

Rev. Lisa Schrott
July 24, 2020
Leviticus 23: 9-13, Luke 13: 20-21
The Sacred in the Ordinary: Grain and Wheat

This morning we continue our worship series on “The Sacred in the Ordinary”. As I shared last week, our worship service is arranged in four acts: gathering around the word, proclaiming the word, responding to the word and following the word into the world. We considered prayer last week as one of the ways in which we respond to the word. Stay tuned for another week or two and you will get to see the fruit of those labors as we share the birds made from our prayers. Celebration of the Lord’s Supper is another way we respond to the word. As is the offering. The Directory for Worship in our PC(USA) Book of Order shares this about the offering:

Christian life is an offering of one’s self to God. In the Lord’s Supper we are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ for the life of the world. As those who have been claimed and set free by his grace, we respond with gratitude, offering him our lives, our spiritual gifts, and our material goods. Every service of worship shall include an opportunity to respond to Christ’s call to discipleship through self-offering. The gifts we offer express our stewardship of creation, demonstrate our care for one another, support the ministries of the church, and provide for the needs of the poor.¹

This morning we consider the roots of our present day offering as an act of worship, a moment when ordinary elements of life become sacred as we offer them to God – as they become an opportunity to respond to Christ’s call to discipleship. Before we jump into a parable from Jesus, I will share words from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, a book we don’t often hear from in our Sunday worship. Leviticus, the third book of the Bible is part of the Torah – the sacred teachings of the Hebrew people. In Leviticus the laws and regulations for worship of the Lord God are given to the Israelites while they are wandering in the desert after Moses led them out of slavery in Egypt. These rules gave structure and boundaries to the people as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Hear now these words from Leviticus chapter 23, words that shape our understanding of offering as an act of worship.

The Lord spoke to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest. He shall raise the sheaf before the Lord, that you may find acceptance; on the day after the Sabbath the priest shall raise it. On the day when you raise the sheaf, you shall offer a lamb a year old, without blemish, as a burnt offering to the Lord. And the grain offering with it shall be two-tenths of an ephah of choice flour mixed with oil, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord, and the drink offering with it shall be of wine, one-fourth of a hin.

¹ W-3.0411: Offering. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part II. The Book of Order, 2019-2023.* The Office of the General Assembly, 2019.

There are five types of offerings described in the book of Leviticus, all using elements common to the life of the people – elements which become sacred when offered to God. The offerings served different purposes, yet all were acts of worship and reflected the importance of maintaining a relationship between humans and God. The sin and guilt offerings were mandatory to confess and seek forgiveness for sins committed – the prayer of confession in our worship service has its roots in these offerings. The burnt offering was a voluntary offering made to atone for sins and to also show one’s devotion and commitment to the Lord God. The peace or fellowship offering was made as an act of thanksgiving and connection to the community.

The grain offering was given in recognition of God’s goodness and provisions. Note that the offering was in **response** for God’s goodness – not given to appease God, not given to seek God’s approval, nor to earn God’s favor. It was given in gratitude. The grain was typically made into a cake with some oil. But it never contained yeast or a leavening agent as a reminder of the unleavened bread of the Passover, when God spared the Israelites from the final plague set on Pharaoh and Egypt – the death of firstborn children. Throughout the Old Testament, there are frequent instructions on celebrating the Passover with unleavened bread and making offerings with unleavened cakes. In the New Testament these reminders continue as the Passover feast is celebrated. Yeast, if not actually seen as problematic, is certainly seen as unwanted. So it is curious that Jesus uses yeast as a metaphor for the kingdom of God in this parable from the thirteenth chapter of Gospel of Luke:

And again Jesus said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

So how do we understand this parable in light of all the texts that speak to bringing to God unleavened bread or unleavened cake as an offering, as well as the commands to celebrate the Passover with unleavened bread? Let’s start by considering the role of a parable. Parables were one of the ways Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds who followed him. Parables are stories – some short – some long – that are known for having multiple perspectives for interpretation. Telling tales of familiar characters and common people and activities was a popular way for ancient rabbis to hold an audience’s attention while illustrating an important moral point. The purpose of parables in Jesus’ teaching was to focus the listener on God and God’s kingdom. Parables reveal the character of God: what is God like, how God works, and what God expects from followers. The stories draw listeners and readers into a real and intimate encounter with the living God who is a shepherd, king, father, vineyard owner, a woman baking bread and so much more. The settings in the story are taken from ordinary life and reveal to us sacred moments.

You see Jesus was the master of the unexpected. He was teaching with authority yet healing the sick on the Sabbath; he spoke about repenting from sinful ways and yet he shared meals with sinners. These are big technical errors – like fumbling the football on the five yard line or not paying your taxes – things that will not just engender grumbles and snarky comments, but could get you into real trouble. Jesus uses these situations to teach us. And the parables teach us about how God’s kingdom differs from the kingdom of humans. And Jesus said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

To what should I compare the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is like... this was our assignment each week in preaching class when I was in seminary. To go out into the world and observe – watching and listening, attending to the details – the smells and sounds and sights and then to write a couple of sentences about where we saw the kingdom of God displayed before us. Where did we see the sacred in the ordinary?

At a hospital...The kingdom of God is like the woman drifting through the gift shop at Dekalb Hospital, distractedly spinning the racks of stuffed animals and absently stroking the T-shirts. Her vacant eyes begin to glimmer and a smile creeps up her face as she seizes the plastic wine glass festooned with the words “Girls Night In”.

At a cemetery...The kingdom of God is like the solitary patch of purple crocus blooming life between the remembrances of John Patrick’s 9 days on this earth and his beloved great Aunt Jo who “loved the stars” for 90 years.

At the Farmer’s Market...The kingdom of God is like the 20-something boy-man in a multicolored poncho picking out the two brightest purple Chinese eggplants and squealing with excitement as he offers them to his friend in the fake fur coat and the dangling earrings. And wanting to offer even more to the one who loved him when he seemed unlovable, he saunters over to the ginger bin, where a frumpy middle-aged woman offers advice not just on the freshness of ginger, but where he and his partner can take dance lessons.

This exercise of looking for the kingdom of God, of seeing the sacred in the ordinary, helped me connect to elements of my faith that I too often overlook in day to day living, missing the joy, the gratitude, the community. This exercise also gave me new insights into God’s desire for the kingdom here on earth – the kingdom we inhabit while we await the eternal kingdom. For me, the parable of the yeast reminds that generosity and abundance are core values for God’s kingdom and should be core values for all of my life – in the church and in the world. Yeast is a symbol of miraculous abundance – microscopic, single-celled organisms that, with some warmth and moisture, transform sugars and starches into carbon dioxide and alcohol and allow bread to rise and wine to ferment. Yeast transforms three measures of flour into bread to feed a family, to feed the neighbors, to feed the community. Yeast and other

leavening agents are a symbol of generosity, a pinch added in that keeps on returning dividends, enough to feed yourself and to share with others.

Some of us experienced the lesson of leaven's abundance during the pandemic. Much has been written about why the trend of making of sourdough bread took off, from too much time at home, to ironically a shortage of yeast, to the benefits of working with your hands, to creating something that brings joy. But I think it also may have to do with one attribute of yeast-less breads, the sourdough starter that is shared. You see before there was the sourdough craze of 2020-2021, there was the Amish Friendship Bread craze of the early 1990's. Oh yes... am I bringing back pleasant – or maybe painful memories for some of you?

Many years back, I was gifted some Amish friendship bread starter from a fellow church member at Center Congregational Church in Manchester, CT. She was kind enough to also give me a bag of flour. I was a graduate student at the time and the gift of fresh baked bread was truly manna from heaven for my housemates and me. The instructions begin on Day 1 with the admonition to "Do Nothing". I could handle that. Most of the days the instructions were to mush the bag and let the air out. On day 6 you added milk and sugar and flour. And then on day 10, after you added more milk and sugar and flour, you split the mix and give three portions to friends and then bake a loaf for yourself. It doesn't take long to realize that you don't quite have as many friends as you think you do, and you are struggling to give away starter to anyone and everyone you meet. The starter served as the leaven – the yeast equivalent – and it gave and it gave and gave and it gave some more. It is not just symbol of abundance – it is abundance and generosity in its most basic form.

When I think back on my Amish Friendship Bread years, I think about the relationships that were developed and deepened when I offered a loaf of homemade bread. I think about keeping something going day after day - of nurturing the starter – even if it just mashing the bag and letting the air out. There is something powerful in the commitment to keep tending to it, even if you can't see what the results will be until farther down the road. Like the offering we bring each week – our time, our talents, and our treasures – we don't always know how our gifts will be used. We do know that our commitment matters. And we do know that the kingdom of God looks like a place of generosity and abundance.

The Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen is well known for his teachings and writings on spirituality, contemplative practices and prayer. He also wrote beautifully about fundraising and stewardship practices, based on the principles of abundance he saw representing the kingdom of God. Nouwen said, "Even a small act of generosity can grow into something far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine - the creation of a community of love in this world, and beyond this world, because wherever love grows, it is stronger than death"². Nouwen recognized that God calls us to be the yeast – through our generosity – to be agents of

² Henri Nouwen. *A Spirituality of Fundraising*. The Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, 2010. p25.

creating a community of love in this world. The kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

Nouwen went even further, recognizing that for followers of Christ, there is importance, value, and joy in furthering the kingdom through financial giving. He said, "Asking people for money is giving them the opportunity to put their resources at the disposal of the kingdom. To raise funds is to offer people the chance to invest what they have in the work of God. Whether they have much or little is not as important as the possibility of making their money available to God. When Jesus fed five thousand people with only five loaves of bread and two fish, he was showing us how God's love can multiply the effects of our generosity. God's kingdom is the place of abundance where every generous act overflows its original bounds and becomes part of the unbounded grace of God at work in the world."³

Amen and amen. God's kingdom is the place of abundance where every generous act overflows its original bounds and becomes part of the unbounded grace of God at work in the world. What started as a handful of ordinary grain becomes sacred bread that feeds the world because we are God's yeast, God's leaven. As the Book of Order reminds us, every service of worship shall include an opportunity to respond to Christ's call to discipleship through self-offering. The gifts we offer express our stewardship of creation, demonstrate our care for one another, support the ministries of the church, and provide for the needs of the poor. We are the yeast that brings God's kingdom closer to realization. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

³ *ibid* p46