

A LITTLE FUNGUS **Matthew 13:33**

INTRODUCTION:

I just HATE to begin a sermon with an apology. In fact, when I was taking classes on preaching, I was told never to begin a sermon with an apology...or any speech, for that matter. That's good advice if you don't mess up a lot. But I mess up a lot. And when I mess up I'd rather fess up than try to cover up. So here goes with the confession.

When I was planning my sermons for 2009, I had settled on the theme, "Little Is Much". I wanted to get across the idea that God can use what we have and who we are, however insignificant we may feel. To illustrate that, I had decided to spend November talking about the little creatures that God has offered as illustrations from which we may learn. So, on November 1, we looked at a number of little beasts from Proverbs 30. On November 8, we looked at the bugs (specifically the ants). Last week, we looked at the birds.

I don't know if you noticed but all of these begin with the letter "B". This week, I intended to look at the bacteria. My text was to be Matthew 13:33 where Jesus said,

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

I had prepared an outline complete with introduction and conclusion, which I gave to Linda Schnepfer so she could select songs accordingly. Then I began to manuscript the sermon. This is where I move from the right brain, creative and conceptualizing phase of sermonizing into the left-brain, detailed, analytic and research-oriented phase.

As I started writing and studying, studying and writing, I began to learn stuff. Good stuff. Important stuff. Relevant and applicable stuff. And fairly late in the process, I discovered that yeast isn't a bacteria. Who knew?!? It's a fungus.

Two problems with that:

- 1) It didn't fit my outline and
- 2) Fungus doesn't start with a "B"

I thought about trying to bluff it through and see if anybody picked up on the fact that yeast is not a bacteria but I knew someone would probably catch that. (And with a retired science teacher in the congregation, I was pretty sure I knew at least one person who would realize I was wrong.) But the other thing is that if there isn't integrity in the pulpit, we've got a real problem. I'm not saying that I never make mistakes in a sermon. But

when I do, that's what they are: they are mistakes. They are not deceptions. I promise you this: I will never intentionally mislead you. I will never knowingly preach something that is wrong.

Therefore, as much as it pains me to do it, I have to change my title to something that does not begin with a "B".

Here goes: Today's sermon is "A Little Fungus". (Oh! That hurts!!)

Fungi, it turns out, are a separate kingdom of their own. They are not plants nor animals nor even bacteria. And the discipline of biology devoted to the study of fungi is known as "mycology". (I know that Mike Delonshaw and Mike Spitzner thought that "Mikeology" was devoted to them but it is not. It is devoted to studying the other kind of fungus.)

Mycology has identified over 100,000 distinctly different types of fungus but they know they have not identified all of them. Estimations of the number of different types of fungus run as high as 1.5 million.

Fungi are ubiquitous. There are fungi that thrive on land and fungi that thrive in the water. And there are airborne fungi.

Fungi range in size from quite small to humongous. The smallest fungi are only a micron in diameter (Just to help you reference that, an inch is 25,400 microns in length. So the smallest fungus is about 1/25,400th of an inch in diameter.) And the largest known fungus is a tree-killing single organism in northeast Oregon that covers an area equivalent to 1,665 football fields or 2,200 acres. One organism! It lives three feet underground and is 3.5 miles across!

Yeast is but one fungus in this family of hundreds of thousands of fungi.

As we all know, yeast is important in the bread-making process. And it is that process that Jesus used as the context for his parable when he said that "the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."

If you would permit me just another moment or two before we start looking at how the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, let me take the time to define what Matthew means by the phrase, "The Kingdom of Heaven". Usually when we talk about heaven, we mean the eternal home of God's children who have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. And the Bible does use the term in that way. The book of the Revelation uses the word heaven like that.

But in Matthew's gospel, when Matthew quotes Jesus telling parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, Matthew uses the phrase to refer to the realm where Jesus is acknowledged as King. That may be in the hereafter but it is also in the here and now in the hearts and lives of people who have made Jesus to be king of their lives. The Kingdom of Heaven is a present reality for them...for us...for the church: that group of people over whom Jesus reigns.

In Matthew 13:33, Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast. From something as humble as yeast, from something as little as fungus, we can learn important facts about the Kingdom of Heaven.

I. IT MUST BE ALIVE

When you go to the store and purchase an envelope of baker's yeast, you are buying a living organism. It has to be alive to work. In fact, if you have very old envelopes of dry yeast, you cannot use them to make bread because the yeast spores will have died.

In the bread-making process, the first step is to empty the contents of the envelope of yeast into a basin of warm water to activate the organisms. It is as if they have been hibernating in that envelope. But the warm moist environment of a basin of water will awaken the yeast so it can become effective.

While I didn't know enough about yeast when I started to write this sermon, there is no doubt in my mind that Jesus knew all he needed to know about yeast when he spoke that parable. And one of the things I'm sure he knew is that yeast must be alive to be effective.

The Kingdom of Heaven, like yeast, must be alive to be effective. Remember again that the Kingdom of Heaven is that sphere in which Jesus rules and reigns. The visible manifestation of that today is the church.

For the church to be effective it must be alive. The life of the church does not derive from its many programs, its rituals, its buildings or its organizational structure. The life of the church derives from the presence of the Holy Spirit living in us.

A church where the Holy Spirit is alive is a church that is alive. And a church where the Holy Spirit is not alive is a congregation that is dead. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires and empowers us to do the work of the King. The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast: it must be alive to be effective.

II. **A LITTLE CAN ACCOMPLISH A LOT**

The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, a little can accomplish a lot. One gram of yeast contains 20 billion tiny cells (that's billion with a "B"). There are about 7 grams in a quarter ounce package that we buy at the store (2 1/2 teaspoons). That's 140 billion cells!

Depending on the recipe, one package of yeast, about 2 ½ teaspoons, will make one loaf of bread. By volume and by weight, the yeast is only 1% – 2% of the dough. But that tiny amount of yeast ends up affecting the whole loaf. Those 140 billion cells will spread throughout all of the dough and have an impact on all of it.

What the yeast does, these little organisms, is that it works by consuming sugar and excreting carbon dioxide and alcohol as byproducts. The carbon dioxide gas creates little air pockets in the dough causing it to expand (or "rise") and making the finished product lighter, and fluffier. The yeast also adds a distinctive flavor to the bread.

But it doesn't take much yeast to create these dramatic effects. Just a little leavens the entire loaf of bread. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. From the Day of Pentecost on, the church has always been a minority movement in the world. There have always been more people who do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God than there are those who do. There have always been more people who reject his lordship than there are those who do.

But don't lose heart. Little is much when God is in it. The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast worked into dough: even though it is little, it can accomplish a lot. In fact, in II Corinthians 12:10, the apostle Paul noted:

"I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

It is precisely because we are weak, insignificant and small that God delights to use us; so that He gets the credit for what is accomplished and He gets the glory for what is achieved.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast: it must be alive to be effective, a little accomplishes a lot and it must be mixed in to make a difference.

III. **IT MUST BE MIXED IN**

Yeast in the envelope doesn't make a difference. As I said before, just lying in the bottom of an envelope, yeast will die. To achieve what yeast is intended to achieve, it must be mixed in to the dough.

When making bread, it is important to stir, mix and then kneed the dough, in part so that the yeast gets worked all through the dough because everywhere the yeast is, it changes what it touches.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that. God never intended for Christians to be quarantined and kept isolated from the rest of the world. God never planned for us to be monks who practice our Christianity inside a monastery.

Jesus said that no one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, people put the lamp on a lamp stand so that the light can be seen and it can effectively dispel darkness over a wider area.

Similarly, salt has to get out of the saltshaker and be applied to the food for it to make a difference. A light under a basket, salt in a salt shaker, yeast in an envelope and a Christian out of touch with unbelievers are all ineffective.

I will probably ruffle a few feathers with what I am about to say but I am not a fan of the home-schooling movement among some Christians. Christian teachers have made an enormous contribution to our schools and to Christ's Kingdom. Christian students have had a significant impact both on the public schools and on the Kingdom of God. I hate the thought of quarantining the Christians from the public schools (either the Christian students or the Christian teachers) because believers need to touch the lives of the unbelievers to make a difference for Christ.

We need Christians in the workplace so they can make a difference for the Lord. We need Christians to serve as volunteers so they can make a difference for the Master. Christians in the Lions Club, the VFW and the AmVets, Christians on the police department, the sheriff's department and the fire department, Christians to deliver meals-on-wheels and Christians everywhere else they can contact others who have not yet come to faith in Jesus as the Son of God. As the yeast is worked through the dough, it makes a difference. And as Christians work into the culture, they make a difference. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." It must be mixed in to make a difference.

IV. IT MUST BE GIVEN TIME TO WORK

And it must be given time to work. Bakers mix the ingredients and kneed the dough but then they have to let it rise before they bake it. The yeast needs time to do its work.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast. It has been 2000 years since Jesus began the church. It has been 2000 years since the message of salvation

was first proclaimed. It has been 2000 years and the world is still not won for Christ. 2000 years and his will is still not done on earth as it is in heaven. 2000 years and we are still waiting for his return to take us home with him. But do not get discouraged and do not give up. Yeast does not work instantly and the Kingdom takes time.

Sometimes when I share the gospel with another person, I get impatient and I want that person to accept Jesus right now. But I need to become humble enough to learn from some fungus...that the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast and it takes time to have its maximum impact and its full effect.

CONCLUSION:

Some people believe that small churches cannot reach the lost effectively anymore, but is this true? Thom Rainer, who was founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth, did a survey of nearly two hundred churches of various sizes, denominations, worship styles, and ministry approaches. Here is his conclusion in his own words: "*There was virtually no correlation between the growth and outreach of the church and the type of church – traditional or nontraditional.*" There is virtually no difference in growth between traditional and non-traditional, or large and small churches. Growth is about the same proportionately. Clay City Christian Church is not too small to be effective, too traditional to be effective, too old to be effective or "too" anything else. God can use us just as we are, right where we are.

INVITATION: #657 – "*Cleanse Me*"