

## TREASURES OLD AND NEW

Proper 12 Year A: Genesis 29:15-28  
Psalm 119:129-136  
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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**Key Passages:** *“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. ...[E]very scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who bring out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”*  
(Matthew 13:33, 52)

When I was growing up in Virginia, country ham, or more precisely, Smithfield ham, was highly prized in my family. We only had it once or twice a year, usually around Christmas. The ham would arrive in its cloth bag, and Mother went through extensive preparation to serve it. She would scrub the tough exterior rind, removing dust clinging from the smokehouse, some of the heavy coating of salt, and often bits of mold inevitably clinging despite the dry conditions of curing process. The entire ham was soaked in water for several hours, patted dry, coated with brown sugar and put into the oven for roasting. At dinner time, my father would carefully carve very thin slices, and we would enjoy the salty-sweet meat for many days.

One year we had an extra ham at Christmas, a result of the generosity of a relative. My parents decided to share their good fortune with another family. (They were not, I might point out, Southerners. They had once asked my mother, “How big is a grit?”). Some months later the friend said ruefully to Mother, “It was so nice of you to give me that ham at Christmas. But unfortunately, when I opened it, the ham was moldy, so I had to throw it away.” My thrifty and generous parents were crestfallen. Sometimes treasures are hidden under moldy exteriors.

In our reading today from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus continues with his story-telling, his parables about the “kingdom of heaven.” Today we have several suggestive images, some likely very familiar to you. Tiny mustard seeds and pearls of great price. Stories with pictures of everyday items and people, much like the stories of farmers and seeds of the last several Sundays. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus proclaims, “The kingdom of heaven has come near,” (Matthew 3:2). So perhaps we should not be surprised to hear him giving us images suggestive of this world, this messy down-to-earth place. And opening our eyes to the possibilities of abundance and unimagined treasures as sacred meets human. I think Jesus is speaking directly to us today, here at Trinity Church.

I am going to concentrate on the second parable, the one about leaven and dough, with the help of New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine who analyzes this parable and several others in her recent work *Short Stories by Jesus* (pp. 107-125). She combines her knowledge of Jewish history and New Testament exegesis to help us discover meanings in these parables that do not rely on interpretations based on anti-Jewish stereotypes.

Jesus said, “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.” First we need to understand a little kitchen biology. The yeast referred to is what we would call sourdough starter. Starter is created from leftover bread; as it spoils, fermentation begins. This is the source of the leavening that occurs when the starter is mixed with water and flour to create dough. It’s important to keep an eye on the starter. If it hasn’t been allowed to ferment enough, it won’t cause the dough to rise. But if it ferments too long, it will ruin the bread and perhaps cause food poisoning. So leaven may be dangerous. There is good yeast and bad yeast.

A second detail in this story also needs a little explanation. The woman takes three measures of flour for this baking project. We are not talking about three cups. Three measures would be somewhere between forty and sixty pounds. The huge task of kneading this dough could not be accomplished by one person alone. There is some exaggeration going on here. Maybe we are to think of a communal project, not unlikely in villages where many small houses did not have their own kitchens. Often there would be an outdoor oven in the town center, and baking was a group project.

So we have a scene of a woman beginning a baking project with a huge quantity of flour and some yeast as starter. For many of Jesus’ hearers, this story might remind them of a story from Genesis. Abraham is visited by three strangers to whom he extends hospitality, inviting them for a meal that will be quickly prepared. He runs into the tent to ask Sarah to take “three measures of choice flour” and quickly prepare cakes, while he goes to the field to take a calf for the meat dish. The extravagance of this welcome is highlighted in the preparations that Abraham and Sarah undertake. It is also important to recall that it is through this hospitality that Abraham and Sarah learn that they will be blessed with a child, despite their advanced years.

These pieces of the picture help us grasp the significance of Jesus’ story. The kingdom of heaven is likened to the preparation of bread, a staple of life. But this everyday occurrence becomes the possibility of a great celebration as large quantities of flour are leavened so that a feast is produced. The leaven hidden in the dough becomes the source of this abundance. Knowing how and when to add the starter means being alert. The potential of the yeast is subtle and miraculous.

Can you see the suggestive power of this story as we think about our life as Trinity Church? How do we recognize that the kingdom has come near? What is the leaven and when should it be added? Do we have the measures of flour, and are there enough of us to knead this dough? Do we have the patience to wait for it to rise? Do we have an oven large enough for this project? Will we watch it carefully so that it does not burn? How will we share the abundant results? Will we set aside a bit of starter for the next batch?

The story both challenges and reassures us. Jesus' words and actions demonstrate the kingdom that God is building, a place of healing and welcome, a place of abundant feasting, where everyone has a place at the table. These are visible signs of God's love in our everyday world, symbolized most significantly for us in Jesus as the bread of life shared in the Eucharist. That is the reassurance.

The challenge is for us to find our part in the communal exercise of baking. Like Abraham and Sarah we need to seize opportunities to welcome the stranger. We need to be vigilant and skillful. And we need to trust that God will supply what is needed for abundant results. Like the farmer in earlier parables, our job is to be faithful in our work, knowing that it is God who creates the yield.

Diligence in being part of God's kingdom is our task as Jesus' followers, his disciples, the ones to whom he tells these stories. We are each learning what it means to follow Jesus in our individual lives. And we learn that primarily from our communal experiences, as part of a church. God chooses to act through communities of faith, beginning with the family of Abraham and continuing through the centuries. We have the testimony of scriptures, the accounts of the ways that God has reached out to humans. As Christians we believe this is most fully revealed in Jesus, as a human being and the divine image. Through the ongoing worship and work of the church, we encounter God as the rich traditions of stories and liturgies come alive in and through us, giving us new insights into ourselves and our place in God's world. As choir members know, we are given the score of a piece of music, and it's up to us to discover and reveal its beauty and power through our singing.

Being honest about our shortcomings, trusting each other in moving forward, and open to seeing God at work are always our challenges as disciples. Now especially as we are in a transition period of preparing for a new rector, the challenges and the opportunities are heightened. Who are we in God's plan to build the kingdom? What is our part? How do we listen and discern together, as members of a faithful community?

The last of today's parables seems particularly helpful. Jesus makes this comparison, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and

what is old.” Jesus is sharing the secrets of the kingdom with us, the ways in which God is bringing hope out of despair, healing out of disease, new life out of death.

I believe we are to see ourselves as the “scribes” in this parable. Through our baptism into the life and death of Jesus, we have been given access to the forgiveness and love that are God’s gifts to us. Growing as members of Christ’s body, we discover the treasures that God desires for us, and we learn to share them with the world that God loves.

Especially now, in these next months, we will be thinking carefully about the treasures “old and new” that God gives to us as Trinity Church. What are the riches of our heritage that we hold in trust for our present use and for future generations? What are the new treasures, the new opportunities for deepening our faith as we discover fresh ways to spread God’s love?

And, to keep us honest and faithfully listening for God’s voice, we also have to ask ourselves what parts of our heritage must we identify and destroy. What pieces of bread saved as yeast have become toxic and must be discarded? Where in our history have privilege and power kept us from becoming God’s beloved community? Where have we failed to share the abundance that God has produced from three measures of flour? To go back to our opening story, how do we remove the crusty layers of mold and salt that obscure the treasure of a tasty meal beneath, a meal to be which others must be invited?

During the eight days of Passover, Jewish people eat unleavened bread, recalling the haste with which they escaped from Egypt, when there wasn’t time to wait for the bread to rise. Preparation for the yearly observance of Passover includes sweeping the house clean of old leaven. New life, life after slavery, will begin with fresh leaven for the baking of bread and feasting on God’s abundance.

Let us be willing to work diligently and carefully in the coming year, to examine our lives and make preparations for the new possibilities that God has in store for us. Let us be willing to speak truthfully and humbly with each other. Let us be willing to look and listen to our history, our neighbors, our hearts, and the “still small voice” that may come in all those places. Truly God has treasures old and new for us to discover.