

"Prove the Yeast"

Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 13:33

Prove you love God. Prove you trust God. Prove you will obey God. O Lord, prove you love us. O God, prove you are trustworthy. O Lord, help us to love, trust, and obey. In the blessed name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Ten plagues and miracles: The Plague of Blood, Frogs, Gnats, Flies, the Livestock, of Boils, of Hail, of Locusts, of Darkness, and, finally, the Plague on the Firstborn. It took these 10 plagues, each of them a miracle in its own right, to deliver the Israelites from the oppressive hand of Egypt. Ten miracles of Biblical proportion, we would say. The LORD demonstrated two things: that he was a God of incredible, irresistible power, and that he was trustworthy. He had unequivocally proved it. But there was more to come in the story! There was more to come in two respects: first, in respect to the people's incessant complaining, fear, and refusal to trust the LORD, and, second, in respect to God's responses to the bitter complaining - more miracles! How astounding is that?!

There was the miraculous and incomprehensible parting of the waters of the Red Sea. And then the miracle of making bitter water sweet to slake the desperate thirst of the Israelites. And then the miracle of the manna and quail. All they had to do was go out and gather it as directed. And yet, the response is the same: more bitter complaining.

And yet...., and yet..., and yet the LORD puts into play yet another miracle, the miracle of water from the rock. Lest we escape notice of it, there are two parallel and recurring themes. First, the people's incessant complaining. Second, the LORD's miraculous provision. We probably should also note that these early miracles took place without God verbally berating and chastising them for their unwillingness to trust God. One would think that after a while the LORD would get frustrated and begin to verbally criticize and berate them. But, at least thus far in the story of the people of God, the LORD patiently continues to provide for them what they cannot provide for themselves. No stunning rebuke yet, just provision. How many times, and in how many different ways, does God have to prove himself to them?! When are the people of God going to begin responding appropriately to God's will and intent for them? That, is the question.

But today's message is not based primarily on our OT story; that story, rather, serves as a backdrop and helps set the stage for our Gospel lesson and a present day story and reality for us.

Jesus said to his disciples one particular day a couple thousand years ago, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." It is important, perhaps critical, that we note that "the kingdom of heaven" is not, as some people think, concerned solely, or even primarily, with "heaven", per se. "The Kingdom of heaven" is an expression that speaks to the present kingdom on earth but as it is related to the glorious kingdom to come! As one scholar put it, "Here [in this story] Jesus uses yeast to symbolize the positive, hidden permeation of the kingdom of heaven in this [present] world." As yeast

transforms the life-less flour, so will the order of things in this world be transformed [to a more heaven like reality] by the words of Jesus, and even Jesus himself, when those words and deeds are put into practice.

I want to share something I shared with our Elders this past Monday night at our Session meeting. I asked them to consider every thing that Session has oversight over and everything that they do as a sitting Elder, even down to the mundane replacing of the ballast in a light fixture in my office. I asked them to consider the possibility that every single thing they do as Ruling Elder is in some way **an advancement of the kingdom of God**, even something so seemingly mundane as replacing the ballast of a light fixture in my office. I hope no one finds this a stretch. A fully and properly lit office helps reduce eye strain and thus better enables me to do my work of study, research, and everything else I do in my office. But it also is true, on the other hand, that such a small matter indeed is a small matter when compared with the kingdom advancement that comes through worship and Sunday School.

Relatedly, why do we take seriously the upkeep of our church property and facility? One short answer is because what we and others see is a visible representation of how wonderful and good God is, and that in terms of God's own nature and in terms of how we view and serve God. We want the world to know how good God is and how much we love and respect God. I will let you take it from here to the more obvious ways the kingdom of heaven is advanced in the life of our church, such as in worship and Sunday School, etc. I need not comment on those things this morning as hopefully they are somewhat obvious.

But there is a dimension of application that goes beyond the immediate life of the church that we need to consider and explore. Though application of this passage to life within the church is indeed quite proper, it is perhaps even more appropriate to apply it to the greater world in which we live.

This realm of application is indicated in today's parable setting, particularly when we consider its context. [As they say, context is everything.] Immediately prior to Matthew 13 we find Jesus speaking to and teaching only his disciples. But in Matthew 13 we find a substantive shift. In verse 1 we find Jesus surrounded by huge crowds. It was to a large number of people we find Jesus teaching the things of God. In fact, "the disciples came to [Jesus] and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?'" Jesus' answer, paraphrased succinctly, was, "To teach them the things they do not understand." Jesus was not speaking only to his disciples, nor was he in the temple speaking only to the religious community. Here Jesus was speaking to the large crowds gathered around him. They represent the world at large, not those who came to Temple.

The parables then delivered to the crowds include the parable of the weeds, the parable of the mustard seed, and the parable of the yeast, each of them beginning with "the kingdom of heaven is like....." Jesus was beginning to teach all the people, not just the religious community, what God had in mind for the greater world. These parables were not solely, or even primarily, for the purpose of speaking about life within the spiritual life of the people of God, but primarily about God's will for the greater world.

Quite often within the church these days, focus and application of Scripture tends to concern itself with the inner life of the individual Christian and within the corporate life within the church. But this passage speaks primarily to life in our world as God wills it for the greater world. But this is where it seems to get a bit tricky in our present day and age. The world is not very agreeable or hospitable to the voice of Jesus nor that of his church.

One of the things for which I'm grateful in the life and concern of evangelical Christianity, in general, and our congregation, in particular, is the concern over a number of matters that are at center and primary focus in our present election year. Decisions made, votes cast, will in various ways be manifestations or evidence of the advancement or retreat of the kingdom of heaven.

There are voices in our culture that strongly discourage, and even attempt to forbid, the Christian voice from making itself known in terms of some of the issues that are at the center of our present election year. Some voices serve up warnings, warnings of negative consequences should we be so motivated to speak up and act. I think this, too, needs little explanation today.

One application includes our deep concern for the sanctity of life, the sanctity of all life, regardless of color or ethnicity, regardless of age or stage of life, regardless of one's vocation or station in life. God is concerned with the sanctity of life of every color and ethnicity, with the sanctity of life both pre-born and post-birth human beings, human beings whether in early childhood or at the end of life. These issues are centrally situated in our present election cycle. And not only in terms of the election and the consequences that will come to pass, but also in the present search for the next Supreme Court justice.

Application, however, is not confined to merely these two issues. Application applies to a broader concern God has for his world, for, after all, it is his world ultimately. It is not ours.

The next thing I'm talking about is the simultaneously simple but complex concept of freedom. There are many kinds of freedom that are at inherent risk this election year.

There is no doubt from the historical record that in the minds and hearts of the colonists who founded this nation that "freedom" was the most central, the most essential, the most critical thing they sought to take back from mother England. Sadly, it would have to be taken by force; the price would be measured in blood and in a thousand other ways. The freedom to come and go, to own and to work, to prosper and live and play freely, to speak freely and openly, to worship openly and freely and to serve God as God calls us. And it was not merely these ideals themselves that the rebel colonists held more dear than life itself, it was the furtherance of these dreams and ideals that bore fruit as found in the Constitution of the United States. It was also for future generations that fought so hard to obtain and then hold on to freedoms of various sorts, however imperfectly we have obtained them. It was not happenstance or coincidence that these ideals were foundational for the Constitution; it was not happenstance or coincidence that the Amendments which subsequently followed came into existence. Very few public schools today teach the truth that the people of this

fledgling republic had in mind the furthering of the kingdom of heaven. There's was not only or merely a secular fight. It was a battle also to further the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

It is a tragedy of enormous proportion that many in America now deny or downplay this history and truth. It is a devious development meant to revise and then deny what God had given to and done through our nation. The whole idea of what constitutes objective and inherent "truth" has been supplanted with the idea that what a given particular group decides is truth is ultimate truth. Inherent truth is being sidelined, spurned, and denigrated in favor of what me, myself, and I (or my group) has decided is true and what is false. Objective truth is ridiculed and spit on, not always in so many words, but in more ways and by more means than we have time here to catalogue. Subjective truth today is king, but only where subjective evaluation and determination has the most present power. It is an ever shifting foundation, one made of sand that the rains of trouble and turmoil will soften, loosen, and then sweep away. Jesus had a metaphor about that! (the man that built his house on the sand as opposed to the man who built his house on a rock; Matthew 7:26-27)

In application of our Gospel passage one author referenced a brief part of 2 Corinthians 10:4-5. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, [the weapons we fight with] have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (NIV) "Christians are not to sit around idly and do nothing as our world self-destructs but are to stand up in our world to be a substantive work of God's will in a broken, fragmented, and contentious world." The cultural arguments for abortion are strong, and at times almost formidable, but they are terribly wrong-spirited and destructive. There are numerous policies that pretend to be for the good of the people but which will in the end be destructive because they rob our citizens, individually and as a nation, of the freedoms God has given to us, "certain inalienable rights" they are called. Certain voices try and trick us into believing that giving up our freedoms will benefit us all, but in the end they will unavoidably and more deeply enslave us.

I found it intriguing that this author, William Henderson, wrote his words of application in his commentary copyrighted 1973. It is astounding that some of the concerns of that day are still with us in 2020.

Henriksen tells us, in terms of our Gospel lesson and by way of application, that the purpose of the Christian "is not merely to get to heaven when he dies, or only to be an instrument in God's hand to bring others there, [though it is both those things] but everywhere [the Christian is] to bring every thought of whatever kind into submission to, and therefore harmony with, the mind and will of Christ, that is, to demand that not only every tongue but also every 'domain of life, will exalt him. Therefore Christ's true follower actively promotes such causes as the abolition of slavery, the restoration of women's rights, the alleviation of poverty, the education of the illiterate, the reorientation of fine arts along Christian lines, etc. [Christ's true follower] promotes honesty, industry, and commerce. He does all this not apart from but in connection with and in fact as

part and parcel of, the evangelization of the world. That this "yeast" of the rule of Christ in human hearts, lives, *and spheres* [of life] has already exerted a wholesome influence in thousands of ways, and that this influence is still continuing, is clear to all who have eyes to see. All one has to do is to compare conditions - for example, the treatment of prisoners of war, of women, of workmen, of the underprivileged - in countries where Christ's rule has not yet become acknowledged to any great extent, with those existing nations where this principle has already been operative for some time on a generous scale." (*New Testament Commentary, Matthew*, William Hendriksen, 567-568)

One key point Hendriksen was making, and which is a major take away this morning, is that while there are two major concerns of the Christian - first, us as individuals making it to heaven ourselves, and second, us bringing others to salvation - equally of vital concern and of no less value is the work we are called to do in all the other "spheres" of life. What we do in terms of the greater world is no less important than having salvation and leading others to salvation. The realm of politics is not and cannot be an exception.

People tend to carve up life, mentally and physically, into different compartments or spheres. [It's called "compartmentalization".] Sadly, there are some of these spheres of life that are being pushed to the sidelines as they are deemed unwelcome and inappropriate. Jesus speaking to the crowds, not merely his disciples, tells us that God indeed has plans and designs and instructions for the whole world and the various institutions and entities that make up human society.

This is where the yeast and well-mixed dough metaphor comes in. Our sermon title is "Prove the Yeast!" This title came to me in that some time earlier this summer I observed an instruction on a package of yeast which admonished the user, "Don't forget to "prove" the yeast!"

What does that mean, "prove" the yeast? Prove that it's Red Star yeast? I don't have to prove that; it says so on the package. Prove that it's not outdated yeast? The expiration date is here on the package. Prove that it's bread yeast? It says so on the package.

"Don't forget to "prove" the yeast!" This instruction/warning, fortunately, was accompanied with instructions on how to do so because I had no idea what it meant. Actually, it is quite simple. Take a teaspoon of yeast and dissolve it in warm water (105-115 degrees). To this add a teaspoon of sugar and dissolve. It's that simple. If the yeast is active and viable, within 5-10 minutes the volume of liquid should double. I had never heard this before. I was more curious than skeptical so I did as instructed. Within 5 minutes the volume had indeed increased and by 10 minutes it had more than doubled! The yeast was truly alive and viable.

In the interest of our Biblical metaphor, we must ask what makes bread dough rise. Simply put, the yeast changes the sugar in the dough into carbon dioxide and ethanol (alcohol). The increasing amount of carbon dioxide gas as it is produced, trapped in the dough, makes it rise. The alcohol produced during fermentation evaporates during baking.

The point of thorough mixing seems two-fold. First, it enhances the rate of rise of the dough in that fermentation begins immediately because, and second, every part of the dough has yeast mixed into it. No part of the dough is without the leavening action of the yeast. It is a single whole rising action. Every part is affected. This is God's design and desire for the advancement of the kingdom of heaven. There is no compartment or sphere of life that is to be avoided or left unleavened. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked **all** through the dough."

If we want the kingdom of heaven to be more properly advanced and realized, the love, ways, and truths of Jesus Christ have to mixed in, applied, and set to work. Our emphasis on the sanctity of life is of course properly emphasized in our worship and in our prayers. But that interest, emphasis, and effort is not to be kept out of the whole batch of dough of life, but mixed in thoroughly in every corner and part.

Those little bubbles of gas, that is, the actual process, I'm guessing, were unknown to the woman referred to in our Gospel lesson. All she would have known was that the yeast somehow made the dough to rise and thus give rise to beautiful, delectable bread. The whys and hows were of a later time and discovery. But the truth we now know. Every one of us are called to be a part of the rising and leavening process; every one of us is to be a bubble of carbon dioxide or a bit of ethanol gas having a critical part in the process of bringing the kingdom of heaven more fully into being this election year. 2020 sure seems to keep on being a rascal year, does it not?

It is the same in terms of law and order and that in terms of lawlessness and violence. We talk about Biblical principles that are designed to be a check and be a guard against all that would maim and kill, hurt and destroy. We can't help but think of the blissful day in the future in which "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD." (Isaiah 65:25 NIV)

I want to close noting that it is said that this is a critical year in the life of our nation. Perhaps this statement is partially incorrect, or at the least a bit inaccurate. To many minds and hearts, it is perhaps better stated that this is perhaps one of the most critical years in our nation's history since the years of our nation's birth. This is for us to think about, pray about, and then act on. That day of action is little more than a month away. May each of us be the yeast that leavens the kingdom of heaven on earth as it envisions and looks to the kingdom of heaven in heaven for which we all yearn. Amen.