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“Small Stuff”

Luke 13:20-21

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Jesus 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."

—Luke 13:20-21

On the Late Show, Stephen Colbert sometimes asks his guests the Colbert Questionert. He asks them 15 questions, like, "What's the best sandwich?" "What do you think happens when we die?" "What's one thing you own you should really throw out?" And "favorite smell?"

A lot of people say their favorite smell is their spouse or their kids or a car. Babies do smell good, I agree. But I think the smell of yeast meeting warm water and flour, especially when the smells of butter or coffee get mixed in, is close to the smell of heaven.

When the city shut down in 2020, and our commutes shortened from bedroom to living room, the smell of croissants baking from the coffee shop down the street pulled Blake and me outside every morning. The simplicity of the ritual calmed the overwhelm we were feeling.

And some days, that cold brew and croissant were the only reason I got out of bed. I listened helplessly to the stories of hunger and trauma and isolation increase for my clients. I watched the news. I tried to be productive, but the longer this kept going, I knew languishing was setting in.

Our daily morning visit to the coffee shop was manna in the wilderness. We walked slowly, checked in with each other, listened to the birds we hadn't ever heard on our street before, and breathed deep. We got to know the shop owner, and each week he told us how they were managing to hang on, and sometimes he convinced us to try some

different kind of cold brew, but be careful, there was more caffeine. And I always got a croissant because I could smell the delicious yeast all the way down the street.

But Jesus didn't say the kingdom of God is like the smell of a bakery or of croissants and baguettes. Instead, there's something that happens in the making. The yeast slowly, steadily works. And if we're open to the process, our patience and trust grows.

But yeast isn't easy. Yeast is overwhelming. It's a living organism, and it needs just the right conditions in order to thrive. So when you bake, even if you follow a recipe exactly, it could end up a total flop. The dough may be growing, but then there's a draft, and so it stops. Or maybe you leave it growing too long. Just watch one bread week episode on British Bake Off. Yeast is a stressful ingredient to work with. So, just like with our lives, we do our part, step-by-step, and we trust the yeast to do its.

Anne Lamott tells a story about her 10-year-old brother, overwhelmed by a report he had due on birds. "He'd had three months to write [it]," she says. "It was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'"

When we feel so overwhelmed that we miss sleep to scroll through parenting blogs, or we ignore the pile of college brochures on our desk, or we call into work because we don't totally trust our parent's caregivers, or we avoid

having a real conversation with our partner, then the depression and languishing set in. Our problems feel too big to do anything about. And we are too small. We start to believe that our only hope is for God to do something big in our lives.

But the kingdom of God is not like that.

The kingdom of God is like the seeds we plant and the bread we bake, Jesus says. God's grace is hidden in the small stuff we do every day.

Jesus is in the synagogue preaching on the Sabbath, and he sees a woman who needs some help. So he helps her. And of course, all those religious people who know right from wrong and have all their Bible memorized, cringe.

"Sabbath is sacred," they tell him. "There are six other days of the week you can do this stuff. You have to be careful to stay in God's grace."

And while they argue with him about what keeping the commandment looks like, he points to what the grace of God is all about.

"The kingdom of God is like yeast," Jesus says. "It's like when a woman hides the small portion in dough and then the whole batch rises."

God's grace isn't about living up to expectation or following all the right rules. It's healing and wonderful. And anytime there is rest and relief, that is Sabbath, in itself. God's grace is mighty, but it's in this small, regular stuff, like coins and dinner tables and children. By the grace of God, it's imbedded in the stuff we do every day.

Jesus must have watched Mary bake bread 100 times. He wondered at the magic of the dough rising. And while the delicious smell of living yeast filled their home, he

learned patience and a slower pace to growth.

So now Jesus wants us to see that our invitation to salvation isn't big and flashy. But it shows up in ordinary ways: in line with us at the coffee shop, on our commute to work, in a note to a family member, or on our run through the park. Every day, we have 100 chances to accept God's invitation to fuller life.

The good news is that God's grace is already available to us. We don't have to earn it. But we might have to slow down to be a part of it.

In her poem "Roses," Mary Oliver writes, Everyone now and again wonders about those questions that have no ready answers: first cause, God's existence, what happens when the curtain goes down and nothing stops it, not kissing, not going to the mall, not the Super Bowl.

"Wild roses," I said to them one morning.

"Do you have the answers? And if you do, would you tell me?"

The roses laughed softly. "Forgive us," they said. "But as you can see, we are just now entirely busy being roses."

We easily forget how to be human. We start thinking about how to make our lives better, how to be happier or not feel trapped. We are addicted to our devices and so many other ways of coping with being human, that we're

avoiding real life. We compare our lives with our friends' and wish we were better, and we tell them how they should be better. We're avoiding the slow process of baking bread and waiting for dough to rise. Showing up for our human lives is hard to do because it means we have to slow down and pay attention. And slowing down means feeling what we're feeling.

And sometimes feeling what we're feeling means we're not feeling it. It means we can't find a reason to get out of bed. It means we want to shut it all out. But the kingdom is there too—with the smell of croissants from the coffee shop down the street. Or the sound of familiar hymns from the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. All we have to do is put our feet on the ground and take one step in front of the other. God's yeast will always do its part rising.

Sarah has a master's degree, but she's a stay-at-home mom now. She wishes she had had more years to work before getting pregnant. Her resentment is tearing her apart. She gets easily angry with her kid and her spouse. She doesn't recognize herself.

But one day, she gave up trying to get the laundry done because it was raining, and she got down on the floor to play with her 1-year-old instead. After an hour of pushing cars around on the floor and giggling, she goes to make dinner. He helps her stir the sauce, and she goes at his pace, so he doesn't get frustrated.

When Sarah chooses connection over whatever other expectation she had, life opens for her. So it gets easier and easier to slow down and pay attention. Because her kid picks up every leaf at the park, she tries to see what he sees in those leaves instead of rushing him along. And

when she rocks him to sleep every night, the song that comes out is “Be Thou My Vision.” Instead of shutting herself in her bedroom during an argument, she stays with her husband and she listens. She gets pretty good at the sourdough bread recipe she bakes for her neighbors who are having babies. And she finds a sitter and goes back to yoga, just once a month at first. After awhile, she gets more comfortable leaving the baby with someone else, and she starts to feel more like herself.

A year full of choosing connection over expectation in all these small ways grows into a whole new, full life for Sarah.

The kingdom of God is like the changing season or a seed growing or dough rising. It’s slow and gradual. And it makes us new slowly and gradually too—through every day acts of resurrection: whenever we choose to love, even when we haven’t felt loved lately. Or when we bring tea to a colleague in the middle of a stressful day. Or when we take deep breaths instead of reacting. Or when we refuse to become cynical, despite the evidence. Or when we offer forgiveness even though we’re hurting. It is only by the grace of God, by the mystery of the yeast, that we are able to choose love instead of anger. Any time we move toward healing, we are participating in the movement of the kingdom.

And we’re changed, over time. We are made new because we showed up, and God’s yeast does it’s faithful part. We get a chance to offer grace and kindness, instead of score-keeping and grudges. And because we choose to live open-heartedly, then God’s kingdom changes us. God opens doors, softens hearts, makes it possible, and slowly we are made whole, and slowly our neighborhoods

are healed, and slowly our relationships are mended. Not overnight, but one day you realize how far you have come in just one year. How different you are, less dependent, less angry, less hurt. More forgiving, more hopeful, more loving. The kingdom of God is like yeast—small graces that eventually make us totally new.

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