

1 Lenten Sermon, March 20, 2013

Texts: Exodus 12:14-20, Matthew 13:31-33, Luke 12:1-3

Title: "The Pure Becoming Impure - for Us"

1. Leaven

What if there were a mysterious substance that caused things to blow up and fill with air.

- a substance that causes dead bodies that puff up and give off odors.
- a substance that causes mushrooms to pop overnight out of the soil.
- a substance that makes people feel stomach pain & emit foul odors.

The ancient Hebrews had a name for this substance. They called it leaven.

It was considered a kind of natural pollutant. It did do some good things, like make wine from grape juice – but even then you got a foul odor if you opened the wineskin. Eventually, it would turn the wine to vinegar.

Today, leavening is a good thing. Leavening agents help us make cakes and breads that we enjoy. We think of yeast as a kind of happy microbe, that can not only make bread rise and make wine and beer, but even be used as a nutritious food additive or supplement.

But in Biblical times, leaven was symbolic of decomposition. It was seen as a kind of pollution.

In the Bible, there is only one positive reference to yeast or leaven. There are 17 negative references. And then there's the reference in today's Gospel reading.

The reading from Exodus shows how important it was to the ancient Hebrews to bake their bread for Passover without leaven:

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel.

In Luke 12, Jesus warns against leaven in a metaphorical sense. He said to his disciples:

"Beware of the **yeast** of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops." Luke 12:1-3, NRSV.

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The Apostle Paul, too, in 1 Corinthians wrote about leaven as a polluting agent. He wrote:

“Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are —unleavened. Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, NRSV.

But if leaven was considered a bad thing, why is it paired in the gospel of Matthew with mustard seed?

If you read the parable of the mustard seed, it seems like a parable of growth. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a plant so big that birds can make their nests in it. Looking at the text, you'd think that mustard seed is a good thing.

But probably not. Mustards are among the noxious weeds of the world. They were known as weeds in the literature of Jesus' time.

One plant that may have been the species Jesus was talking about is *rapistrum rugosum*, often called bastard cabbage, turnip-weed, or tall mustard-weed. It was introduced from southern Europe, and has become an invasive pest in Texas. It can grow 5 feet or more in height. It crowds out other, more desirable species, because its broad leaves come out early and can shade out other plants.

Sahara mustard (*Brassica tournefortii*) is another candidate for the mustard that Jesus may have been talking about. It has been introduced to the Americas and is now an abundant annual weed in southern California, southern Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, west Texas, and northwestern Mexico. It, too, can grow to 5 feet tall.

When the seeds of this plant are moistened they become very sticky and readily adhere to people, animals, and objects. Seeds easily take hold along roadsides and arid desert lands, especially in disturbed habitats.

To take one of *these* seeds and plant it in your garden is pure foolishness.

2. Three measures

So, back to the leaven. Jesus' parable tells us that a woman hid the leaven in three measures of flour. That's a lot of flour.

About 50 pounds. Here's my visual.

So, like the mustard seed, this is an image of a little doing a lot. This is a lot of flour to make rise.

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3. The woman hid

But there's more. A woman hid the leaven in the flour — and it would have been a poor, rural woman. In cities, bakeries were run by men. A poor, rural woman had little power. She could own no property, and had to obey her husband or father.

And the woman didn't just mix in the leaven, she hid it. She put it in without anyone looking. She put in this undesirable substance in a sneaky way, so that all the dough became less desirable. She polluted the whole 50 pounds of flour.

4. God gets dirty for us

What are we to make of this?

What is Jesus telling us?

That the kingdom of Heaven is about upsetting the plans of others to grow crops without weeds and bread without yeast? I don't think so.

Well, If you were one of Jesus' listeners back at the time he told it, I think you'd get several things out of it.

1. First, you'd notice how Jesus got your attention by speaking of things that shouldn't happen. Weeds planted in the field; leaven hidden the flour. You've got my attention, Jesus.

2. Second, you'd notice that this Kingdom of Heaven is not like most kingdoms. If you were to pick a plant to be the symbol of a Kingdom, you might pick a palm tree, which was on the coins in ancient Israel. Or you might pick the mighty cedar of Lebanon, which Ezekiel describes as sheltering the birds of the air.

But pick a mustard plant as symbolic of the Kingdom of God? What kind of kingdom is that?

3. Third, You'd find that God upsets people's plans. In ways that people can't perceive, God interferes with our plans – even good plans. We may plan to grow wheat or bake unleavened bread, but the Kingdom of Heaven throws in a weed or a bit of leaven, and our plans have to be changed. Jesus often changed people's plans. Jesus said, "follow me," without regard to people's plans. One man said, "Wait, let me bury my father." Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, proclaim the Kingdom of God."

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4. Fourth, if you were one of Jesus' listeners, you'd also see how this is the complete opposite of pharisaic Judaism.

The Pharisees wanted people to obey every law in the Hebrew Scripture, and become pure enough to earn God's favor.

Jesus tells the opposite. It's not that we need to become pure like God – rather that God becomes *impure* for *us*. God is willing to be involved with the weeds of society. We can see it in what Jesus did – he related to tax collectors and sinners; Jesus invited a thief to paradise; he accepted a gift from a sinner woman; he touched lepers.

You could say that God comes down to our level — but maybe it's more that God reaches out to us impure sinners by becoming impure for us.

The Kingdom of God is like a poor, rural woman, who probably couldn't afford all the temple rituals she was supposed to participate in, so she was impure.

And that impure woman secretly stashed some impure leaven into a lot of bread flour, and all that bread flour became impure, too.

I think this is where the parables become a source of hope for the average Judean of Jesus' day. The average Judean had plenty of sin built up that he or she couldn't get purified in the temple.

And then Jesus came along and said that this sin was *not* a barrier between us and God. Instead, God comes down to our level so that our sin may be forgiven.

Jesus suggests that maybe religion is not about following the outward forms. Religion is instead about intimacy with a God who loves us.

Remember the story of Mary and Martha? Martha was busy with the outer forms. She wanted to get dinner ready for Jesus and the other guests. But Mary sat and listened to Jesus, desiring intimacy with God. Jesus said that Mary chose the better part, the better emphasis in religious life.

That's good news. None of us is perfect. But with God we don't need to be perfect.

We all feel like a weed at times. But that's OK. We're in good company, and God likes weeds, too.

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He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

He told them another parable: "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." (Matthew 13:31-33, NRSV)

"This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day you shall hold a solemn assembly, and on the seventh day a solemn assembly; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual ordinance. In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread. For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread." Exodus 12:14-20, NRSV.