

Mustard and Yeast

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, you have declared that your kingdom is among us. Open our eyes to see it, our ears to hear it, our hearts to hold it, and our hands to serve it. This we pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Background



This morning we're looking at two comparisons or similitudes Jesus taught to give us a better sense of the "flavor and feel" of God's guiding hand in our lives and society. Or to put it another way,

When Jesus steps into a room or a human heart,
What does his presence and power feel like?

In Jesus' first parable, there is one man. In the second, one woman. The man took a grain of mustard. The woman took a pinch of yeast. The man cast seed into his garden. The woman kneaded yeast into her dough. And change happens when seed and yeast are worked into the mix. Radical transformation, in fact.

God works miracles in and through the mundane and the minute. "*Don't despise the day of small things,*" the Scriptures say. With patience and care, the tiny seed... grew into a tree. The pinch of yeast... caused the dough to rise.

So too, Jesus' small acts of healing, teaching, feeding, freeing, forgiving, serving, and dying will take root and grow into something worldwide. And it will grow in us and change us, too. The good news is Christ is still working in and through us. Like a plant rising from the ground, like bread rising in the oven, we too will rise up—to feed and free others, all in Christ's name.

Christ was and is a catalyst for change. Wherever he's at work, blessings and benefit are sure to follow. Shade and food for the birds of the air all begin with one seed. Three measures of dough, or about 50 lbs of flour, needs just a pinch of yeast to permeate it, to make enough bread to feed one hundred and fifty guests. God's kingdom arises and grows in regular, everyday places, like backyard gardens and kitchen tables. God's rule and reign revealed in Christ, is down to earth. Relatable. Right here, right now. God's movement is patient, pervasive, and powerful, reaping a harvest of changed hearts and transformed lives.

So let's hear the Word of the Lord from ...

Scripture: Luke 13:18-21 (NRSV)

He said therefore, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."

And again he 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."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Mustard and Yeast



There is a memorable scene in Ron Chernow's excellent biography of Military General and President Ulysses S. Grant where the Civil War was in the balance. It had been raging for four long years. But the Confederacy was beginning to crumble. Petersburg and Richmond had surrendered. The Union army had Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his Northern Virginia Army on the run. Union General Ulysses S. Grant confided with his advisors, *"I have a great mind to propose to Lee to fully surrender."* Negotiations began with written correspondence back and forth between the two generals.

These were some of the most anxious moments of the war.

*"Was Lee just biding time to make an escape or
was the end of the war truly at hand?
Would Lee reject the terms of surrender Grant called for?
Should Union forces ease their unconditional terms of surrender?
Or should they stop the peace talks and continue their pursuit of Lee?"*

The night of April 8th, Grant paced up and down the camp, holding his head as he agonized from a migraine. Normally a sound sleeper, Grant had a fitful night's sleep as he pondered the enormous decisions before him and the country. Thousands of lives were at stake. To seek relief and remedy from his pain, Grant soaked his feet in hot water and mustard seed powder. He also placed mustard plasters on his aching wrists and neck to stimulate relief and healing. Mustard has medicinal qualities.

Grant awoke the following day, Palm Sunday 1865, and decided to give peace one more chance. He wrote another letter reaffirming the terms of surrender, this time in gentler language.

Lee accepted.



They would meet at Appomattox Court House for the surrender. The bloody Civil War that claimed 750,000 American lives was about to end. Grant's generous terms of surrender offered to the Confederacy were like healing mustard leaves to a battered and newly stitched together country. There was a long journey of mending ahead, but the seeds of peace set it in motion.

The Mustard Seed

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nnpTv13osc>

God's activity and influence is like the mustard seed that starts insignificantly but finishes magnificently—providing food and shelter for the birds of heaven that have congregated together from the north and the south, the east and the west. Jesus was using some exaggeration here for a reason. Mustard seeds would grow into a quick growing vegetation or bush more than a tree. These plants could grow to about ten feet tall. Birds of all kinds found shade under the mustard plant and also loved to feed upon the mustard seeds.

It was common in the day to describe great empires as mighty cedar trees that all kinds of birds would perch and nest in. Jesus had a kingdom too, but a very different one. Jesus chose the less magisterial mustard plant rather than the mighty cedar to remind us that his kingdom is not of this world. His kingdom is different: surprising, subtle, counter-intuitive, miraculous. It would provide nurture and healing, more than brute force.

You have to pay attention to this kind of kingdom. And you only notice it with the eyes of faith.



We have all kinds of odd birds and fine-feathered friends here at Immanuel in our neck of the kingdom. We make room for varieties of faith expressions in the living Christ.

We've got peacocks and pigeons,
Finches and flamingos,
Owls and ostriches,
Road runners and robins,
Even a few blue footed boobies and dodos.
We're open to new kinds of birds migrating in.

We're the same kind of different here, but all under Christ's wing. In Christ, there's room to branch out here, to go out on a limb. We're birds of different feathers that flock together—a bird sanctuary in the animal kingdom of God.

The Yeast

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1w09QKf9GU>

Well, Jesus moves from the garden outside to the kitchen inside to further describe God's activity.

You can learn a lot about Almighty God by watching a woman bake bread. Jesus probably watched his mother Mary make bread at home when he was a kid. I'm guessing he even helped with cooking and baking. And so God's activity is like yeast. It gets worked deep into our lives, into church, into society. The hidden and secret power of God raises up our flat lives. The power of God permeates us—every inch of us. Nothing is left untouched by God.

And so God is like Julia Childs asking us: "Will we allow God to work on and in and through us?" Will we choose to be like rising yeast that makes yummy bread, or a rotten apple that spoils the bushel?

When we open wide and taste and see that God's kingdom is good, we find ourselves enjoying the smells of a spiritual bakery that offers bread from heaven to feed us and the world.

But by itself, away from the dough, yeast won't do anything. But when it gets inside of you—look out!

Just as the seed needs to go into the ground, so the yeast needs to go in the dough. In other words, you've got to internalize your faith. Jesus doesn't want distance learning. He wants hands on learning. God doesn't care about book covers or keeping up appearances.

God works from the inside out.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

We're like dough and the kingdom is like yeast. God's power works inside of us, but it doesn't originate inside of us. We need outside help. God in his grace puts the kingdom inside of us. Jesus says the kingdom of God is inside of you. There is a hidden and miraculous power at work in us. This is the beauty of God's work in our lives:

What Jesus touches is transformed. It doesn't stay the same.

Jesus touches fear and it becomes courage.

Jesus touches division and there is reconciliation

Jesus touches blindness and there is sight.

Jesus touches uncertainty and there is trust.

God's presence in Christ metamorphizes history and individuals and groups. God doesn't want to change just your Sunday life. Jesus isn't interested in half and half or fifty-fifty. He wants all of your life—24/7/365. But he also gives us a part to play. Our part is to plant our seed. To mix in the yeast with the dough. Potential needs to be actualized. Sow the seed. Knead in the yeast. Place it in the oven. Don't hold back. Let it go. God can magnify and multiply your seed and your daily bread.

You see, what Jesus is talking about here is CHANGE. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But our unchanging God is ever changing and transforming us more and more into Christ's image. God loves us right where we are. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are. God doesn't want you to stay a seed or stay a pinch of leaven. *"Behold, I make all things new."* But in order to enjoy the abundant life, You've got to die to what you've known before. You have to let go, relearn, and be reborn.

Cardinal Newman put it this way:

"To grow is to change; to be perfect is to change often."



Jesus, our Divine Baker, the Bread of Heaven, is telling us that change is "kneaded." Jesus, dressed in white, is kneading, massaging, rolling, and rubbing the yeast into our lives, our church, and our

world. It can be a little dizzying and nerve wracking to be spun on Jesus' finger. He's stretching us and spinning us and throwing us, like a chef does making pizza dough. All this pressure and movement is helping us move beyond what we know and what we've grown accustomed to or gotten good at. Change is scary because it disturbs familiar patterns we've gotten comfortable with.

Yeast is a disrupter. The added ingredient of yeast causes the dough to bubble and seethe. It's invasive.



God's activity can feel like he's poking and prodding us—like the Pillsbury doughboy. On top of that, Jesus often lights a fire of the Holy Spirit under us and we feel like we're going to get burned. But it's only when the heat is on and we're under fire that the dough gets transformed into delicious, piping hot bread. The risen Christ, helps us rise to the occasion. God loves us too much to just leave us just a lump of dough. He isn't here to make our lives comfortable and stayed. When spiritual leaven is added into lives, homes, churches, and communities, we can't remain passive. It's a catalyst for change. Goodness, love, forgiveness, healing, and justice permeate and rise up all around us and through us.

In other words, we're empowered to LIVE BEYOND OURSELVES. Jesus works in us to bless others—not just "me." Jesus gets us out of the oven and into hungry souls. We break bread together with the Heavenly host. In Jesus' kingdom, He takes, breaks, and gives us away. We're selected to serve, chosen for charity, blessed to be a blessing.

The Spanish mystic Unamuno offered this surprising blessing:

"May God deny you peace and give you glory."

God gives us courage under fire and gives us divine discontent when change is necessary. We glorify God through these challenges.

"Behold, I make all things new." says Jesus. The old is gone, the new is here.

It's through the change and growth of the seed and the yeast that God transforms and matures his children, his church, and his world.

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.