

**“The Subversive Work God”**  
**The Third in a Series on the Parables of Matthew 13**  
**Matthew 13:33**  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer  
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Back in the days of my childhood, long before Netflix and Hulu or even cable television existed, I recall eagerly anticipating the yearly broadcast of one of my favorite movies, *The Wizard of Oz*. This annual television special was wildly popular and drew huge ratings for the network hosting it, usually CBS. No doubt, many of you recall family gatherings to watch this American classic.

The movie opens—in black-and-white—on an ordinary, dusty, Kansas family farm in the year 1900. Daily life is just what you would expect until, of course, a tornado roars in from the southwest. It picks up the house into which Dorothy has fled, spinning the farmhouse round and round and round inside the funnel, before finally depositing it back on the ground—or does it? When Dorothy looks outside, everything has changed. Instead of black-and-white, the movie is now presented in glorious Technicolor. Outside the transported farmhouse are vividly colored flowers and trees and meadows—and soon she discovers a yellow brick road that she learns from curiously small people, called Munchkins, leads to the Emerald City where the great and powerful Wizard of Oz lives. One line I always looked forward to hearing Dorothy utter when she first steps outside the transported farmhouse is, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Dorothy’s words capture the same emotion evoked by the parables of Jesus. As I said in the last two sermons, the parables arrested the attention of the original hearers, not only by their vivid depiction of nature and daily life in ancient Galilee, but also—perhaps especially—by their strangeness. I also suggested that the depth of the parable’s message is connected to that point in the parable where things become strange, where “we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

But what’s strange about today’s parable? Isn’t it just a brief and vivid glimpse of daily life in ancient Galilee? Just an everyday story of a peasant woman kneading a bit of leaven into a lump dough? And isn’t the spiritual teaching simply the idea that, just as a little bit of leaven (or yeast) will cause a larger lump of dough to rise, so too the kingdom of God starts out small, seemingly hidden, but eventually it will transform the whole of society?

Well, yes and no. This summary of the parable is true to daily life in ancient Galilee, and it leads naturally to that interpretation of the parable’s spiritual meaning. In fact, that’s how this parable is commonly explained, and it’s a good explanation. But as with last week’s common interpretation of the Parable of the Mustard Seed, I suggest that this common interpretation of the Parable of the Leaven, although true, is a bit superficial.

We need to “follow the yellow brick road,” so to speak. We need to uncover the strangeness of this parable, the place in the story where there is a twist, if we are ever to arrive at “the Emerald City” where the deeper spiritual truth of this parable lies.

Actually, this parable contains two strange elements, elements that were obvious to the original hearers but are hidden to us because of linguistic and cultural differences that exist between the first and twenty-first centuries. Let’s try to uncover these two strange elements of the parable.

First, the woman kneaded the tiny bit of leaven into three measures of flour. Today, we probably picture three measures as three cups of flour, right? But the word “measure” Jesus used refers to a unit of dry weight in the ancient world equivalent to 93 cups of flour! The woman was not making bread for her family, but rather for a large feast. The enormous contrast between “a little leaven” and this enormous mass of dough shows the vast transforming power of God’s redemptive activity in the world—it far exceeds anything we experience in common daily life.

This is an encouraging spiritual truth that we need to hear, living—as we do—at a time when the church in America seems to be at low ebb. This spiritual truth gives us reason to hope that the church will once again surge to high tide. God’s vast transforming power is still quietly at work in the world, even if today it seems to be hidden, like the tiny bit of leaven was hidden in the huge mass of dough. God is always at work.

This spiritual truth also speaks to us as individuals. Just as the tiny bit of leaven transforms every part of the huge lump of dough, so too God’s redemptive activity has the power to transform every aspect of our lives. Can you imagine what your life might look like if every aspect were slowly but resolutely transformed? Before we contemplate this, however, let’s look at the second strange twist in the parable.

No doubt, the greatest surprise for the original readers would be Jesus comparing the kingdom of God to leaven. In the ancient world, leaven was a common symbol for the corrupting influence of evil, something akin to our saying that “it only takes a single rotten apple to spoil an entire barrel.” For example, in the Old Testament, the Israelites were commanded to remove every trace of leaven from their homes in preparation for Passover, an activity symbolizing the need for a total turning from the corrupting influence of evil, even those peccadillos that seemed rather insignificant (Exod. 12:15). Or to cite a New Testament example of the contaminating influence of even the smallest evil, recall that Jesus warned his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt. 16:6). In fact, the Parable of the Leaven as recorded in Matthew and Luke are the only places in the Bible where leaven is used to symbolize something good.

Why would Jesus have made such a shocking—indeed, a scandalous—comparison? I believe we can approach the parable’s strange analogy and its meaning in two steps.

First, it is common knowledge in virtually all cultures that—if left unchecked—evil has a contaminating influence that spreads, like yeast throughout a lump of dough, eventually corrupting the whole of a person or a society. This shocking parable creatively proclaims that the flip side of this truth is also true. The kingdom of God, that is, God’s redemptive activity, also has the power to transform—albeit positively—the whole of a person or a society. What good news! God’s transformative influence in the world is gradually, but intractably, working to transform us day-by-day to become more and more like Jesus.

The second step with regard to this strange twist of comparing the kingdom of God to yeast requires us to consider how Jesus’ teachings were viewed by the dominant culture of his day. In the eyes of the Roman Empire, the kingdom of God was an evil, evil thing, and if left unchecked, it would spread its “corruption” throughout the Empire. That’s how Rome viewed the early church, and that view was correct, for consider the following: Jesus taught absolute allegiance to God, not Caesar. Jesus taught that the persuasive power of love and compassion would triumph over the power of brute force and domination. Jesus focused on the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized—the Bible’s “least of these”—not on the rich and the powerful and the “in crowd”—the Bible’s “principalities and powers.” Jesus taught that our riches should be stored up in heaven, not in bigger bank accounts and the accumulation of material things. I could go on and on, but you get the point.

The kingdom of God that Jesus taught was, as the Roman’s feared, subversive to the dominant culture of his day, for gradually—even when hidden from view—God’s redemptive power was continually at work to transform every dark and shady corner of the Roman Empire. And that is why the Roman Empire tried first to exterminate the church, and when that failed, to control the church. It did far better at the latter than the former, but in the end, neither tactic worked, for God’s subversive work continued.

And I suggest to you this morning that what was true of the Roman Empire has been true throughout history—even to our own day. The kingdom of God has always been viewed as dangerously subversive in the eyes of every dominant culture, and rightly so. For as this parable teaches, God’s redemptive activity is always working subversively, hiddenly, to transform every person and every society into the image of Jesus.

The last two parables we have examined have been parables of encouragement and profound promise. God is an extravagant sower, sowing seeds of the kingdom everywhere and always. God’s work is intractable; God never gives up. This week’s parable builds on the themes of encouragement and promise, but adds an interesting twist: a note of warning. One Christian leader put it this way:

Be careful. People who have been infected by the gospel have done crazy, counter-cultural things like sharing all they have with others, standing up for their values in school or the workplace, looking out for the underprivileged, and sharing their faith with the people around them.<sup>1</sup>

I return now to a question I asked earlier: Can you imagine what your life might look like if you discovered that various aspects of your life were slowly but resolutely being transformed by God's redemptive activity? Would you, like the Scarecrow, discover growth in your intellect, your spiritual understanding? Would you, like the Cowardly Lion, find courage to live like Jesus? Would you, like the Tin Man, discover a heart filled with love for everyone? Would you, like Dorothy, find your way back to your spiritual home?

Your personal answer to that question is today's good news. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, "Parables That Do Things," (web).