

# Kingdom Secrets: Fermenting Change

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist Church  
on Sunday, July 28, 2002  
by Dean J. Snyder

Matthew 13: 31-33

One morning this week, as I was walking through our building, I heard voices coming up the stairway by the church office that sounded like somebody downstairs was having altogether too good a time for a church meeting. When I went downstairs to investigate I found a handful of women making these (Stuffed toys).

The name of the group, I discovered, is the United Methodist Women's Fellowship Group. It is a sewing group of maybe 8 or 9 women who sew stuffed toys for Children's Hospital. When children are brought into the emergency room, they are given a stuffed toy as a gift, and the nurses there say it really helps children to have a new toy to hug when they are going through the emergency ward experience.

The women, I discovered, also sew lap blankets for the children in wheel chairs and crib blankets for the children in our own Child Development Center.

So, the fellowship group has given me a doggie and kitty for my office, in case I experience any trauma.

The history of the fellowship group can be traced back to the 1920s. It is the oldest benevolent sewing group in the history of Washington, D.C., and I am proud of the ministry they do for children on our behalf, and I hope you are too.

For several Sundays this summer, I am preaching a sermon mini-series on the topic "Kingdom Secrets." All the sermons are taken from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew and the overall text is a portion of Matthew 13: 11, where Jesus tells his disciples: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven."

If we are disciples, it is given to us to know the secrets of heaven. Kingdom Secrets.

Let us pray: "Your Word, O God, is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Open our hearts and minds that we may hear a word of hope and of possibility and of love today. In Christ's name. Amen.

There is a god at the bottom of the cellar steps of my soul. My assumptions about this god, and my experience of this god, have been shaped by conventional thinking, popular piety, civil religion and my mother, bless her memory.

The theologian Carl Michaelson argued that, because God is hidden, the god we project in our minds and psyche, the one at the bottom of the cellar steps of our souls, is not likely to be the God who created heaven and earth, who liberated the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, who spoke through the prophets and who was incarnate in the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ.

Our spiritual condition, Michaelson said, is one of existential embarrassment because we are praying to and seeking to serve a God whom we do not know but only imagine. Our only hope is to encounter the hidden God, whom Michaelson believed we come to know in Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew likewise assumes that God is hidden. The Gospel of Matthew teaches that there are secrets we cannot figure out about God and God's ways from conventional thinking, popular piety, civil religion or my mother.

As followers of Jesus, we come to understand God in ways that may be different from conventional or popular understandings of God.

Some of these images of God and God's activity in our lives and in the world are contained in the kingdom of heaven parables of Jesus in Matthew 13.

In Matthew 13, Jesus says God is a sower who sows seeds of love in our hearts. Much of the seed is wasted. It falls on hard and thorny places in our hearts, but God is extravagant. God sows seeds of love so extravagantly that eventually some seed falls on soft and tender places within our hearts and takes root and grows. This, according to Jesus' parable, is the way God nurtures the kingdom of heaven into being in our lives and our world. God loves so extravagantly that, in spite of the hard and thorny places in our hearts, the kingdom of heaven is born in our hearts and in our midst. The kingdom of heaven will not come by force. It will grow in our hearts. God hangs on the cross, arms outstretched, and says, "This is the way I do my work."

Later in Matthew 13, Jesus says God is a farmer who doesn't worry about the weeds in the wheat fields of our lives, but wants us to grow in love rather than to be obsessed with our own faults, failings and shortcomings. And if we can manage to allow God to love us in spite of our faults, failings and shortcomings, then perhaps we will be able to love others in spite of their failings, and the kingdom of heaven will be born in our midst. The kingdom of heaven is not a place where people are perfect but a place of perfect love.

In this morning's Scripture lesson, in Matthew 13:33, God is a woman - a woman in her kitchen baking bread. She takes a small bit of yeast and mixes it with three measures of flour. Three measures of flour was about a bushel, 16 five-pound bags, an enormous amount of flour, an enormous baking job. She mixes a little bit of yeast into her giant tub of flour, and it bubbles and ferments and agitates and transforms the flour into enough dough to bake enough bread to feed 100 people.

It is this image of the kingdom of heaven as yeast that I want us to think about together this morning.

God is a woman mixing yeast in the dough of our lives until the whole world is risen.

I would like to offer some suggestions this morning of what I believe the image of yeast has to say about who God is and the way God is at work in our lives and in our world.

One of the implications of this metaphor is that small things can have great significance. It was a small piece of leaven the women mixed into an enormous amount of flour. Three measures of flour was a bushel full, or 16 five-pound bags of flour. Yet a small amount of yeast could transform the whole tub and produce enough dough to make enough bread to feed more than 100 people.

It is the same point Jesus made in the parable of the mustard seed.

What God is doing in our lives and in the world may seem, to all appearances, like a very small thing - the smallest and most insignificant of all seed - but eventually it grows into a tree where birds build their nests.

A baby in a stable, a lone teacher on a hill, eleven ill-equipped disciples, a cross - the smallest of seeds, George Buttrick said, but today orphanages, hospitals, universities, homes for the aged, hospices for the dying, shelters for the homeless, social service agencies and houses of worship are literally scattered across the face of the earth in the name of the baby born in a stable who died on the cross.

Some small act of love within your reach this week may have implications you cannot imagine and may never know.

But the metaphor of yeast has more implications. It is an image with an edge.

Yeast brews. It bubbles. It ferments. It agitates. Yeast disturbs. You can't control it. Yeast transforms.

The kingdom of heaven isn't merely growing quietly in our midst; it is bubbling inside us, fermenting and agitating and transforming us into something new.

The movement of God within our lives may be disturbing and unsettling. Probably will be.

I thought that god's job (the one at the bottom of the cellar steps of my soul), I thought god's job was to make the world a safe and secure place for me to be.

But yeast ferments and agitates and transforms.

My friend Gil Rendle, who is a senior consultant for the Alban Institute, has written a book entitled *Leading Change in the Congregation*. One of the things that Gil says in his book is that congregations rarely achieve substantial change without the experience of chaos- which is a condition, as Gil defines it, where answers are hidden and rules are unknown. Chaos is the wilderness through which Moses led the children of Israel to the promised land.

Gil says that if Moses and the children of Israel had traveled in a straight line they could have made it to the

Promised Land in 40 months. Instead they stayed in the wilderness for 40 years. Gil believes they could have got to the Promised Land much sooner but they would not have been a transformed people.

As a consultant Gil says he has learned that the longer churches manage to tolerate chaos -- the longer they can stay in the wilderness -- the more substantial and healthier the change they experience is likely to be.

The same applies to us. We rarely achieve substantial growth in our lives without the experience of chaos, where answers are hidden and the old rules no longer apply. The longer we manage to tolerate chaos, rather than revert to easy answers or old truths, the more substantial and healthier the change in our lives is likely to be.

Yeast brews. It bubbles. It ferments. It causes upset. It unsettles things. It infiltrates. It agitates. It transforms.

This is hard to believe, but when the old sureties no longer seem to hold in our lives, we should not assume God has abandoned us. I have spent much of my first four weeks here trying to listening to learn about Foundry. Half of the people have told me that their faith has in some way been disturbed or broken, and they are trying to figure it all out again. Often they have apologized for this or acted embarrassed.

Don't apologize. This, more than anything else, is a sign of the spirit of God in our midst. This is not a sign of weakness but of strength, that we can let go of old certainties and allow the spirit of God to agitate inside us and transform us.

I have come to a new conclusion about the most important quality we need in order for God to use us. I used to think it was commitment - that the most important quality we needed to development in order to be disciples of Jesus Christ was commitment.

But I now believe that more important than commitment, more important than knowing the Bible, more important than anything else is the quality of malleability. Can God knead us, mold us and shape us? Can God bubble up inside us, ferment, agitate, upset and unsettle us, knead us, mold us and shape us?

Or have we set, like cement that has hardened? More important to our usefulness to God than anything else, I suspect, is our malleability.

I do not tell the story I am about to tell to demean anybody or to put anybody down. It is a sad story.

I had a friend and mentor who was the pastor of one of the first reconciling congregations in the United Methodist Church. Reconciling congregations, as many of us are aware, are churches that make a commitment to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the church.

You will notice that our bulletin here at Foundry includes a welcome that says that we are "a reconciling congregation, affirming the call of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be in ministry with all people of all races,

sexual orientation, ages or physical conditions. We want all people to feel welcome here."

When my friend's church became a reconciling congregation more than 15 years ago, he decided to organize a regional conference to discuss the reconciling congregation movement.

Because he did not want the conference to be just the already convinced talking to other already convinced people, he invited a minister who opposed the reconciling congregation movement to speak at the conference. He was a minister who had been a leader in other movements for justice but who opposed the reconciling congregation movement.

We were all eager to hear what the minister would have to say.

This is what he said: (I remember it as though it were yesterday.)

He said, *I think this whole thing can be traced back to Martin Luther King Jr. Black people decided they wanted equality, he said. Dr. King helped them win equality. And that was okay, he said. I supported that and worked for that.* And he had.

*But then, after that, he said, women decided they wanted to be equal, too. And that was okay too, he said. I supported that and worked for that.* And he had..

*But now, he said (and this is just the way he said it), homosexuals want to be equal.*

*What nobody seem to be aware of, he said, What nobody seems to be considering is that if this doesn't stop, everybody is going to want to be equal.*

*What then?* he said. *What are we going to do if everybody decides they want to be equal?*

We were sad to hear him say this. He had stopped being malleable. The sad thing was that he understood what the reconciling congregation was really about better than many of us sitting in the audience. It was about more than including gay and lesbian people fully in the life of the church. It really was about including everybody. It was about the truth that we all stand in God's presence, no matter who we are, equally God's beloved children. He got it, but he could not bend into it. He had stretched as far as he could go. He had stopped being malleable.

I went through a bit of a tough week this week - my fourth week at Foundry. I had been a little nervous when I first came. Then things seemed to be going okay. I can do this, I told myself. I started feeling self-confident, maybe even a little cocky.

Then a couple things happened this past week that threw me off my stride, nothing really disastrous, but enough to unsettle me. Then, I got preacher's block. It was Friday afternoon when I try to have a draft of what I intend to say done, and I had nothing. Well, rather I had three different drafts, but it all felt like nothing - lifeless and energy less - nothing worth wasting your time with.

Friday afternoon I called Jane and said, "Sweetheart, I'm feeling really vulnerable today."

She said to me, "Good!" Well, that wasn't the exact word she used but that was the gist of her response.

"Good!" Jane thinks that I am not at my best when I am overly self-confident or cocky. She thinks that when I am vulnerable, I am more open to the movement of God's spirit in my life, I am more attentive to others and to God. She thinks that when I am vulnerable, I am malleable.

I had a parishioner once, a man I loved. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for his church. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for his pastor. He got sick and had to go into a nursing home. When I went to visit him, if he found out I was coming, he would hide from me. He refused to receive Holy Communion. He would not let me minister to him. It broke my heart.

I thought about it and prayed about it, and I think I finally figured it out. When he became sick, he thought, I believe, that God had betrayed him, that God had let him down. He thought the deal was that if he was faithful, God would keep him strong. He thought Holy Communion was supposed to keep him strong.

But that's not the way it works. There is only one way to come into God's presence. The only way we can come into God's presence is weak. The only way we can receive the bread of Holy Communion is hungry. The only way we can receive the wine is thirsty.

The apostle Paul said this remarkable thing once. I think it is the most amazing thing he ever said. He said, "When I am weak, then am I strong."

The way God can best use us is when we are weak, and vulnerable, and malleable.