

A photograph of a church interior showing a line of people waiting for communion. The pews are red, and the floor is also red. A man in a suit is handing out communion to a woman in a blue coat. Other people are visible in the background, some sitting and some standing. The text "THE PLYMOUTH PULPIT" is overlaid on the image, with a colorful logo for "PLYMOUTH" and "PULPIT" below it.

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“Waiting in Line for Communion”

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

In May 2022, L'Appartement 4F, a French bakery, opened on Montague Street. The lines stretched round the block. Moms with strollers, couples with dogs, people in Birkenstocks lined up before the bakery opened each day. When you see a long line, you figure it must be amazing.

One of their best sellers is their miniature croissant cereal, Petite Croissant Céréale, which is \$50 a box—more than most have paid for a box of cereal. "They require a lot of time and work. They roll them out, shape them into this teeny, tiny triangle and roll it like a regular croissant. After being shaped, the diminutive croissants, which weigh about a gram apiece, are dehydrated and rolled in cinnamon-sugar, then baked fresh. Each box contains around 250 mini croissants, each around half an inch in length. They are not only adorable, they also manage to remain remarkably crunchy in milk and have a shelf life of two to three weeks." (Jeanette Settembre, New York Post, September 1, 2022)

They must be good. Sixteen months later, they still sell out. They only make 5-10 boxes a day. The cashier told me I should get in line early on a weekday if I want one—and she made it clear that I would only be allowed one.

The tiny croissants get most of the attention, but the almond croissant stuffed with raspberry ganache is delicious. When people line up for baked bread, they are waiting because it is good.

For most of us, bread is a mystery. We buy our bread at the grocery store, loaves that come in plastic bags. And if, on occasion, we do bake bread at home, it is often using a bread machine, which feels like cheating.

I have no firsthand knowledge, but I have heard that baking bread from scratch is not a sure thing. Bread has simple ingredients—yeast, flour, water, salt—but yeast, the star of the show, is really more of a diva. Yeast is fussy about water temperature. Yeast is exacting about measurements. Yeast requires the right combination with sugar.

And sometimes, no matter what you do, yeast just will not cooperate—behave as it ought or rise as it should—because the house is too chilly, or the dough too wet, or the water too hot, or the moon too full, for all we know. Yeast takes its own sweet time. Yeast will not be hurried, and nothing a person can do will speed it up. Living things have their own sense of timing, and yeast, once it permeates the dough, is a mysterious, enigmatic, living thing. Bread is complicated.

Jesus knew that it is hard to make good bread. Imagine Jesus as a six-year-old, a child in the kitchen, standing at his mother's elbow, watching her hands slip yeast into flour and knead the dough and shape the loaf. They will not eat the loaf until it bakes. They cannot bake the loaf until it rises, but the boy knows it will rise. The miracle happens every day, with a timing only his mother can decipher. The moment when she hands him the finished loaf to take to the table where the family is gathered is Jesus' first vision of heaven.

Imagine Jesus as a nine-year-old. Brooklyn resident

and Jesuit priest Bill Cain wrote *The Diary of Jesus Christ*. The title of the first chapter is “The Calling.” Anyone who has read fictional versions of Jesus’ life assume the chapter will end with Jesus’ realizing that his calling is to be the Messiah.

This is how Bill Cain pictures Jesus telling his story: “When I was little—and I mean about nine—I wanted to be a rabbi. This didn’t have much to do with God. Carpentry looked like a lot of hard work. The only problem was that our rabbi never seemed happy.

“The happiest man in the village seemed to me to be the baker. He was always cheerful. Always joyous. People were always happy to see him, which was pretty much the opposite of the way they felt about our rabbi.

“The baker would carry on his shoulders a big yoke from which hung two sacks filled with breads of all kinds and, even though every household baked its own bread, people would scrape together their coins to buy his. He would make the women laugh, even my mother, and she wasn’t always easy to get a laugh out of. It would be his way to toss in an extra roll for good customers.

“My mother would say, ‘You’re trying to get me fat!’

“And he would say, ‘There’s more of you to love.’

“Old joke and not something my father would get away with, but coming from the baker, she would laugh.

“We kids would follow him through town and he would shout at us. ‘You’re like a pack of cats at a fish market.’

“But when he took off the yoke at the end of the trip through the village, he would give us the broken pieces of pastry for free. For the pleasure of it. Good bread is sheer pleasure.

“One day I asked to carry the yoke. I was shocked at how heavy it was. I asked him how he could be so happy carrying such a heavy yoke.

“He answered, ‘Well, it’s heavy only at the start. Once you sell the bread, it gets lighter. And the more you give away, the lighter it gets.’

“So we went through the village, laughing and chatting, the burden getting lighter as more bread was sold and given away until there was no burden at all, but only laughter.

“Nine-year-old Jesus concludes, ‘That’s when I knew what I really wanted to be. A baker.’” (Bill Cain, *The Diary of Jesus Christ*, 1-3)

If there was a moment when Jesus wanted to be a baker, it would make sense. Bakers feed people. Bakers care for people. Bakers are like magicians. They create magical tastes and smells. They make us feel loved. They make us want to share what we have been given.

Imagine Jesus as a 30-year-old trying to help his students understand God’s love. Jesus does not look far for his parables. He talks about everyday things—seeds, birds, brooms, coins, lamps, and baskets. Jesus thinks the ordinary world is shimmering with God’s love, and he wants his listeners to see it, too. He wants us to live with a new mindfulness.

Jesus thinks, “What if every time we smelled freshly baked bread, we remembered that God’s love permeates the world like the smell of baked bread fills a kitchen. What if I could help people think about the whole deal, not just the finished loaf, but the dough, in its rising, the leaven performing its magic.”

Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is like yeast that a

woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. Then she waits while the dough rises, on its way to being bread.”

Someone in the crowd thinks, “Huh? What does a woman baking bread have to do with anything?”

The parables require our imagination. Some of it is odd. The amount of flour is curious. Three measures is 50 to 60 pounds.

In the Hebrew Bible three measures is symbolic. Three measures is how much Abraham tells Sara to bake when three guests show up. Three people and she is supposed to make enough bread for a convention? Apparently, 50 to 60 pounds is the amount of bread you need when God is present. Or maybe when God is present, 50 to 60 pounds is how much you get (Mike Graves, *Your One Wild and Precious Life*).

According to Jewish tradition, when the Messiah comes, he will feed all of Israel. In the Gospels, Jesus feeds Israel and the Gentiles, too. A significant part of Jesus’ life is giving away bread. The kingdom is about sharing bread.

Maybe Jesus is saying something about timing. What we want to hurry up and plan for and accomplish quickly takes time. God’s work is often slow and steady and unpredictable. That is good news for those of us who wonder if God is doing anything at all these days—in the world, in the church, and in the work we do. We may not see it happening, but it is happening.

Maybe this parable is about ratios. God does not need much to do a lot. What we think is small God can mix into a mountain of flour—and it will be enough to leaven the whole. That is good news for small groups in big

sanctuaries. We wish there were more, but it is enough. Jesus' followers understand that a little bit of something makes a big difference.

And sometimes we need to see things that are easy to miss. The New Revised Standard Version says that the woman took yeast and "mixed" it—but that is not quite right. The Greek word is enkrypto, which means what it sounds like, encrypted. Concealed. Converted into code that no one else can understand. "The kingdom of God is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal" (Anna Carter Florence, *A is for Alabaster*).

That is a twist. The kingdom is hidden. The kingdom is encrypted. Yeast we do not think about is at work. What God is doing is waiting to be seen. The kingdom of God is leavening everything in its reach. The kingdom is good enough to stand in line for.

Imagine Jesus as a 33-year-old, sitting at the table with his friends. The end is near. Jesus wants to give them something to remember, something concrete, and something holy. As they are eating, Jesus takes and blesses the bread, breaks it, and passes it to disciples who will run, who will deny him, and who will betray him.

Jesus gives them bread and says, "Take, eat. Whenever you smell bread baking, remember how much I love you. Remember how much God loves you. Remember how much you love one another."

When we wait in line for the bread at communion, it is different from waiting in line at a bakery. We do not talk in line at the Lord's Supper. We stand solemnly. We step forward when a gap opens in front of us. We are not sure where to put our hands, at our sides maybe. We look

around, but not too much. Mostly we look straight ahead.

We think about what it means. We think about God welcoming everyone in a line that stretches back 2000 years, churches through 20 centuries, countries all over the world, and Christians of every stripe lining up to receive God's grace. It must be good if people stand in line for it.

We think about forgiveness, the forgiveness we have been given and the forgiveness we share. We think about the people in line with us, the ones we love and the ones we do not know. The line moves slow. Finally, we are handed the tiniest piece of bread, so tiny we can barely taste it, but this gift is the love of God.

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