

## **The Parables of Jesus: Stories About Multiplying** Sunday, 8/4/19

**1** Jesus told parables as an engaging way to teach spiritual truths in simple story form, generally with one main point. As far as I know, Jesus only used one parabolic image that might have come from his experience as a carpenter, and it wasn't really in a parable. Can you guess it? I'm thinking about when he talked about the splinter in your neighbor's eye and the log in your own. Instead of speaking from his own experience, he spoke to the experience of the largest number of the people he shared his life with. That's why there are so many parables about seeds and plants and fishing and baking. People had to eat, and many more people than were employed producing food, at least compared with the United States today. Jesus was the consummate communicator, clear about his purpose and the people he was trying to reach with his Good News. And that's how we wound up today with parables about mustard seeds and yeast cells, two small things that have proportionally great impact on the world.

**2** The parable of the mustard seed is both one of the most disputed in Bible commentaries while actually being one of the simplest. Once again, we tend to let our historical suppositions cloud the simple truth of what Jesus was trying to teach us. What you see here are black mustard seeds and the resulting shrub that grows from the seeds. There are many different kinds of mustard seeds, even something that's been called a mustard "tree," and there are arguments all the way around in the commentaries as to which kind of mustard seed and plant Jesus was referring to. You can be sure that botanists have weighed in on this over the years.<sup>1</sup> I don't think it actually matters. We know that mustard seeds are very small, even though they are not literally the "smallest" of seeds, as Jesus said somewhat hyperbolically in the parable. Whether they grow up to be large shrubs or trees seems pretty much beside the point, as well as whether a shrub could really support the weight of a nesting bird. The point Jesus is trying to make is much simpler than that!

Let's see if the meaning of the parable might be made clearer with a modern retelling like this: The Kingdom of God is like an acorn that was planted in the ground. Out of something as small as an acorn, an oak tree grew, something much larger than the acorn that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ww2.odu.edu/~lmusselm/plant/bible/mustard.php>

blessed God's creation by providing a home for animals and shade for plants and people. Incidentally, it doesn't matter in this retelling whether a farmer planted the acorn, a squirrel planted it, or it just fell down and worked its way into the soil. It doesn't matter whether it was a black, yellow, brown, or white mustard seed. The point Jesus was trying to make is that contrary to what most Jews of the day were expecting, the Kingdom of God has its beginnings in small things like acts of kindness rather than big productions like a military revolt against their Roman occupiers. Let's test that as we look deeper into the parable of the yeast.

**3** Am I the only one here who likes caramel rolls? My Grandmother on my mother's side, Laura Niemann, was a renowned cook. One of my favorite memories of visiting at her home in New Ulm, Minnesota is of her caramel rolls with breakfast, coming out of the oven and onto my plate. There are few things better than fresh caramel rolls prepared by someone who knows how to make them. And when they're made by someone who loves you, I'd have to say they're even better!

On the other hand, caramel rolls that haven't been allowed to rise long enough or are prepared with old yeast are disappointing. Even the best pecans and caramel can't cover up the lack of rise in a caramel roll that has an unavoidable and unsatisfying denseness. Yeast is important for baking, but did you know that yeast is used in the fermentation of quite a few other food products as well?

**4** In a National Public Radio review<sup>2</sup> of the book, *The Rise of Yeast*, I learned that yeast is used in the fermentation of cocoa and coffee beans, and that the strain of yeast used can actually change the flavor of the beans. You probably already know that yeast is responsible for the alcohol content of beer and other drinks. But did you know that the alcohol is the waste product that's excreted from the yeast cells after they eat the sugar? Think about that the next time you have a beer or a glass of wine- you're drinking from a yeast toilet! Some people think that the discovery of yeast and the fermentation of grapes and grains is the real reason that people settled down into a pattern of staying in one place and cultivating crops.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/02/28/588969884/the-rise-of-yeast-how-civilization-was-shaped-by-sugar-fungi](http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/02/28/588969884/the-rise-of-yeast-how-civilization-was-shaped-by-sugar-fungi)

Yeast are single-celled fungi, kind of a microscopic relative of the mushroom. There are 20 billion yeast cells in a single gram,<sup>3</sup> which means that those foil packages of yeast that you buy in the grocery store have about 140 billion yeast cells. You might think that Jesus would have skipped the whole mustard seed parable and talked instead about the size of yeast cells, right? Wrong. There weren't any microscopes back then, and no understanding of cellular biology.

Before we compare the parable of the yeast with the parable of the mustard seed, let's look at one more teaching about yeast in Matthew 16:5-12. I'm reading again from the New Living Translation. {[Read Bible](#)}

**5** Its helpful to identify which parts of this teaching from Matthew 16 are the same, and which are different than the parable of the yeast in Matthew 13. In Matthew 16, Jesus warns us about the “yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees,” while in the parable, the Kingdom of Heaven is compared with yeast. The context of this warning is crucial, because it comes on the heels of the miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand. And what did Jesus feed them? Fish, and loaves of bread, presumably yeast bread. What do the miracles and the parable of the yeast all have in common all have in common? Multiplication! In the parable, just a little yeast was added to a large amount of flour, but it impacted every part of the dough. In the feeding of the five thousand, just a few loaves of bread and a few fish were multiplied to provide for everyone's needs. Although Jesus doesn't spell this out for us explicitly, we're to also assume that from what we know of yeast, the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees might multiply their bad example and teaching, making them especially dangerous in their hypocrisy.

Elsewhere in the Bible, Jesus often laments that the Pharisees and Sadducees are leading others astray with their bad teaching, loading them with burdens too hard to bear.<sup>4</sup> As religious authorities, they had an out-sized influence on the faith of their flock. The implication is that yeast, whether used for good or evil, is something that begins as something small but has the capacity to bring change to everything it comes into contact with, for either good or evil.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://redstaryeast.com/science-yeast/what-is-yeast/>

<sup>4</sup> Luke 11:46

If we don't get caught up in pressing the details of the parables and get lost in historical and botanical suppositions, Jesus seems to be teaching essentially the same thing in the parables of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast: Don't underestimate the power of the smallest parts of the Kingdom of Heaven to make big changes to the present and future world, with the contrasting teaching, don't underestimate the power of evil to bring harm.

**6** Jana Reinhart lived a real-life example of the yeast of the Kingdom of God that she's going to share with you now. {Jana shares her story}.

Jana: *I like to share God's love by talking with people and often spend time providing hospitality on Sunday mornings. I've talked with a lot of people in 20 years of ministry! One time in my previous church I talked with a woman, Lauren Hauger, who was visiting for the first time and she shared with me that she hadn't been to worship in many years. She said she was nervous about being there, so I helped her find a place to sit, then talked with her after the service to ask about her experience. She told me she wanted to return with her significant other.*

*I was surprised to see her the next week because I didn't really think that I'd see her again. She brought her husband along with her. In the months after that she continued to attend our church and even grew in her faith and joined our church as a member. She became a volunteer and enjoyed helping out. One time she told me that I was the reason she came back to church, that my interest in her experience in worship the first few times and in her family when she brought them made a difference in her life. She said feeling God's love through myself and others is what helped her deepen her faith and commitment.*

**7** God really surprised me ten years later when my friend Lauren became a United Methodist clergyperson as a Licensed local Pastor. She's been serving in Morris, MN and is now in the process of moving to her second appointment at Park Rapids. We never know how the "yeast" of our love can positively impact another person. God has plans and we can watch for good things to grow.

Bill: Wouldn't you like to see more yeast like that in the world? The Kingdom of heaven begins with the very smallest of things, even a smile and "Hello!"

**8** In just a few minutes, we'll be sharing a simple meal of bread and juice, just a small piece of bread dipped into a cup of juice. The calories in this meal are negligible. It's not going to spoil your appetite for lunch. But in these small, outward signs we can find signs of the inward grace of the Holy Spirit. Who knows who might be here today with a brokenness of sin weighing so heavily on their heart that they're living in self-condemnation and fear? Who knows who might be here today with a hurt so deep that every minute of the day is a struggle with overwhelming pain? Who knows who might be here with a feeling of being discarded, unworthy, unloved and unwanted? I'll tell you who knows, Jesus. The same Jesus who gave us these small signs of the Kingdom by surrendering his life on a cross that we might be restored to full relationship with God and receive an assurance from God's Holy Spirit that we are forgiven, accepted, that we are loved, and that we are God's children. Those are no small things, but somehow they're present in the humble beginnings of bread and juice.

**9** You really don't have to become a pastor, go to Africa to be a missionary, start a church, or do anything else dramatic to be a part of ushering in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth (that is, of course, unless God is calling you to do one of those things). I believe that because each of us has been created with the image of God within us, each of us also has the ability to advance the Kingdom of Jesus, no matter how small the contribution. But it won't happen automatically. Flour without yeast won't rise. Flour with bad yeast won't make good bread. We need the yeast of God's Word and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit fermenting in our hearts before we can become yeast for the world. What would it be like if this week, perhaps even this very day, each of us let go of the tight hold we have on our hearts and lives and just let God's love multiply? What would it be like if we really understood that the small things we do in the name and love of Jesus are a part of something much, much larger than ourselves? We're baking bread for Jesus, and the flour is all the people we'll be meeting this week. Let's go and be yeast!



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