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Easter Sunday  
Matthew 13:33  
April 4, 2010

## CORRUPTED BY LOVE

Easter Sunday is the most difficult day on which to preach, in my opinion. Why? Well, first of all because it's not easy to "one up" a resurrection--but also because Easter is a foregone conclusion. The surprise and amazement that gripped the first followers of Jesus has been replaced by the annual trappings of surprise and amazement that is now scheduled by the church around a lunar calendar. Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, and so the church just moved in on the pagan festivals of spring and replaced them with the worship of Jesus. All over town this week, the wayside pulpits had already announced it: He is risen! Any questions?

Perhaps what we really need is a young lad like that boy in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes, who in his innocence is more honest than subservient, to ask, "*Who* is risen?" What did it mean in the first century to make that claim? And why is everyone so excited about the vindication of an anti-imperial apocalyptic prophet who if he appeared among us today would immediately be put under surveillance! Are you sure this is good news? I wonder sometimes if the best way to approach Easter, since we live in the Empire, would be to say, not, "He's back! Hallelujah!" but "Oh no, he's back!"

Don't get me wrong, I believe that Easter is audacious. But what I fear is that we've forgotten how audacious. So this morning, I'm going to do something I've never done, and that is to preach an Easter sermon based on a parable — and in particular a tiny, harmless sounding little parable called the Parable of the Leaven. I would be willing to bet that there have been few, if

any, sermons preached on Easter using this parable in the history of Christendom, and so you may be wondering where this idea came from?

Well, this is a subversive church full of subversive people, and one of our Sunday School classes, the WEBBS group, has been studying the parables of Jesus during Lent, and one of the members of that class, Kay Gilchrist, wrote to ask me if I would consider preaching a “parabolic” Easter sermon. That was sneaky of her because she knew I could not refuse. I’ve been teaching a course in the parables at OCU, using the same book that the WEBBS group has been using, and so the only question for me wasn’t whether it could or even should be done, but only *which* parable.

And that’s when it hit me that perhaps the oldest and most authentic parable in the New Testament might just be perfect, because like Easter it seems so harmless on the surface — so safely happy and joyful and tame. Like a new Easter bonnet; like ham loaf; like lilies: It’s only one line long, for Pete’s sake: *Heaven’s imperial rule is like leaven that a woman took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.*

That’s it? You’re going to preach an Easter sermon on that? Yes. Because this parable is shocking and audacious, just like the claim that Jesus had been raised from the dead. (Well, whatever you say preacher man, but it doesn’t sound very shocking to me.) And it’s so short that some scholars have argued that you shouldn’t really call it a parable, so they call it a *similitude*, a one-liner that compares the reign of God, which we can’t see, to something on earth that we can see. Like a metaphor or a simile. In this case a woman baking bread, and putting in a little yeast, so it will rise, and everyone will say, “Um, um , um. . . can she cook, or what?”

That’s what I thought it meant in Sunday School, and that’s why we skipped right over this harmless little parable and moved on to the heavy stuff – eleventh hour workers, prodigal sons and that unlikely Good Samaritan guy — you know, the real parables. Not this kitchen stuff, this charming domestic metaphor that compares Christians to yeast that makes bread rise, just as we are God’s chosen, and although we are hidden and insignificant in size and number we will produce results out of all proportion to our size.

Isn’t that what it means? Isn’t that why it appears in the gospel right next to the parable of the mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds that grows into

the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches?

No. That's not what it means. And if we didn't study the Bible carefully, using the critical tools now available to us, we would miss the fact that this little parable is a scandal. So let's study together, and see if there may be a good reason why nobody uses this as an Easter text.

First of all, it appears in both Matthew and Luke in almost identical form, but in the gospel of Thomas, discovered among the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls by a young shepherd boy who wandered into a cave near Nag Hammadi in Egypt, makes the woman the object of the comparison rather than the leaven. In Thomas, a gospel as old as any in the New Testament, the parable reads, "The Father's Imperial rule is like [a] woman. She took a little leaven, [hid] it in dough, and made it into large loaves of bread."

When the King James Version was translated, it became obvious that translators had difficulty knowing what to do with a woman *hiding* leaven in the dough because the Greek word didn't make sense and so they have the women either mixing or kneading the dough. Likewise, the term "three measures" is lost upon our ears, but in fact this was an enormous amount, and would have been immediately relevant to those who first heard the parable for reasons we will return to.

For now suffice it to say that scholars see in this tiny parable the marks of authenticity, because it is independently attested in two very early Christian documents, the Q gospel and Thomas — and for this reason, it received the highest number of red votes from members of the Jesus Seminar, meaning that the scholars believe it to be as authentic as any parable we have in the Bible. But what we have lost is the ability to hear it as the first audience would have heard it.

When we hear the word "yeast" we think of a positive agent. But in the ancient world, the process of "leavening" stood as a metaphor for moral corruption. Just as a decomposing corpse swells up, so does a leavened loaf. Think of "road kill" as a modern example. The swelling is caused by fermentation. And in that world where purity was so important and avoiding contact with all things impure was part of what it meant to be righteous — leaven is a negative symbol.

We have several examples in the New Testament of this. In Mark's gospel, Jesus warns the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod, and in both cases it is in response to their request to show them a sign, or perform a miracle — something Jesus sees as corrupting the whole enterprise. Paul quotes the proverb, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” in his letter to the Galatians to warn against a person who is leading the congregation astray by demanding that they be circumcised.

In our time, the closest equivalent would be to speak of “one rotten apple spoiling the whole barrel.” And don't forget, any reference to leaven among an observant Jew is negative because the powerful symbol during Passover (which is this week) is what kind of bread? Unleavened bread — the kind that could be carried on the journey and would not spoil. In fact, the feast of Passover is the feast of unleavened bread, and so one of the traditions this week for the Jews is that all leavened bread is to be cleaned out of the house.

So what we hear as harmless “yeast,” the first audience would have been shocked by—leaven cannot possibly be a correct symbol for the kingdom of God. Everyone knows that God has chosen unleavened bread as a symbol for righteousness and purity, and thus rejects leavened bread as a symbol of corruption. Then of course, there is the woman who hides the leaven — a woman is the agent of the reign of God — a woman, who by her very nature was considered impure. Why? Because men made the rules, and the same fear and distrust of women existed in those days that exists today. It was a patriarchal society, and so one of the most radical things you could say or do in those days was to have a woman as the agent of God's reign.

She also does something subversive here by *hiding* the leaven, and we have lost the meaning of this act because what we translate as “hid” or “concealed” comes from the Greek word *krypto* or *encrypto* from which we get our contemporary word for protecting by special codes valuable information on a computer. So what the woman is doing is something akin to keeping a secret by means of a code. Remember, the early church was an underground movement.

As for “three measures of meal,” I said earlier that this would have immediate relevance for the first audience because of a story in Genesis with which most of the listeners would be familiar. It is the famous story in Genesis 18 concerning the prophecy of the birth of Isaac. In the story three angels, one

of whom is the Hebrew God Yahweh, visit Abraham and among the items Sarah prepares for them are cakes made from three measures of flour.

Few things were as important or significant to Jews as the birth of Isaac, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, and so when they heard this phrase in the parable, “three measures of flour” it suggests a comparison between the action of the woman who hid the leaven and the birth of Isaac, which was the unlikely, impossible promise of God that came to pass against all the odds. Remember, they were both too old to have kids, and when she heard the news, Sarah laughed.

But even so, how is this action, the hiding of a corrupting agent in a large amount of dough like the kingdom of God? Another problem for us is that the word “kingdom” conjures up fanciful images like Walt Disney’s Magic Kingdom, but the Greek word from which we get kingdom is *basileia* — and from the root of this word comes the English word basilica, which was the Roman word for a very large public building, like the emperor’s administrative offices where he conducted the business of the Empire.

So while today we hear “kingdom” and think of some future, heavenly place, in the ancient world, *baseleia* has to do with the royal administration of *this* world. And in those days it was hardly benevolent. The *pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) was only *pax* if you were *Romana* — meaning you only lived in peace if you were Roman, otherwise it was *oppressio*, or oppression. Think of that old Buffalo Springfield Song, “For What It’s Worth.” “There’s something happening here/What it is ain’t exactly clear/There’s a man with a gun over there/Telling me I got to beware . . .Paranoia strikes deep/Into your life it will creep/It starts when you’re always afraid/You step out of line, the man come and take you away. . .”

The first people to hear this parable lived in a brutal empire, and they would have heard the unmistakable comparison here between the *basileia* of God as opposed to the *basileia* of Caesar, and that’s why scholars believe it would be more accurate to say “the Empire of God” or “Heaven’s imperial rule” is like leaven that a woman who took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.”

But just think for a moment then about what it is that Jesus saying. That the empire of God is like moral corruption. Well we can’t say that, can we? Perhaps Caesar’s empire is like moral corruption, but not the empire of God!

Unless, of course, you remember that the whole point of parables is to *disorient* the listener so that they begin the process of *re-orienting* themselves to a whole new way of being in the world. That's the problem with too much preaching in the church today—it's too tame. Nobody's fur ever gets rubbed the wrong way. Who thinks of church as a dangerous place to be? Especially on Easter Sunday? Isn't going to church on Easter almost as safe as going on Christmas? I mean, you are there for the arrival and then for the departure, but who knows if that means anything because you never studied the parables?

I got to wondering what would happen if more preachers would fashion modern parables in their pulpits to say that the reign of God is like moral corruption which a woman took (yes, a woman — you know, those weak and unpredictable emotional creatures that we find both compelling and frightening), yes, a woman and hid in the body politic of the *pax Americana* until the whole American loaf had risen, had been corrupted. And after it was all leavened, the result was a messianic banquet otherwise known as peace on earth?

What if the “good news” is really that God is unclean? Shocking, isn't it, but if you say that you believe in the incarnation, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, then the whole purity thing's been shot down, has it not, by a God who is mysteriously present in human flesh – in all its frailty, imperfection, and yes, corruption.

And if it's really the Empire that is corrupt, the world of loving things and using people, of broken relationships, of abandoned and abused children, or addictive violence, of greed and selfishness — then shouldn't Christians be about the business of corrupting this corruption? Shouldn't we be like yeast in the loaf of a corrupt world corrupting it? Making it rise, hidden and mysterious and yet irrepressible? Let's face it, doesn't this give a whole new meaning to saying, “He is risen!”

Rome is like a colossal astride the world, and meanwhile a woman is in her kitchen hiding leaven into the loaf of an unleavened world — trusting God to corrupt the whole thing. Rome hears rumors of an uprising in Judea, and sends down its goons to put a spear through his side and closes the Jesus file. But like that woman hiding leaven in three measures of meal, the God who sides with the unclean, the lost and forgotten, the blind, the orphans and widows and all those who could not afford to keep the purity codes because they were too poor, with those who thought of themselves as leaven in the world — this

unclean God *opened* the file again and said, “Not so fast.” The leaven of my word is in the loaf and one of these days the whole thing will be leavened.

Well, let’s face it, that’s not much to believe, is it? I mean Rome would be justified in laughing and saying, “That’s it? That’s all you’ve got?” Three women running frightened from an empty tomb? A penniless, itinerant rabbi named Jesus that you call “Lord” when everyone knows only Caesar is Lord; only Caesar is born of a virgin; only Caesar can be called a son of God? Any questions?

And so the church went underground, met in people’s homes, often the homes of wealthy, uppity women, and they sang hymns, gave alms to the poor, refused to worship the Empire, and shared a meal that they considered to be the messianic banquet — the Jesus feast of leavened bread, corrupted by love, and slowly, mysteriously corrupting the whole world.

*There’s something happening here/What it is ain’t exactly clear/There’s a man with a gun over there/Telling me I got to beware. I think it’s time we stop, children, what’s that sound/Everybody look what’s going down/There’s battle lines being drawn/Nobody’s right if everybody’s wrong/Young people speaking their minds/Getting so much resistance from behind. I think it’s time we stop, hey, what’s that sound/Everybody look what’s going down.*

“Heaven’s imperial rule is like leaven that a woman took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.”

That’s all you’ve got?

Yes, that’s all we’ve got. That’s “what’s going down.” But hey, a little bit goes a long way. In fact, I’ve got an idea. From now on, maybe the underground church is going to have to add a new line to the Easter liturgy. We’re not just going to say, “He is risen!” Hallelujah! Pass the ham loaf. We’re going to add something that’s a bit more subversive, hidden, dangerous, corrupting. As the body of Christ, we are going to say, not only “He is risen!” but “*We are rising!*”

We are rising. We are called to corrupt the corruption until all that is left in the three measures of this corrupt world is the corruption of love. And when that day comes, and the messianic banquet is served, someone needs to thank that woman . . .

Pastoral Prayer for Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010

Lord of life, this morning is not like other mornings in the church. We make a strange, ancient, audacious claim that joy comes with this morning as with no other. We tiptoed out of our homes and into the first light of this day and heard angels telling us that our hopes are not in vain, that in fact, “hope is a bird that perches in the soul, and sings the song without the words, and never stops at all.”

We pray that all the weariness of the world, all its deception, and violence, all its self-serving meanness might pause, take a deep breath, and think about its future. That tyrants might “take five”; that womanizers might step back, that those with more money than they can ever spend might consider a school in Afghanistan instead of bigger boat.

On this morning, may we consider that all things truly are possible. That love will have the last word. That life will triumph over death. That the “yes” of the universe will sanctify love and not hate. This is Easter morning, and we are all running frightened from an empty tomb. Let the trumpets sound. Let the angels sing. Let the world begin all over again.

In the name of the risen Lord we pray, and sing, and wonder if we are not now all “undone.”

Amen.