

Series: Life Stories
Part V: Revolution and the Kingdom of God
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So, what was this American Revolution we are about to celebrate this week all about, and does it have anything to do with the Kingdom of God? That is one way for us to begin thinking about this parable of Jesus from Luke's gospel we want to look at today. If you were to ask why this revolution took place in our nation more than two hundred years ago, you would probably get a number of answers. Some would say it goes all the way back to the pilgrims who first came here seeking religious freedom to worship God the way they believed was right, and to do this without fear of whether a king or queen might permit them to do so.

If you go back and look at history, you will find that many of the religious leaders advocating for the revolution were actually Presbyterians. Even today Presbyterians tend to believe that good government should be more representative and "from below" rather than imposed "from above." It is the structure of our church government today. We elect elders to serve on our Session which has the final say in almost all matters here in this church. Referring to the time of the American Revolution, one historian puts it this way: "The allegation that the American Revolution was a Presbyterian Revolution is an important one to understand if we are to have a truly comprehensive understanding of what happened and why." (Richard Gardiner, *Journal of the American Revolution*, "The Presbyterian Rebellion?", September 5, 2013.)

Others would say the American Revolution took place because of certain ideas – ideas such as all persons being created by their Creator to be equal, and freedom as expressed in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Over time these ideas and principles developed. For example, one of the symbols of these ideas and principles we often see this time of year is the Statue of Liberty. It stands there in New York City and for many years it has welcomed those seeking a new country. It has welcomed those who were looking for a new start, or for those who valued the principles on which this country was built. In 1883 Emma Lazarus wrote a poem that was largely ignored for many years. It was a sonnet dedicated to the Statue of Liberty that was discovered after her death. A patron arranged to have the last five lines become a permanent part of the statue itself. By 1945 all fourteen lines of the poem were placed over the Statue of Liberty's main entrance. But the last five lines go this way:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Whatever we point to as the reason for the Fourth of July celebration we will observe later this week, it all started out small and grew over time. It started out small with a group of pilgrims seeking religious freedom. It started out small with a few of our founding fathers who had ideas about how the world could be a better place. It started out small with men and women who came

from other nations because of the ideals and principles upon which this nation was founded. It started out small, almost hidden and imperceptible, but its influence over time became great! That idea of something small and hidden having a great influence may be at the heart of what our parable is about today.

The version of the parable we are reading today is from Luke's Gospel. The parable itself is small, only two lines, but it contains some great truth about what life and the kingdom of God are all about. However, because it is so short, I have also included another passage from Mark's gospel which is not a parable, but which helps us better understand this one. So please turn with me first to Luke 13:20-21, and then to Mark 8:14-21. Both can be found printed on the insert in your bulletin, the pew Bible, or in your own personal Bible. As we read these words, listen for the word of the Lord.

Luke 13:20-21, NIV

Again he [Jesus] asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

Mark 8:14-21, NIV

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." They discussed this with one another and said, "It is because we have no bread." Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" "Twelve," they replied. "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?" They answered, "Seven." He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

This very short parable about yeast and bread is a story told by Jesus, along with what is called "The Parable of the Mustard Seed", to explain what God's kingdom is like. Unlike our previous parable of "The Prodigal Son", which was so long it took us two weeks to work through it, this is only two short verses.

In trying to explain to others what the kingdom of God was like, Jesus talks about bread making. In that time, the dough for bread was made to rise, like yeast does for us today, with "leaven." This leaven was actually a piece of dough that was allowed to sit and begin to ferment. Since there were no bakeries at the time, everyone made their own bread at home. So, you saved some fermented dough from the last batch to mix in with the new dough, so it would rise. It took very little of the leaven to affect the whole batch of dough. Scholars have estimated that the sixty pounds of flour mentioned here would make enough bread to feed about 150 people – a lot of bread made with a very small amount of leaven that was hidden in the dough. It might even

appear that it wasn't enough and would have no effect, getting lost in the dough. But, the end result would show otherwise.

Also, in Jewish thought, the idea of leaven could be used to talk about the little bit of leaven as a bad thing that could work its way through whatever it came in contact with, thus making the whole thing worse. That's what Jesus is warning about in the passage we read from Mark's gospel.

Apparently, his disciples had forgotten to bring enough bread for their journey on the boat. Jesus becomes aware of this and uses the discussion about bread as a "teachable moment." He tells them to be careful and to watch out for the yeast (or leaven) of the Pharisees and of Herod. The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of the day who had the habit of twisting the Jewish moral law so that it became more about trying to keep endless rules, rather than expressing love for God and neighbor. And Herod was the Jewish puppet-king serving Caesar while oppressing his own people. In a sense Jesus tells them to watch out for the influence of bad religion (not all or good religion) and political rulers like Herod who are only in it for themselves. Their influence can ruin a lot.

But the disciples don't really pick up what Jesus is saying. And in what is one of the classic dumb lines in the Bible, in response to Jesus' artful use of the leaven metaphor, the "duh-sciples" are very literal and say, "It is because we have no bread." (Mark 8:16, NIV) Jesus tries to explain some more, but he ends up saying, "Do you still not understand?" (Mark 8:21, NIV) Obviously not – at least, not yet.

Actually, when it comes to understanding what Jesus means by the kingdom of God, we, too may not fully understand it. I think that when it comes to understanding what we mean by the kingdom of God, Bible scholar William Barclay is most helpful. He points us back to the Lord's Prayer – the prayer Jesus taught the disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray -- and the prayer we pray almost every week here in worship. Barclay points to this phrase: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Barclay reminds us that in Hebrew poetry like that found in the Psalms, some lines are actually repetitions of the same idea, but using different words. When Jesus prays to God the Father, "Thy kingdom come . . ." then everything that comes next is another way of saying what God's coming kingdom looks like. So, what is God's Kingdom? It is when and where God's will is done on earth as in heaven. Whenever and wherever we see what seems like God's will for our world taking place – that is God's kingdom being revealed in this world.

However, this "revealing" is not always obvious. Some have suggested that is why Jesus uses the word "hid" to describe what the woman in the parable does with the leaven. She hides it in the sense that it looks like it has disappeared into this large batch of dough and is gone for good. But, when the dough is baked in an oven, over time the hidden leaven works its magic. The results are obvious in that loaf of warm, delicious, and nutritious bread! The kingdom of God may not look like much to us here and now. It may even seem to us to be hidden or lost in the overwhelming number of other negative influences in our world. But over time, if we have eyes of faith and

ears to hear, we will see and hear the work of God's kingdom in our world today. Something small can even bring about a revolution of God's love and grace.

William Barclay writes about this revolution. Barclay says in response to some critics like Karl Marx who called Christianity, "the opiate of the people" teaching the masses to endure those things against which they should have rebelled, "True Christianity, on the contrary, is always revolutionary." (*And Jesus Said: A Handbook on the Parables of Jesus*, 1970:62) Barclay goes on to describe the different types of revolution that can come through our Christian faith.

First there is what he calls the "moral revolution" in which God begins by working within a person's heart and mind. When we fully grasp the extent of God's love for us, we are transformed by God's amazing grace in grateful response to God.

Barclay also talks about the "social revolution." For example, the good news of the gospel upends the way the world labels and ranks people -- which is often according to their wealth, their influence and power, or how others view them. The gospel teaches us that what really matters is how well we serve others in the name of Christ.

Finally, Barclay talks about the "economic revolution" that Christian faith can bring. He describes how the grace of God and the influence of God's spirit can affect the way we think and feel. The primary goal of whatever we do in life is not just to make more money for ourselves, but to look at all we do in terms of how well we serve others and meet the needs of those around us. If we did this, Barclay says, "Every work would be dedicated to the healing, the helping and the supplying of the spiritual and physical needs of men [and women.]" (*And Jesus Said: 63*) So, as the leaven of God's kingdom works its way into our lives, it will first transform us -- and then through us, begin to transform our world.

So, this morning I want to ask three questions. Each follows from the passages we have read about both the positive and negative ways in which "leaven" can work its way through our lives. The first is this: *How are the negative values of our world working their way through us?* Remember Jesus told his followers to be careful of the negative influences like the Pharisees, King Herod, and the way their influence can work its way through our lives. Where do we need to look at those negative influences in our lives, and then choose to make a change and turn away from those -- seeking God's forgiveness, and then heading back in the right direction?

The second question is this: *How are we allowing the positive leaven of God's kingdom to work its way through our lives?* Additionally, how can we be more open to the small, almost imperceptible influence of God's Holy Spirit in our lives today?

The third and final question flows from the second -- how we allow God's kingdom to have its way in our own lives. The third question is this: *How are we allowing God's kingdom to work its way through us and make a difference in our world today?*

We began by saying that revolutions often begin small -- sometimes with only one person. Our American Revolution began with a few brave souls committed to making a better world. Our Christian faith began with one man -- Jesus the son of God -- who gave his life on a cross and was

resurrected three days after his death. This was God's way of beginning the work of God's kingdom – a kingdom where God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven. God uses the seemingly small, insignificant, and powerless to change the world!

In just a few moments, when we come to this table, we will each take a small piece of bread. As you receive it, let it also remind you not only of God's grace at work in your life; let it remind you of your call to go out and change the world – making whatever part of it you come in contact with, a place where God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.