

Proper 12 Year A: 29 / 30 July 2017
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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May the Holy Spirit be yeast to our lives, burping abundant grace

Genesis 29:15-28
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

One of the things I am thankful for in my life is being raised in a multi-generational home. By that I mean my maternal-grandparents lived with us. Now, I was only 5 when my grandfather died, but my grandmother lived well into her late eighties, so I had much more time with her.

My grandmother, as is my mother to this day, was a faithful person of prayer. There wasn't much she could do in her elder years, but this was a task she put her heart into. All I can say is be careful what you pray for—she always wanted someone in the family to have a religious life—look what happened to me! All kidding aside, both my grandmother and my mother are people of hospitality where food was the center of family life together, that is, of course, after prayer.

My brother and I were raised with simple food. Nothing fancy, farm fair really, with a twist of French Acadian thrown in. Though it was nothing elaborate, it was wholesome and comforting, especially my grandmother's homemade doughnuts. There is nothing like a fresh doughnut just out of the fryer, and no commercial doughnut can compare. However, there was one thing neither woman excelled at: bread baking.

Who knew that baking bread was a more challenging task than simply mixing water, flour, salt, and yeast? Atmospheric conditions play a role in the success of bread making I soon learned from these two cooks. At least that's what they would say when their latest effort didn't quite work out. Of course, that never stopped them from trying over and over again to get it right. Eventually, mom did surrender to using frozen dough to bake fresh bread. Something about working with yeast just made matters too challenging.

Since there are no doughnuts in today's readings, I will have to settle for working with the parable that most closely resembles bread baking. Today, Jesus is on a parable roll, where you get four for the price of one, each of which metaphorically depicts the Kingdom of God—or as I prefer to say, the Kin-dom of God.

Yeast, I have learned, is classified in the fungus kingdom. I found that to be a curious choice of words for the article's author to employ considering today's readings are about Kin-dom of Heaven. Yeast, as a fungus microorganism, requires energy to grow. These microorganisms need a food source, primarily sugar. Active yeast will feed on sugar resulting in the fungus burping carbon dioxide and ethanol. The process is called fermentation: carbon dioxide in bread making and ethanol in alcoholic beverages. Hence, when Jesus compares the Kin-dom of Heaven, of God to yeast being added to flour, he is speaking of a very disruptive experience.

Scandalous is the word used by some theologians to describe this disruptive experience. After all, something is going to alter the simple properties of flour, water, and salt turning them into something fabulous. Unleavened bread is useful and portable, a staple of many cultures and civilizations. It meets basic nutritional requirements for sustenance. By adding the active yeast microorganisms to this utilitarian food product, one unleashes a chain-of-events that forever transforms the basic ingredients of bread. Once added, the yeast will go about its work breaking down starches, which is aided by the baker's kneading the dough. As the starches are torn apart, the yeast sets about gorging on the sugars that are released, after which it burps itself into happiness. Talk about your ultimate sugar high. All this burping, this release of gas, causes the dough to "rise"; the air pockets that develop from these yeast burps give the dough volume that results in a light texture to the finished product. Even if the baker punches the rising dough down, it will rise again. As long as there are sugars for the microorganisms to feed on, they will burp away, forming countless air bubbles within the raw dough. This is what the Kin-dom of Heaven, of God is like?

Indeed, it is. How can I say that, you may be asking? I can because many theologians believe that the Kin-dom of Heaven is both now and not yet. Unlike some Christian denominations and their theological teachings where the Kin-dom of Heaven is some future event that will happen, possibly in another realm, ushered in by calamity in our present day, Episcopalians and many others understand the Kin-dom of God as being ushered in by Jesus, is present to us now, but will only find its completion in God's time. It is both present and future, now and yet to be. Something a little hard to wrap one's mind around, and thus we have parables to help us better appreciate this idea of present while simultaneously incomplete.

Working with today's parable, unleavened bread is our present reality where leavened bread represents our journey towards the fullest expression of the Kin-dom of Heaven. Introducing yeast to unleavened flour is very much a scandalous thing, maybe even violent as those microorganisms tear apart the starches in an effort to reach the sugars which in turn causes the microorganisms to burp CO₂ thus ushering in transformation.

Unleavened bread, though useful, is not all that flavorful. It will feed and sustain many people and is a bit more resistant to mold. Now imagine God as the baker who adds yeast to this pedestrian product where the active yeast breaks apart the internal components of the flour, water, and salt in order to feed and burp, thus causing the raw dough to rise. The Kin-dom of Heaven is a journey from the mundane to the extraordinary. Carrying this further, imagine that the unleavened bread is you and I. As people of faith, we are productive going about life trying to do what is right. We worship, and we volunteer, and we try to treat others as we would like to be treated (or at least I hope we do). Think of the yeast as being the Holy Spirit, that most active agent of the Trinity. It sets about, tearing apart our assumptions, presuppositions, even our biases all in order to reach that which is best in us. It disrupts what I call our hemostasis, that condition of just getting along, doing our thing, comfortable in our situation— after all, this is how it's always been; a phrase that isn't unfamiliar to many of us. The Holy Spirit feeds on our self-imposed limitations, our self-reliance, on the very idea of "self." And it burps forth grace in abundance empowering us to greater witness as co-participants with Jesus in ushering in the Kin-dom of Heaven, the Kin-dom of God that is both now and not yet.

Jesus more than invites us, he warns us that the Kin-dom of Heaven isn't life as usual. It isn't built on our presumptions, our egos, our individual abilities. It is built on God's grace. It is made through the scandalous work of the Holy Spirit in our lives constantly seeking to transform our being into active agents of faithful witness. We, you and I, are to be the Bread of Life, co-participants in ushering in the Kin-dom of Heaven. We are not to be passive, unleavened bread. Instead, filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are to be extraordinary bread actively sharing of our abundance with those in need, actively fighting for the right use of creation, actively witnessing God's transforming love when faced with indifference and cruelty. We are to be scandalous.

And here's the bonus: God never gives up on us. Just as my grandmother and mother continued to try working with yeast, seeking to do things better, God continues to infuse our lives with the Holy Spirit seeking to break down our barriers and transform us into disciples willing to be bread for the world. It is the ultimate act of communion and we are invited to be active participants in establishing the Kin-dom of Heaven. Not as something future, but as something now and not yet. May the Holy Spirit be yeast to our lives, gorging on our insecurities, and burping abundant grace such that we are transformed into the Body of Christ presence in the world.