly the imagined scoop splats on the boy’s face, and the colourful dessert is there for all to see! Peter looks back at his spoon, now finding the traces of the imagined dessert. He looks down at the table, catching the scent of food, and there appears before his eyes this feast they’ve been eating! The hidden meal suddenly appears. He comes to see it as it really is: there to be enjoyed, to fill his hungry tummy; he just lacked the eyes to see it, the ears to hear it, the heart to understand. “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” says Jesus. Yet, like a mustard seed buried in the soil, and like yeast plunged into flour, it’s hidden and hard to perceive.

And so, disciples are those who see the significance of the insignificant, who see the feast when others see empty pots, and who discern the fingerprints of God in a world that refuses to acknowledge its true nature. In a world that says, “The kingdom hasn’t come,” the disciples of Jesus dare to say, “Look again.” These parables call for faith in the God who is active in the tiny movement initiated by Jesus. “Whoever has ears, let them hear.” “Are you listening? Really listening?”

Unleavened bread

This story must have jarred in the ears of his Jewish audience. They offered unleavened bread in the temple, and every year they celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Every single instance of yeast in the Old Testament is about it not being mixed in with the dough. Lot prepared unleavened bread for his guests in the evil city of Sodom. On the night of their escape from Egypt, the Israelites left with unleavened bread. Lot and the people of Israel are to be redeemed from these evil places, and bread without yeast is the sign. The Jews constantly relived these stories; they were ingrained in their psyche. Bread without yeast symbolised redemption. Yeast symbolised corruption and spoiling.

Then, out of nowhere, Jesus refers to yeast being mixed in the dough, and even suggests that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like! As Michael Green says, “Leaven had a bad press in Judaism. . . . Yet, on second thoughts, that’s just what his followers must have seemed to respectable Jews. Common uneducated fishermen and farmers, carpenters and women, tax-gatherers and disreputable characters—it would all seem rather distasteful. . . . But God is like that. He takes distasteful characters and transforms them, and then transforms society through them.”

Christ the living yeast

And at the heart of these lowly characters is Jesus. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The Word became yeast and mixed into the flour of the world. Jesus is just one man, yet by his life, death, and resurrection, all humanity has been affected. Like yeast plunged into flour, mixed through to become dough, Jesus has transformed human nature for the kingdom of heaven. Fully God and fully human, God became what we are in his body, so that we might become what he is: adopted as sons and daughters of the living God.

“In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.” Bread-making involves living things. Yeast is a living ingredient; it responds to your own personal touch in kneading technique, the atmosphere of your kitchen . . . One baking website describes baking with yeast as a combination of art, science, and a bit of magic. After a while, though, if stored improperly, yeast cells will die. And dead yeast doesn’t rise. Abraham and the people of Israel were blessed to be a blessing. As the people of God, they were meant to have a yeasty quality in the world, causing the nations to rise in praise of Yahweh. Instead, as the prophets tell us, God’s people lived as dead yeast, causing the nations to blaspheme God instead by living as a shameful witness. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”

Jesus is the yeast of God, plunged into the flour of the world to raise us to life. Jesus entered our shameful condition, shared in our death to sin; yet on the third day he rose again. “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” The parable of the yeast proclaims that God’s action in the world, while almost imperceptible or hidden, is nonetheless real. In God’s own time, this kingdom is sure to rise.

The feast

The result of the woman’s heavy work to mix the leaven through the flour is a fresh batch of dough—enough bread to feed a crowd. The large quantity of flour suggests a festive occasion, reminding us that the final outcome of God’s hidden activity will be the messianic banquet, when the heavenly Lord Jesus will dine with his people. In the end, says Jesus, just as the mustard seed “becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches,” so too the small amount of yeast, worked all through the large amount of flour, will become a feast of bread. The kingdom of heaven, now hidden, will in that day be savoured, and our faith will be exchanged for sight.