

# Bread Enough

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**H**ow many of us have eaten something already today? For many of us, preparing to eat is an occasion for saying grace, for acknowledging the gift of food, for thanking God, the source of all good. Grace, like the parables of Jesus—one of which we reflect on today—is an attempt to remind us of the presence of God in the midst of our daily lives.

It is only in the last decade, demographers tell us, that the majority of people who live on earth are not farmers. The Bible, including the parables of Jesus, is full of references to planting, harvesting, and food. Bread is universal, whether it is pita, naan, injera, lefse, or hotdog buns. Our text today, Matthew 13:33, is set among a number of parables involving seeds: person planning seed in friendly and unfriendly places, wheat and weeds growing together until harvest, mustard seed. One biblical commentary says this about the parables of Jesus: "Jesus does not explain the kingdom of God but evokes provocative images that demolish conventional inadequate ways of imagining God's rule in the world."

Think of some of the familiar parables of Jesus. The Good Samaritan upsets attitudes toward a foreigner or stranger by making a hero of a traditional enemy. The Prodigal Son challenges traditional images of a father primarily as disciplinarian. The story of the poor man Lazarus challenges the tradition that the rich are those favored by God. (All of these perhaps challenge us as much as they challenged first-century Jewish listeners of Jesus.) Even here, Jesus speaks of yeast positively, when usually yeast is a metaphor for a negative influence. Elsewhere, Jesus says, "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees." Martin Luther, in his Easter hymn "*Christ lag in Todesbanden*" (Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands), wrote, "Then let us feast this Easter Day on Christ the bread of heaven; the word of grace has purged away the old and evil leaven."

The parables are Jesus' way of connecting our daily lives to God. Many of the parables start, "The kingdom of God is like . . ." Following one Jewish tradition, Matthew usually substitutes "heaven" for "God" and speaks of "the kingdom of heaven." The Bible that Jesus knew, what we call the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, often speaks of God as king of the Hebrew or Jewish people, and also of God as king of the whole world, of all peoples—if we are speaking literally, a patently ridiculous claim—which suggests that somehow speaking from faith means looking at things differently.

For many today this language, with its masculine associations, is a problem, and so some translations and discussion speak of the reign of God or the realm of God or the sovereignty of God. Whatever words we use, the clear meaning is that God is concerned with the matters we usually associate with government or our life together. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann defines "kingdom of God" as "a public life reorganized toward neighborliness."

Jesus was convicted and executed as a threat to the governing authorities, as one who claimed to be, or was accused of claiming to be, king of the Jews, as the banner over the cross of Jesus read. However we interpret the meaning of the death of Jesus, he was convicted for alleged political crimes.

The Old Testament has two traditions in relation to the idea of kingdom, both presented in the stories, in the book of First Samuel, surrounding the crowning of the first king of Israel, Saul. One tradition says that a king was a gift of God and an instrument of God in leading God's people. Another tradition says that any king is trying to take the place of God. Through history, most Jewish and Christian people of faith have stressed that first tradition. Mennonites have tended to stress the second tradition and been more suspicious of government.

Christians have at different points said, "This is where I must differ from or stand up to the government." Military service is one such point. Payment of taxes, a significant portion of which is for military expenses, is one such point. In U.S. history, the Underground Railroad to protect runaway slaves is one such point. The choice now of some pastors not to act as a servant of the government in officiating at weddings, until gay and lesbian weddings are legal, is one such point. The issue of whether a national flag may be in a place of worship is one such point.

Language about the kingdom of God says that our relationship with God is about our life together, not just our individual lives. A German proverb says, *Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch*. One person is no person.

In relation to gender, the most radical act of Jesus (whatever Dan Brown suggests in *The DaVinci Code*) was not marrying. In a society where a man's first task was to carry on the family line by fathering a son, and a woman's place in life was to bear children, especially sons, Jesus made a profound statement by not getting married.

We have many stories of Jesus, contrary to the expectations of his culture, meeting and speaking with women: a Samaritan woman at a well, Mary Magdalene, a Syro-phoenician woman who seeks help, a woman who touches the hem of his garment to seek healing, a woman who anoints his feet, Mary and Martha who are hostesses.

According to the Gospels, Jesus addresses God as "Abba," a form of the word for Father perhaps equivalent to "Dad." The Gospel of John has Jesus often using Father-Son language, but this is less about the gender of God than about a close relationship. The late Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler wrote this about the authority of Scripture and of God: "Authority is a force continuous with the whole nature and performance of the person or thing possessing it. My grandmother had authority; my grandfather had power. I remember what my grandmother said, and I wanted to do it. I have no remembrance of anything my grandfather said, except that I had to do it." The funeral of Henry Westby, age 100, Friday presented a more positive view of grandfather.

The fact that Jesus here suggests God is like a woman baking and elsewhere speaks of himself as bread should lead us not to take any one image or picture too literally.

Let us think for a minute about this one verse:

The baker here uses fifty pounds, twenty-some kilos, of flour—enough not for a simple family meal but for a feast, a banquet, a common biblical picture of the character of God and God's intention for us. So the parable pushes us past thinking mainly or only about ourselves.

The Greek text in the Gospel of Matthew actually speaks of the woman hiding the yeast in the flour, suggesting that God is at work in ways we do not see or even imagine, that life has mysteries, dimensions beyond what we ordinarily see.

And the picture of the feast recalls the text of last Sunday, the Genesis story of creation, which tells us that God sees the creation is good. Much of what Jesus teaches, in this parable and elsewhere, is rooted in the sense of the generosity of God, "the wideness of God's mercy," as the Victorian hymn writer Frederick Faber put it, while we so often imagine a world of scarcity. Lynn Twist writes, "We spend most of the hours and the days of our lives hearing, explaining, complaining, or worrying about what we don't have enough of. . . . The mantra of 'not enough' becomes a kind of default setting for our thinking about everything, from the cash in our pockets to the people we love or the value of our own lives." Much of our culture's suspicion of immigrants and of Muslims is rooted in the fear that there is only so much and that they are out to get it.

Rather than our need creating our sense of scarcity, our sense of scarcity leads us to want more. Twist goes on: "Once we define our world as deficient, it becomes noble and responsible to make sure we take care of our own. . . . It's like a game of musical chairs." In the *Star-Tribune* week before last I found concerns about global warming and energy consumption and an article lamenting that the Chinese love of fresh air keeps them from choosing to buy electric clothes driers.

Rather than start with scarcity, let us start with the sense that God is alive and well and generous. Frank Laubach, early-twentieth-century missionary and leader in literacy programs, started each day with the prayer, "God, what are you doing in the world today that I can help you with? God, what are you doing in the world today that I can help you with?"

To quote Brueggemann once more: "Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity."

Jesus says, there is enough of what we need. Friday night at Families Moving Forward, about nine o'clock Joan Wing and Barb Beers and Anthony Beerswing, who had been playing with the half dozen or so children, were preparing to leave. A two-year-old boy would not stop banging on the piano, despite being asked to do so and despite the keys being covered. Finally I just picked him up and carried him as I went around making sure the doors were locked—no fighting, wiggling, talking or screaming. Not a simple cure for the world's problems, but certainly a clue.

The parable of the leaven invites us to live with a sense of God's abundance and generosity.