



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2020

Sermon Title: "The Kingdom Is..."

Gospel: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

"Back in the day" one of the classes I had to take in middle school was "Home Ec," what today would be called family and consumer science. One of the units was cooking, and we were divided out into teams of four and assigned to small "kitchen" stations to learn how to prepare food. Being in a progressive school district, our cooking class was co-ed and I decided to partner with three guys from my band section. We really didn't take this very seriously, which caught us off guard when we were learning how to use yeast in baking. It was time to make pizza dough. We looked at how small the yeast granules were and thought that more would be better. The wise teacher saw us from afar and in a sharp tone reminded the class, "remember you have to eat what you made." I had this class right before lunch- I was so hungry. But our pizza dough looked like a brick and we had to choke it down. Boy did we get it wrong.

Later, I met a fabulous baker, whose towering creations won contests everywhere. It all came so easily, but she never ate anything she made. Somehow reality would never measure up to the idea. She knew so much but could never simply savor and experience the joy her food created. She never allowed herself to be in the reality before her, somehow always still critiquing her kingdom.

When I actually wanted to be a baker, I pored over the instructions about everything that was required. The order of ingredients, the timing, a little salt was good, but a lot was bad. Sugar was tricky. Temperature could either kill that yeast or cause it to move too slowly. Not only did I wish I had some guidance, I realized how little I knew. Rather than seek out help, I decided that yeast dough was not for me.

Only later still did I realize that living into baking bread, much like the rest of life, is an unfolding of wisdom and everyone can tell you of some misadventures. Recently in this pandemic, I decided to make a recipe that I had all the ingredients for, something to celebrate. What I did NOT pay attention to was that it made three loaves. What to do when you have two loaf pans? I baked the third in a Pyrex bowl. It may have been unorthodox, but tasted just as good. And three loaves of iced cinnamon raisin bread was pretty hard to beat.

Yeast has been making bread for millennia, long before all our high tech solutions. Does process matter? Of course it does, but it should never keep us from the joy of the moment before us. Even the ones where we laugh at ourselves. For me, and maybe for you too, some of the best moments in my life have come from the simple, even unexpected shared joys. The times when someone has assured me that what they placed before me was no trouble and they mean it.

The times when just being together is a far more vital, life giving loving connection I have known than witnessing some feat of the spectacular. The kingdom of heaven may be found in just sitting and eating still warm fresh homemade bread with a loved one.

Building life giving and loving connections instead of towers of achievement is what Jesus has been preaching and living ever since he first uttered "Repent! the kingdom of God is near!" all the way back in chapter 4. After turning his back on all the seeming success the devil offers, and the constant assessing others engage in of sorting who is worthy, Jesus begins proclaiming a **new** word of good news.

News of the kingdom- of healing and mercy and justice and joy. Shown in acts of love, that seem to grow beyond their humble beginnings or imaginings, and often over shared meals of whatever humble folks had made.

That kingdom, the "kingdom of heaven," has come near to earth and Jesus serves it up. By reminding us not to let worries eat us up. To embrace God's blessing as not only possible, but reality. To share in rising together- as emptiness is replaced with fullness, and as hearts wounded are healed to join in, proclaiming with him-

"Rejoice! This kingdom is yours! God cares for you."

Little by little, person by person, a transformation takes place. Like what happens when that yeast interacts with things around it. Yeast gradually grows, connects and changes the very makeup of simple flour, reconstituting the ingredients into something that eclipses what anyone would imagine possible. What starts so small can eventually permeate everything. Things like judgmentalism and retaliation, and all our divisions can be overtaken by love. Those other kingdoms can be continually transformed to one far more lovely-beyond ourselves. "Pursue this kingdom," Jesus says, "not any of the other kingdoms that seem to be more powerful or spectacular."

Yet, for all that lofty talk, we might wonder how on earth we can, or how on earth this kingdom can be what Jesus says it is.

That too I think is why Jesus talks about yeast. Can we trust that something smaller than a pin head and seemingly so fragile can do so much? Jesus is calling us to take the kingdom of heaven that seriously- to believe in the power of God at work even more than we believe in the science of yeast. To avoid being tempted to wonder how WE grow OUR kingdom and lapse into building our own visions. To resist succumbing to the notion that the kingdom of heaven is a great idea but not achievable. Matthew shows us time and again that anxieties can lead us to spend ourselves- our time and talent and possessions- on dissecting what Jesus says, or to whittle it down with portion control, rather trusting the host of the expansive joyous feast of the kingdom come. Jesus tells us today the kingdom portion is not some tiny morsel. The woman with the yeast has three huge shovels of flour- God plans on feeding a crowd! It's making me hungry just talking about it. And there's a place in the meal for us all.

Hold onto that vision of rising and expanding that makes you long for the finished product. This is the kingdom of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, given for us.

Just like bread, this kingdom takes time to grow, but along the way, I think we will see it clearest when we turn toward God, knowing we do not know everything, to be fed with a word of understanding. When we can acknowledge we are weak, and be met by a God who serves up bread for the journey to give us strength. And to remember that unlike everything else in life where we are chasing the dream, and it feels like it all depends upon us, that that is not how the kingdom of heaven is. Because God is always out ahead and pursuing us- in love and grace to draw us closer. Our experience of this kingdom comes in its fullest sense when we trust in Jesus to make it so. It really all depends upon Him. Thanks be to God, he continues to draw near to grow in us.

AMEN.