

The mysterious power of leaven: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-49a

What are we asking for when we pray for the kingdom of heaven to come?

by [Margaret B. Guenther](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

When Jesus tells a story, he compels us to look at holy things with new eyes, and he illustrates his stories with references to ordinary, homely things. If he were operating in the 21st century, I doubt that he would need a blackboard for complex mathematical formulas, or the arcane jargon of a modern expert—whether economist, computer maven, biochemist or theologian. Jesus told stories about ordinary things to explain the extraordinary, the inexplicable.

His gift of imagery is one of the great gifts available to us as humans. Because most of us never outgrow our childhood love of pictures, we respond well to teaching that invites us to create pictures in our minds. Imagery helps us to grasp that which cannot be quantified, measured or neatly captured in words, charts or formulas. With images, we manage to approach the intellectually and spiritually unfathomable because we are led gently, told that a God who ultimately is beyond our comprehension is like a shepherd, a king, a loving parent, a mighty fortress or a maternal figure with great sheltering wings.

In this passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is teaching his friends about the kingdom of heaven, which is the same as the kingdom of God. Although kings are now out of fashion, and the mystique of royalty has eroded, they were real figures of absolute power and grandeur in Jesus' time. I doubt that his hearers had had any more direct contact with kings than any of us has had. But they understood the vocabulary of kings and kingdoms even though they did not always understand what Jesus was trying to tell them.

We have enough residual memory to glimpse what Jesus is telling us about God and God's reign. When he speaks of the "Kingdom of heaven," we are reminded that God is absolute, that God's reign is not a democracy or even a republic. At the same time, we're reminded of our own smallness and limitations in God's great economy.

And when we pray regularly, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we realize that we aren’t praying for the establishment of some grandiose political entity in the fashion of extravagant King Herod or the British Empire in its glory days.

So what are we praying for when we pray, “Thy kingdom come”? What are we asking for?

Jesus gives us some hints. It’s like this, this and this, he says—offering tantalizing bits of imagery for all sorts of people: the farmer who finds a treasure in the field, the shrewd financier who recognizes the ultimate good investment, the plant enthusiast who marvels at the growth produced by one tiny seed, the angler who finds a shoal full of fish, and—humblest and to me most appealing—the homemaker preparing to bake bread.

There are common qualities in these images. The kingdom of heaven is hidden, buried in a field or in the depths of sea, and of great value, a treasure or a pearl. Moreover, despite an unremarkable outward appearance, it possesses surprising power. The unprepossessing mustard seed contains an astonishing potential for growth, while leaven—ordinary old leaven that doesn’t look like much—has the power to transform all that surrounds it.

At one time I was a fairly competent bread maker. I baked all our family’s bread and came to know and respect the mysterious power of leaven. The yeast I used was a grainy, grayish substance without much taste or smell. In Jesus’ time, the yeast was a little lump of active dough that was carefully saved from a previous baking. Like my little packets of yeast, it carried within it the secret of growth and fermentation, the power to change something that vastly exceeded it in volume. A couple of spoonfuls could work amazing changes in a bowl of flour.

But leaven sitting all by itself can’t do anything. It needs the right conditions: it must be mixed with flour; the temperature must be warm enough but not too warm; there must be liquid and a bit of salt.

Then the leaven does its work, quietly, taking its own time, but ultimately transforming a sodden, useless lump of dough into bread.

I love this picture of the subversiveness of God, even if it makes me uneasy to contemplate the hiddenness of God’s kingdom. This kingdom is right here, right now, as invisible and as unobtrusive as a lively, enlivening bit of leaven stirred into

the inertness of the flour. Jesus reminds us that the kingdom is both coming and already here. He reminds us that the power of God can be and is working in us if we let ourselves be open to it and take it into ourselves. After all, like the leaven that works only when it is combined with flour, the kingdom of God, the power of God, is among us, permeating every aspect of our lives, changing, enlightening and transforming us.