

## Parables Session 2

### Introductory Comments

1. Of all the parables, this one received the highest number of “red” votes (most likely attributable to Jesus) from the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of scholars who seek “to renew the quest of the historical Jesus and to report the results of its research to the general public, rather than just to a handful of gospel specialists. Initially the goal of the Seminar was to review each of the sayings and deeds attributed to Jesus in the gospels and determine which of them could be considered authentic.” While this aim is laudable, some of the conclusions of the Seminar (in the opinion of this minister and other scholars) are questionable.
2. **Typical interpretations.** Most interpretations of this parable are obvious and uninteresting. Basically, you hear comments like, “Out of the most insignificant beginnings, invisible to human eye, God creates a mighty kingdom, which embraces all the people of the world”; or “Just a few converts, like yeast, can work to convert the entire population”; or “God’s rule, like yeast, working in a hidden way, will pervade one’s life, giving it a new quality.”
3. **Leaven and bread in Ancient Israel and Jesus’ teachings.** Leaven is not invisible, but in Antiquity would have been what we call “sourdough starter” today. Neither is it insignificant – it is essential for baking. Bread had a significant function in Jesus’ teachings. “Give us this day our daily bread” recalls the Jewish wilderness experience where manna was provided (Exod 16; Num 11; Deut 8), and indicates that God will continue to provide for our needs. The Jewish idea of “feasting in the world to come” permeates the stories and mission of Jesus. Luke’s story of Jesus opens with him being placed in a “manger,” that is, a feeding trough. What better symbolism could there be for the person who would compare his body to bread? Jesus feeds thousands (reminiscent of how Elijah and Elisha did), and Jesus consistently meets with people at a table, dines indiscriminately, and is continually associated with food – most memorably so at the Last Supper. By the time we get to John’s gospel, Jesus has become the “bread of life” (6:35) and the “living bread that came down from heaven” (6:51). Any parable with a reference to leaven, dough, or bread brings with it all this appetizing accompaniment, and it makes the parable much more nourishing. There is thus necessarily more going on than a lesson on “the growth of the kingdom.”
4. To understand the parable, we must look at the component parts – such as the cultural understanding of yeast and the amount of bread that three measures of flour would yield. We need to see connections between the parable and images from the scriptures of Ancient Israel. We also need to correct some bad translations – especially those that have the woman “mixing” the yeast into the dough. Ultimately, we will do well to see what the combined imagery of women and dough, hiding and ovens would have suggested to people living in the first century.

### Questions

Read Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21; Thomas 96. How are they similar/different?

1. **What are some associations that Jesus’ audience would have made with “yeast”?** In addition to appearances in Matthew 13:33 and Luke 13:21, the term “yeast” or “leaven” shows up eleven times in the New Testament, and each occasion hints of something whose taste is a bit off. But what is not conveyed is that yeast is (of necessity) either impure or

“unclean.” Indeed, some yeast is positive and some negative – it all depends on the context (the leaven of the Pharisees was “bad”; that of Jesus would have been “good”). Thus, the word “leaven” at the outset of the parable would not have thrown the audience of guard or into a panic, or been akin to the swelling of a decomposing corpse (as scholars like Brandon Scott suggest). Yeast *might* have a negative connotation, but not necessarily.

2. **What did the woman do? (and not do?)** First off, the extent to which we focus on the woman herself is up for debate. One could make the argument that it isn’t the woman who is the focus, but the leaven: “Similar to the kingdom of heaven is *leaven* that a woman... hid.” But, in the Gospel of Thomas, the woman is the main actor: “Jesus said, ‘The Father’s imperial rule is like a woman who took a little leaven, hid it in dough, and made it into large loaves of bread’ (Thomas 96). Aside from this, however, the greater problem is not the woman, but what she does. In most English translation, she “mixed” the yeast with three measures of flour. The problem is that the Greek does not say “mixed.” The word is *enkrypto*, which means “hid.” Thus, she is literally doing something secretly with an ambivalent or multivalent substance that works by process of decay. In other New Testament places, a cognate of the verb *enkrypto* is found. In many cases, it refers not only to something that is hidden, but to something that should be or must be uncovered. In Luke 8:17 (and Mark 4:22), Jesus insists, “Nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid” (Matt 5:14).
3. **To what do the “three measures of flour” refer?** It’s not just three cups, but somewhere between forty to sixty pounds! The dough would be far too much for one woman to knead, and the yield FAR too much for one person to consume. It’s an image of extravagance, or hyperbole (like the wedding at Cana, for instance). This specific amount recalls Genesis 18, where Abraham, after a long week of managing the relationship between his wife, Sarah, and his other wife, Hagar, plus circumcising himself and every other male member of his household, looks up to see “three men standing near him.” Displaying the hospitality for which he becomes famous, Abraham runs from his tent, prostrates himself before the strangers and invites them to lunch. “Let me bring a little bread,” he tells them. Then he tells his wife, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” It is then that these three visitors inform Abraham that his wife Sarah (long past child-bearing years) will have a son. And upon hearing this, Sarah laughs.
4. **Some possible meanings of the parable?** Perhaps the message is that we should reevaluate the meanest of domestic materials, that what we see as negative or simply utilitarian may have spiritual potential. The kingdom can be associated with pearls, but also with yeast; with banquets, but also with mustard seeds; with kings, but also with shepherds. And despite our best efforts to hide it, there is nothing that can stop God. God’s kingdom cannot be buried... even when we don’t expect it or laugh it off, it will rise eventually. Also, the kingdom is present in the simplest of places - at the communal oven of a Galilean village when everyone has enough to eat. Like yeast, it is present in everything, and is available to all, from the sourdough starter to the rain and the sunshine. It is something that works its way through our lives, and enables all to join the feast.

\*\*\*For next session, read Mt 13:31-32; Lk 13:18-19; Mk 4:30-32; Thomas 20.