

The Rev. Canon Timothy Watt+  
Year A Proper 12  
Preached 20200726

Genesis 29:15-28  
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b  
Romans 8:26-39  
Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

AMEN

About three and a half years ago I was feeling restless. I was newly ordained and Tanya was in her second year of seminary. After years of intensive study absorbing my every waking hour, I suddenly found myself with time to fill... I needed a new hobby. Money was tight for us. The 2008 crisis and seminary had depleted our savings and Tanya was in her second year of Seminary. It was not a time where I was going to be able to convince Tanya that I needed a new Orvis rod and reel or a new set of golf clubs and money for green fees. But I was haunted with the notion that I needed something to do...

I was re-reading through a few of my favorite novels to fill the time and was just starting to re-read Lonesome Dove, a book (and later a miniseries) about a cattle-drive from Texas to Montana... and there, in a part of the novel that I suspect most people just sort of skip over, I fixated upon the earthy description of a retired Texas Ranger named Gus McCrae making sourdough biscuits. I was fascinated by the vividly detailed process laid out in the narrative. He kept a crock of leaven in their well, which kept the colony of yeast and bacteria at just the perfect temperature for it to thrive. Over a few pages the author described his making a leaven out of an amount he cupped out and how he fed the culture before returning it to its safe haven in the well. It was process and art and I knew then in my very bones... I would become a sourdough baker.

So... for all of you who took up sourdough in this pandemic... and who not coincidentally bought up all the flour I needed to keep my starter alive... I was way ahead of you.

I did what I do when I get interested in something... I researched voraciously... I started to read blogs and watch videos on what I needed to do... And one day I was ready to present my sourdough business model to Tanya... I would ask for everything I needed for Christmas... proofing baskets and bench knives, scales and flour sack teacloths... I was ready to make my pitch for resources, my projected return on investment... And so, I cautiously approached Tanya with the fateful opening line of my gambit to build a bread empire and said, "I've been thinking about getting into baking sourdough..." Waiting expectantly for the query on what I'd need to make that happen, Tanya instead said, "You should talk to Melesa."

Melesa was a classmate of Tanya's while we were at VTS. And she preached the Gospel through her Sourdough. She'd make these large, crusty, boules of sourdough bread... true food for the hungry... The crust slightly charred and crispy and the crumb within was soft and pearlescent loops of glutenous magic with hole after perfect sourdough

hole where baking yeast exploded, pressing the loaf out with perfect oven spring. Hearty, crusty, bread you could just sit and eat without anything else and happily call it a meal. Perfect every time. Delicious.

And after talking with her about it, her passion and joy was such that I knew... I just KNEW... I needed to become her sourdough disciple. She taught me the feel of Sourdough... the tangible substance of it. How the starter culture, a symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast, work together on the glutenous bread flour to create something new, unique, and nourishing. Transforming simple flour, water and salt into a hearty feast. How the early shaggy mass begins to change to a more rubbery feel with the addition of salt about an hour into the bulk fermentation of the dough ball... With her guidance on the chemistry, I was on my way. Most importantly, she gave me some of her own starter. Starters are like pets you must care for and feed. You come to love them... she had named hers Fluffy Prince... Meaning my culture would be Fluffy Prince, Jr... 80s and 90's kids will get the joke...

It was only a teaspoon or so of starter in a little repurposed Talenti Gelato jar. And I remember thinking to myself, how will this even be enough to begin? It was so little an amount... Seeing my doubt, Melesa assured me it would be enough... I went home and followed her instructions and those in a book she lent me on the Tartine method... That small amount of starter went in with a 50/50 mix of 100 grams of King Arthur White Bread flour, 100 grams of King Arthur Wheat Flour, and 200 grams of water to leaven over night.

I awoke in the morning expecting to see a little action in the leaven I had mixed... but what I found was a gas-pocketed bloom three times the size of what had gone in the bowl at 9pm the night before. Fluffy Prince Junior was astoundingly strong and suddenly the parable of the leaven in today's gospel came into real focus for me. I was witnessing it in action. A little leaven can be a powerful, transformative thing.

Jesus tells us a parable today about a woman who adds a tiny bit of leaven to 3 measures of flour... We miss just how much flour this is in translation. The Greek here is Tria Sata... Three Sata of flour. This roughly translates to the flour one can expect to grind out of a little over one modern bushel of wheat. In measurements we use, this is something approaching 150 cups of flour or about 22,000 grams of flour for the bakers out there... 10 standard, 5 pound, bags of flour. That's enough to bake around 52 standard loaves of bread... Bread enough for each week of a year. Bread enough to feed a village.

The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who wants to nourish everyone she knows... and she starts with a little bit of precious leaven, multitudes stronger than any common starter... and with a little bit of faith mixed with an entire treasure-chest full of flour she accomplishes the miraculous. Simple gifts blooming in the dark to feed multitudes.

That is what the kingdom of Heaven is like. Jesus is telling us that this leaven that works on us as disciples... but it also works through us, sometimes in surprising ways. We are called to be the Kingdom now. Here. Thy Kingdom Come, now. Thy will be done, now. And God's will is that we leaven the world. Transforming it into the Kingdom, now.

Times were hard in the police state of Roman Occupied Palestine. Freedom was non-existent. Ancient Judeans and Galileans were crushed under by taxes to emperor and puppet-king. Forced into occasional service on the whim of a Roman Centurion. Living a faith only marginally tolerated by the powerful legions around them. They were always a moment of unrest away from brutal crackdowns. A situation that we post-enlightenment members of a democracy do not tolerate well. Neither did they. It is inhuman and degrading.

And then a rumor of a new prophet from Nazareth began to work through them... transforming them... healing them... creating something new in the oppressive despair of their lives: Hope.

Hope that was leavening them, healing them, feeding thousands out of small amounts of bread and fish... healing women who had spent fortunes for relief no doctor could give them, raising children back to life, opening the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, and the frozen tongues of the mute. Hope in the person of a prophet who released people from the real and metaphorical demons that haunted them... and to their great surprise doing this even for outsiders. Freely giving away hope and grace.

This Jesus was a hopeful example, a life of true generosity that seeks to leaven the world without care for what was in it for him... Hope we know as a person who was the Word of God... who gave up his divine place for a little while so that he could teach us all to do likewise for

one another... teach us to become hope for the world. God become flesh among us to help us all to become leaven for the transformation of the world.

We are also living in a hard time that we could not even imagine a year ago. When I began the discernment process last September that has led to me being your rector today, we all had no idea that we would be just three weeks into tenuously restoring in-person services... A hopeful yet cautious beginning.

We did not know that sharing the holy communion that this parable foreshadows, the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven, our true leaven, would still be a ways off, yet... And so we hunger for it together.

But still we gather here, and on-line, to be the body together. Someone asked at a Koinonia this week why people should come to Trinity. I was tired from a day of trying to resolve internet and HVAC issues in

Honyman hall and I just missed it... and the real question underlying it. But I recognized the real question in later reflection and the answer is HOPE...

This parish has prayed together, and lived together, cried and laughed together, celebrated together, and restored this church a few times over together during the centuries.

Community. Hopeful Community is why we should come to Trinity. It's why I felt called here. A symbiotic culture that has leavened this place for over three hundred years. A community of hope. A true shining light on a hill.

We are the leaven working on one another and on Newport and on the world. Now after several months apart, you are sifted back in with one another. And I am newly sifted in with you in our task of transforming the world together in hopeful prayer and service.

We join with those who have leavened this place for over three centuries, sometimes in times much more dire than these... Adding our own time, treasure, and talents to Trinity Church, this embassy of the kingdom of heaven that for centuries has been at work transforming the world. There is a place here in our community for everyone in God's constructive purpose. Space here to join in creating a new building with Newport Community Schools to leaven others with career retooling for whatever new economy comes from this pandemic... and feeding them in the meantime when needed.

There is a place here to study the sacred together in Holy Scripture and Theology. A place here to leaven the next generation of Christians in Children's formation. A place to learn wisdom from the experienced and to honor what they have accomplished in this space. I need you here in the work with me. Trinity Church Needs you. The World Needs you... to fill the space and do the work of the leavening... to transform the normal world into the sacred kingdom.

We are Trinity Church. We are leaven. The flour of the world waits for us to help it rise up. Let's get to work making something new and good out of it.

Amen.