

The Parable of The Yeast

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 13:33-35

Helmut Thielicke, the great German Preacher who stood up to the Nazis in World War Two, tells a story of from the beginning of his ministry. Thielicke graduated from seminary and entered into ministry at about the same time that the Nazis ascended to power in Germany. Very early on he was critical of Hitler's regime and its abuses of power. He thought something evil was happening, and he was determined to stand against it. As an idealistic young preacher, he was also a firm believer in the power of the gospel. Jesus had said "All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me" and he believed it down to his bones. He was determined to do something bold and heroic. He would stand up to the Third Reich, and prove that the authority of worldly powers was no match for the power of God.

To that end, he decided to start a Bible study and invited every important and influential Christian he could think of to join him; thinkers, politicians, educators, artists, lawyers, doctors. All these Christians would get unite around God's Word in a mighty army against the evil regime. Hitler would be brought to his knees! He sent out the invitations and waited for the first day of his study to arrive. When the great day arrived, all Thielicke found around his table were two very old ladies and an even older organist. This was the mighty army God gave him. These were the Christian soldiers he would lead into the fray.

It forms an interesting contrast to the force he was up against. Somewhere in Germany Hitler leading one of his great rallies. Thousands are in attendance, bands are playing, flags are waving, young people are shouting their support, pledging their lives, the Fuhrer was holding them all spellbound with one of his great speeches. Meanwhile there's Thielicke's Bible study. There in the church basement sits Pastor Helmut with four Bibles, three senior citizens, a pot of coffee, and a box of yesterday's donuts. So much for the mighty army. Thielicke was sorely disappointed.

But I wonder if he should have been surprised. Maybe the parable of the yeast could have prepared him for something like this. Jesus starts off the parable of the yeast with a grand beginning. "The Kingdom of heaven is like!" We get very used to this beginning because it's the way he begins so many of his parables, but it really is a grand opening. Think what is implied by that introduction: "God has founded from eternity his great and powerful Kingdom, a kingdom ruled and preserved by the King of kings himself. This Kingdom is full of his glory and power, all other powers of this world with their territories and their armies must finally give way before it. Now, I am now going to show you what the Kingdom of heaven is like, I will pull back the golden curtain and you will see its majesty!"

When someone tells you that you're about to get a picture of what God's eternal Kingdom looks like, when someone gives you such a grand beginning, you get some expectations of what you will see. You expect maybe something like a picture of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome on a feast day, packed with worshippers, a choir singing some beautiful music that fills the whole church. That's what the Kingdom of heaven is like! Or maybe you expect a picture of one of the mega churches of America, 10,000 beaming worshippers. Maybe it's one of those glorious mornings when 100 new believers are baptized. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like! Or maybe, since Jesus talks about the Kingdom of heaven, you expect a heavenly scene: Jesus describing rank upon rank of angels with the rider on the white horse leading them all into battle. Onward Christian soldiers! See his banners roll! That's what the kingdom of heaven is like.

But then Jesus pulls back the golden curtain to show you the eternal Kingdom of heaven, and you find yourself looking at the quietest, domestic scene you could imagine. You see a woman in her kitchen, putting yeast in her dough. She patiently works the yeast through the dough. She kneads the dough, turning it over and over, working it until the yeast permeates the flour. Behold the kingdom of heaven.

What do we make of this scene? What are the elements? There's the woman, not a powerful person in that society. She's in her kitchen...not exactly a place where kings are made or great or great power is unleashed. She's doing something really conventional. She's making bread, a job she does every day. She's working the dough – slow, unglamorous work. It's also hard work. Did you notice how much dough there was? 60 pounds! I asked AI how long it would take to knead 60 pounds of dough. Here's the answer I got: "Kneading 60 pounds of dough by hand will likely take 1 to 2 hours as it is a very large quantity and requires significant effort and time." So, not only is her work commonplace, it's strenuous. And finally, it wasn't work that brought immediate gratification. When you put yeast in dough, you don't get instant results. You have to wait. You have to be patient. Here in this picture the glory and the power of the kingdom of heaven is revealed. Do you see how this is surprising? What is Jesus trying to say by showing us this picture?

Some of what he is trying to say is obvious. We hear the parable of the yeast, we see how it follows hot on the heels of the parable of the mustard seed, and we realize that Jesus is trying to tell us that in the Kingdom of heaven, small things can still have big results. The mustard seed is small but it becomes a tree that gives shelter to the birds of the heavens. Yeast is small, but just a little bit of it can cause a big batch of dough to rise. A little pinch can have tremendous results. So, you don't have to be a big person doing big things to make a difference in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells us that even weak people doing small things can make a big difference.

It's not hard to see why Jesus might want to tell a parable like this to his disciples and to the early church. It would have been just the news they needed to hear. There were only 12 little disciples and the early church was not very big and powerful and so they would have been comforted to know that even though they were little, God could do great things through them.

But I wonder if Jesus means to say more than this. Is the parable of the yeast a simply a word for small churches who have no choice but to use yeast-sized power, or is it a word for big churches who have lots of power choices open to them? Is the church always supposed to operate in this weak and humble way? Or when you get some power and influence, do you move beyond this small stuff and start swinging bigger sticks? This is an important question for us because we are at quite a different stage in the church's history from the disciples and the early church. They had no choice but to choose the way of yeast. We have more influence and more money now. We have other options open to us.

The fact is, this parable is not just comfort for the weak church, it is an instruction and a warning for the powerful church. The Lord of this Kingdom was born in a stable and chose a throne for his cross, and so the church is always at its best when it uses yeast power. Yeast power, is the center of the church's power. The church gets into trouble when it swings other sticks.

For example, take a look at the church of the 12th century. The history of the 12th century church is a perfect illustration of Jesus' point in this parable. In twelfth century Europe, the church was not a weak and helpless, in 12th century Europe the church had some power at its disposal. And at the beginning of that century, the church put that power into action. The Eastern arm of the church based in Constantinople was having some trouble. Muslim armies, which had grown stronger in recent years, had conquered huge parts of the eastern church's dominion, including big parts of Turkey and Syria and Palestine. The Eastern emperor was desperate and he appealed to the West for help against the Muslim invaders and the Western churches agreed to help.

But they decided to do more than just protect their eastern neighbors, they went one step further and decided that they wanted to retake Jerusalem and make it a Christian city. Pope Urban the second went around Europe preaching crusade and trying to get people to fight this holy war, even promising that anyone who was killed while fighting the Turks would go directly to heaven. Thus the first crusade was born, and in 1099 the city of Jerusalem was taken by the Crusaders, who proceeded to slaughter thousands of the Muslim civilians they found living in the city. For the next century and a half, Christians and Muslims fought over Jerusalem at tremendous loss of life. In the end, the Christian armies lost: Jerusalem ended up in Muslim hands.

Without question the crusades were an honest attempt to build the kingdom of heaven. They were an attempt by Christians to do something to make God's rule complete on earth, as it is in heaven. Despite these good intentions, the crusades were a disaster for the church and for the Kingdom. Thousands and thousands died, and not just soldiers. There were wholesale massacres of civilians on both sides. On their way to Jerusalem, the soldiers of the first crusade not only killed Muslims, they also massacred villages full of Jews because they were seen as Christ killers and enemies of the church. And still today our ability to share the gospel with Muslims has been seriously damaged by that history of violence. 900 years later, Muslims still look at western Christians like us and see the soldiers of the crusade, coming at them with swords drawn, bent on conquering. In the 11th and 12th centuries the church tried to live by a story a little different than the parable of the yeast, and it didn't work out so well.

By way of contrast, right in the middle of all of this crusading, in 1181, a child was born in Assisi in central Italy. While the crusades raged in the east, the boy, who became Francis of Assisi, chose quite a different path for his life. He was raised in wealth and privilege but eventually he rejected the power of wealth. He spent part of his life dreaming of being a knight and even fought in a couple of battles, but he eventually he gave up the sword as well. After receiving the call of God, he voluntarily chose a life of poverty and selfless service. He spent his time rebuilding churches, preaching the gospel in a Spirit of joy, caring for the poor, helping the peasants with their work, and ministering to lepers. No great forceful acts, just little yeast-size actions that were full of sacrificial love.

Francis started to gain admirers and soon there was a whole group of men and women who were going out into the world in poverty, preaching, teaching, and serving in small ways. By the early 14th century (so that's 100 years after Francis died) there were no less than 1,400 Franciscan communities throughout Europe, each of them a place of learning, service, and discipleship. They had huge popular influence, and greatly increased to commitment of ordinary people to Jesus.

Both Francis and the crusaders tried to build Christ's Kingdom. Which attempt worked better? Which was more powerful? Which has borne more fruit? The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked through all the dough.

That's the way it has always been with kingdom power. That's the way it was with Helmut Thielicke. Helmut Thielicke's little Bible study may not have looked like much beside the spectacle of the Nazi rallies. Certainly it didn't make the papers or the newsreels. The SS wasn't particularly worried about it. But which regime endured? Was it Hitler with his massive rallies? Or was it the quiet gospel community shared by a pastor and his three older parishioners in the church basement?

When I think about yeast power, I think of the lives of some of the saints who've influenced me in my past. I remember Netta Ribbens, one of the older parishioners at my previous church. I loved Netta. She's been gone at least 20 years by now, but she was wonderful. Netta was never a person who really wielded conventional power in her life. She was never rich. She never held high office in society. She never had a glamorous job. She never really had much official power in this church. Once she was an elder, and she did a good job as an elder, but I know she never really liked it all that much. All the meetings and the business of running things. Phooey! Yet every member of that church knew that she was powerful. She had tremendous impact. She showed up for things. She pitched in. She was kind and encouraging to others. When she went through stuff – and she went through several bouts of cancer – she was strong and hopeful. She didn't do anything worthy of headlines. Every week, in her own small way, she worked the dough of the church with the yeast of the gospel.

I find the picture of this parable so comforting. As we approach the turbulence of our times and the worries of our days, maybe the answer for us is to just keep kneading the dough. Working the yeast in patiently, faithfully. We just keep kneading and kneading until one day, suddenly the dough rises, God does a new thing and the world is changed. You see, everything is different in the kitchen of the crucified King.

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