

Pentecost 12, Year A: Gen. 29:15-28; Rom. 8:26-39; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52

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Ever hear the expression, “What goes around, comes around?”

We heard just a couple weeks ago about Jacob not only taking his brother Esau’s birthright, but also stealing Esau’s blessing from their father Issac.

Jacob has now run away from Canaan to the family’s homeland in Haran, near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; partly because he’s afraid of his brother’s wrath and partly because his father wants him to marry in the family, not a Canaanite.

Jacob is to take a wife from one of the daughters of Laban, his mother’s brother.

Once he arrives in Haran, Jacob quickly falls in love with Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel.

Jacob offers and Laban agrees that Jacob would work seven years for the right to marry Laban’s daughter, Rachel.

The seven years fly by because of Jacob’s love for Rachel, and the time comes for them to be married.

After their wedding night, though, we discover that Laban has tricked Jacob.

As our scripture text states, “When morning came, it was Leah!”

Jacob angrily confronts Laban about this deception, and Laban calmly explains that in his country they don’t give the younger sister away before the firstborn. “Now you tell me,” Jacob must have thought.

(You may have noticed that Rachel and Leah seem to have been given absolutely no say-so in this whole matter, which is another sermon all together.)

But Jacob works and serves Laban another seven years in order to marry his true love, Rachel... “What goes around, comes around.”

You and I may not have to ponder too long to recall similar situations in our own lives...

We’re sometimes the betrayer, sometimes the betrayed.

We’re sometimes the oppressor, other times the oppressed.

At the Multicultural Institute we’re now in the midst of our summer youth program.

During the opening “get to know each other” activities,

one of the tutors led a game in which she would describe a scenario and the kids, who were seated, were to stand up if they had experienced that particular situation.

One question was, “How many of you have ever been called names or been called stupid by your classmates or other kids?”

Most of them stood up.

The next question was, “How many of you have ever called another person stupid, or called them names?” Again, most all of the students (and tutors) stood up.

Of course, certain groups of people have experienced much more blatant discrimination and oppression than others, but most of us know what it feels like to be made fun of, to be left out, to have our feelings hurt by others.

That’s part of our common humanity, and as we’ve been learning from our OT stories, God does not demand perfection in order for human beings to be used by God.

That’s certainly no excuse for individual or systemic injustice, and it’s not to say that we’re not responsible for acts of injustice that we commit or contribute to. It’s just stating a fact.

I can’t think of a single character, in or outside of the Bible, who has been a perfect messenger of God’s Good News.

Even Jesus, at least in my opinion, had lessons to learn about the “Who’s In” and “Who’s Out” situations of his day.

Our OT lessons during this season after Pentecost are showing us over and over again that God uses common, ordinary folks with flaws and dysfunctional families;

We might say that perfection is not required to be an instrument of the in-breaking, the “becoming” of God’s Kingdom.

Speaking of the Kingdom of God, how about those Gospel parables we heard earlier? I couldn’t help but spend a lot of time there, because I love thinking about, dreaming about, envisioning who Jesus really was and what his life and message were all about before layers were added onto the Gospel story by the early church onward.

Parables were the primary means of Jesus’ teaching.

In fact, the earliest layer of the gospel tradition was probably composed almost entirely of single aphorisms and parables that circulated by word of mouth, without narrative context.

There is wide agreement that it is in the parables, especially those about the Kingdom of God, that we can feel confident that we hear Jesus speaking -- unedited. "Jesus, unplugged." NT scholar Norman Perrin said that Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, and that everything else in his message and ministry served to support that proclamation and give it meaning.

Perrin goes on to say that the Kingdom of God is the power of God expressed in deeds – God's activity.

Interestingly, the concept of the Kingdom of God did not originate with Jesus nor did it originate within the Jewish religion.

From what I understand, the roots of the symbol of the Kingdom of God lie in the ancient Near East long before the Israelites even came on the scene.

The Israelites took it from the Caananites, who had taken it from the great kingdoms on the Tigris, Euphrates and Nile, where it had been developed as early as Sumerian times.

In many ways, it was only the name of the gods that changed as different cultures adopted the concept of the Kingdom of God.

With the Israelites, however, a new characteristic was added to the God-King of Israel, Yahweh. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" says the Hebrew Scriptures.

Not only were the Israelites the first or one of the first to worship a single God, but the Kingdom of that God was based on righteousness, justice and mercy.

That's the Kingdom of which Jesus teaches in his parables, several of which are included in today's gospel lesson.

Before we key into one of those parables, let's review briefly what a parable is.

We all probably have a general idea. The sort of classic definition is, "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning."

Another NT scholar of the 20th Century, C.H. Dodd, develops the definition by adding that the comparison in a parable (quote)

"arrests the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, leaving the mind in sufficient doubt

about its precise application as to tease it into active thought.” (end quote)

A parable is usually told to *engage* those who hear it –
to initiate a thoughtful conversation; not to declare doctrine.

William Herzog II goes even further in his book,

Parables as Subversive Speech.

Herzog says that Jesus used parables to present situations familiar to the rural poor,
to encode the systems of oppression that controlled their lives and held them in bondage...

(quote) “The parable was not primarily a vehicle to communicate theology or ethics
but to expose the contradictions between the actual situations of its hearers
and the Torah of God’s justice.”

Jesus lived in a world that was not totally unlike our own.

Wealth and luxury were held in the hands of a few in the ruling class –
these were the winners in the Roman Empire’s exorbitant system of taxation,
which for the common people led to indebtedness, money loans and further debt.

Provincial banks were controlled by powerful, wealthy interests
that exploited those who had little,
resulting in their falling into ever greater debt,

falling behind on rents and tax payments,
as they struggled to eke out a living and to survive.

It was in this oppressive environment that Jesus proclaimed the Good News,
a power – the Kingdom of God, that could transform the evils of society.

The activities and images in Jesus’ parables were common ones for the common folk.
In our gospel lesson we hear about sowing seed, making bread, buying merchandise,
casting a net into the sea, finding a hidden treasure in a field.

Let’s hone in on one of these short parables:

*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.*

This parable clearly exhibits the traits of oral tradition
on which the gospel narratives add their layers.

It is short and compact, with no “extra” words or interpretations.

It's repeated very closely in the other synoptic gospels – Mark and Luke.

And so it seems that the authentic voice of Jesus is transmitted here as clearly as in any scripture text or ancient source.

Let's now examine it from the perspective of parables as subversive speech:

In this one-sentence parable, Jesus uses three images in ways that would have really surprised his audience.

The woman takes leaven and "*hides*" it in flour.

"*Hiding*" leaven in flour is an unusual way to describe the process of mixing yeast and flour.

But right after this parable we hear Jesus saying that his purpose in using parables was "proclaim what has been *hidden* from the foundation of the world," to "fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet."

The next surprise in the parable occurs when Jesus notes that the woman took "three measures" of flour.

Three measures might not sound like much, but it's equivalent to 40 or 50 pounds of flour.

This image for me conjures up the "I Love Lucy" episode in which Lucy must have used too much flour and yeast.

When she opens the oven to check on her bread, out comes this mammoth loaf that no longer fits into the oven.

It begins to expand into the kitchen, pushing Lucy backwards and nearly scaring her to death, as the audience laughs hysterically. I'll never forget that scene.

Three measures of flour would easily make 40 large loaves of bread.

Interestingly, this same amount of flour was used by Sarah to make bread when three representatives of God appeared to Abraham under the Oaks of Mamre and promised that Sarah would bear a son, although she was way beyond the age of childbearing:

A single child from which would come a multitude – a great nation.

For this occasion with the heavenly visitors,

Sarah was instructed to make ready three measures of flour in order to make cakes to serve.

It seems that three measures is a suitable quantity to celebrate an epiphany – a visible, though indirect, manifestation of God.

The third surprising aspect of our little parable is the use of leaven.

Jesus uses the image of the leaven in a provocative way.

In Passover observance, Judeans regarded leaven as a symbol of corruption.

The lack of leaven in bread symbolized holiness.

In a surprising reversal of normal associations,

the leaven in this parable represents not what is corrupt and unholy, but God's Kingdom.

Like many others, this parable can be seen as challenging the status quo, attacking boundaries.

It subverts the hearer's tendency to depend on the expected rules of the sacred, and warns instead that what may appear to be evil might actually be the activity, the workings, the very Kingdom of God.

Amazing that this tiny parable has morphed into a giant loaf of food for thought.

And that's just one perspective.

New Testament scholar Luise Schottroff offers an equally powerful one.

In the context of Jesus' world, as is the case in much of the world today, bread was the basic staff of life.

The word *bread* can actually represent all the food on the table or all the nourishment that people need.

When the Creator, who has given bread, is blessed over the bread, human life is experienced as part of creation, as part of God's Kingdom.

The people to whom Jesus is speaking are impoverished in many ways.

Hunger is well known.

Many of Jesus' parables are about the fruits of the earth and about people working for their food.

The parable of the leaven focuses on the work of the woman baking bread, drawing our attention to a particular moment in the preparation of the dough:

The mixture of leaven, flour, and water must stand in a warm place, covered, while it rises, "until the whole of the flour is leavened."

Then the dough will be kneaded again and shaped into bread.

This bread-making is not only the work of the woman;
it is the miracle of creation that enables the dough to be leavened, to rise.
At a certain point the woman must quit working and wait for the miracle to happen.

It is truly a gift when people share a freshly baked loaf of bread.
Surely we all have memories of such.
Mine is of my grandmother, who made bread daily.
For me, Grandmother's bread-making was not just a procedure, it was a performing art.
Grandmother, didn't have to use measuring cups or spoons;
she just knew from experience and intuition how to do it.
I can smell the yeast as Grandmother mixed it into the warm water;
I can see her small hands kneading the dough with great strength
for what seemed like a very long time.
I can hear the sweet tune Grandmother softly hummed as she worked.
My mouth waters just thinking about the wonderful aroma of the bread as it baked;
and of course, I remember the delicious taste of her bread, hot out of the oven,
topped with real butter...
ah, delayed gratification at its best.

It *is* truly a gift when people share bread.
For people who struggle with hunger this gift is never taken for granted.
It offers a glimpse of how God wants creation to be, of how it is in God's Kingdom.
In the Christian tradition the common meal of the gathered community
is a foretaste of the full unveiling of the God's Kingdom
where all hungry people are invited to join the feast at God's lavishly abundant table.
In the daily prayer that Jesus taught his disciples,
the community prays for the bread that all need in order to live.
Our parable challenges us to compare the Kingdom of God to the leaven,
to recognize the miracle of the rising dough as the in-breaking of God's Kingdom on earth.
We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to be instruments of that in-breaking,
to bear witness to God's justice, compassion, abundance;
to actively challenge the powers and systems that hoard and desecrate Creation;

to be instruments of the in-breaking of God's Kingdom on earth.

As we do so, we may be assured that even with all our imperfections and dysfunctions, we are dearly loved.

Paul describes this beautifully and powerfully in our lesson from his letter to the Romans:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.