

Sermon for July 30, 2017 (Proper12A) “In A Pickle”

*(based on Matthew 13:31-33)*

I have been reading a terrifying book—I mean, another one, *besides* the Bible. It is full of weird kitchen experiments and strange one-celled creatures who want to live in my food. It's written by a famous pickle-maker named Sandor Katz, who has travelled the world exploring pickle traditions. Who knew this could be a real job description? The book is called, “The Art of Fermentation.”

From the first animal that got drunk on fallen fruit, creatures have been pursuing the craft of fermentation. Fermented foods and drinks appear in every culture on earth. Nobody knows when the first human figured out how ferment something on purpose, but archeologists have found alcohol residues on pottery shards 9,000 years old.

The array of nature's tiny fermentors is staggering—and so are the things we make with their help: from Mead and Winemaking, Beer-brewing, and Hard Cider which practically makes itself, to stranger beverages like home-brewed sodas, Kombucha, Kvass, and Kefir. If the batch went wrong, you could call it vinegar, and pickle other things in it: beets, dilly beans, fiddleheads, kimchee, or Sauerkraut. And then, there are other kinds of fermentation—the thousand different processes that turn milk into yoghurt or cheese, and the different brines and curing conditions that turn raw meat into salami or corned beef. Sometimes the same process does wonderful and terrible things at once. Have you ever tried lutefisk?

This week, in Skowhegan, the Maine Grain Alliance is hosting the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Kneading Conference, where fermentation takes center stage. Some of the artisan bakers there are reclaiming the traditions of baking with wild yeast. Others celebrate the more reliable results of strains that have been domesticated, cultivated, and standardized, so that any baker can purchase a vacuum-packed brick or packet of yeasty beasties to set loose for the bubbly, tangy work of transformation. This church has been influenced by some fine bakers—from Bill Gilman's grandmother, whose job as a baker put her

children through school, to Peter Stackpole, who discovered the perfect bread recipe by helping his daughter with a chemistry experiment. We've tasted Dill's sweet rolls and Berenice's Communion bread. Our faith is flavored with fungi, blessed with busy bacteria!

Yeasts and bacteria evolved right along with us—and inside us, especially inside our digestive tract, where they outnumber our cells by 10 to 1! Do you know what pushed Sandor Katz to study wild fermentation? He was diagnosed with HIV in 1991. In the days and months of grief and terror that followed that diagnosis, he began to research how to support his fragile, damaged immune system. In addition to anti-retroviral drugs, he learned that naturally-fermented foods had a tremendous history of providing health and healing. He learned that not all microbes are bad, and that he could tend a garden of beneficial bacteria inside his own digestive system. When these so-called “gut flora” are in the right balance, they help us digest our food, regulate our internal systems, and protect us from infections. Without them, we might not have the guts to get through anything!

Most of us do not share the enthusiasm of Sandor Katz. When it comes to microbes, for the most part, we do not trust them. The ancient Hebrews didn't know how mold and bacteria worked, but they viewed such things with deep suspicion. If they saw mold growing on the side of a house, they declared it unclean and classified it as a kind of leprosy. Hebrew holy books and legal codes are full of references to yeast as a symbol of evil, because they saw how wild yeasts ruined wine and vinegar, caused food to go bad, and sometimes made people sick. And they had no idea how to isolate or control it—yeast was wild, and it was everywhere. So yeast came to symbolize everything contaminated, uncontrollable and unclean. You might think you've outgrown these silly divisions between clean and unclean, but have you ever sought out that antibacterial soap that kills “99.9%” of the tiny lives it touches?

Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like mustard, (a noxious, invasive weed), or a woman who mixed yeast into three measures of flour—in other words, she took a

carefully-ground and carefully stored bushel of flour—and she contaminated it on purpose. Father Dominic Garramone, a monk who bakes bread as a spiritual practice, took some time to do the math on this. He writes:

The amount of flour is the most surprising element of the parable, which is not entirely evident in most English translations. “Three measures” is the usual translation for the original Greek “tria sata” which is a little over a *bushel* of flour (1.125 bushels, to be precise). That’s a ridiculously large amount of flour---you’d need a 100-quart Hobart mixer with a dough hook as big as your leg to knead it! Translating into kitchen measures, 1.125 bushels is 144 cups of flour. Presuming we used a common recipe for basic white bread that uses 5 ½ cups of flour, 144 cups is enough to make 26 batches of bread of two loaves each, giving us a total of 52 loaves, each weighing about a pound and a half. If we’re frugal but not stingy, we can get 16 slices out of a loaf, yielding 832 slices, enough for 416 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (we’d need 33 jars of jelly, and 64 of peanut butter).

That woman—that shockingly imprudent bakerwoman, flinging yeast with such a free hand, that woman who Jesus says God is like—she mixes the pure and the impure all together, filling that massive amount of flour with the capacity to stir and stew, to bubble and rise, to feed more than her own household. That bakerwoman intends to feed the whole village, maybe the whole world—not bit by bit, not when they've worked hard enough or given enough to earned it, but now, a one-woman kneading conference, a massive festival of bread. This is how God works, and how God wants the world to work. This is the source of God's joy and delight.

If these parables are right, then we've painted God all wrong, looming over the edge of a cloud with thunderbolts and a long white beard. God, it turns out, is more like a sneaky bakerwoman who mixes yeast into all the dough, causing heaven to rise up where we least expect—and contaminating everything it touches. And the chemical reaction of all that wild effervescence can be traced to the smallest beginnings, the most seemingly insignificant beings—who transform the hard structures of wheat and barley, corn and oats, and other grains, releasing enzymes that break down cell walls, until the nourishment inside can be reached and used by all our bodies.

What does all this say about God's way of working in the world? What does this say about our need to pay attention? What does it say about how God is calling us to live? What is YOUR image of the Kingdom of God? If you wrote a parable, knowing that Jesus likes to challenge our standards and expectations, what would you say the Kingdom of God is like?

Back to bacteria-- there's another thing they're discovering about wild yeasts and their various cousin-creatures. They're not just good at helping us get nutrients from our food. They are good at breaking down other substances, like oil in oil spills, toxic industrial waste, and the chemical agents used in warfare. Introduce certain bacteria into those substances, and they will gradually digest them, breaking them down into safe and simple organic compounds that can go back to the earth. Here is the Kingdom of God revealed: in the workings of tiny creatures, quietly doing good, making chemical weapons into fertilizer, swords into plowshares, hell into heaven on earth.

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