

THE WONDERS OF COMPOSTING

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Reading: Luke 13:20-21

And again he said, "To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

This is the time of the year when serious gardeners have completed the task of harvesting oak, maple and sweet gum leaves for their compost bins. The last of the zucchinis, which even the most disciplined canning chef can no longer bear to pick, are now about three feet long and eight inches in diameter moldering in the garden, waiting for the compost pile. Tired tomato and pepper plants join last spring's peas and bean plants, liberally salted with eggshells, coffee grounds, fruit peelings and other remnants from the fresh produce the summer yielded. Old potting soil and manure is thrown into the heap, turned a few times and covered until next spring. Some composters will visit the pile throughout the winter with regular offerings from the kitchen sink, and they might even turn the compost every few weeks.

While we are snug in our homes, worms, insects and plant organisms will begin the process of breaking down the raw material. Their waste will add to the rich brew of compost. The feeding, digesting,

and waste of these natural composters will join the heat of the sun and with oxygen produce a rich material that will build up the garden soil for next year's crop. Rubbish and kitchen garbage become the nutrients that will be the staff of life for next spring's corn, tomatoes, and beans. Out of waste comes the humus of new life and nutrition.

I dare submit to you this morning that the kingdom of God is like that. That which nourishes and feeds us; that which enriches, ennobles, and enlightens us; that which gives us meaning and hope; that which offers us the possibility of health and wholeness; and that which shapes our values and gives us peace emerges out of the ordinary realities of human life. More often than we care to admit, the kingdom of God flows out of disaster, loss, waste, and suffering.

This is not, of course, what most of us expect to hear. We imagine that anything sacred would be clean, if not sterile. We imagine that anything holy would be well ordered and predictable. We think that everything will be perfect in the kingdom of God. We are like the matron who was walking her grandson along the shore of the ocean. He was dressed in navy blue knickers, white stockings, patent leather shoes, and a sailor's blouse. Suddenly a huge wave roared up and snatched the child from the woman's hands. He was nowhere to be seen. The grandmother

bowed her head and prayed that the good Lord would return her grandson, restored to life according to God's will. Within a few seconds the boy was placed back on the beach, dry as a bone. The matron immediately inspected him, giving inventory of shoes, stockings, knickers, and blouse. She turned her head heavenward and stated in a commanding tone, "He had a hat."

Jesus told a parable about the kingdom of God that did not meet the expectations of his audience either. In the shortest of all parables he simply said, "The kingdom of God is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened." Some new translations of the Bible state that the woman used yeast and mixed it into the flour. All of us know that yeast comes in sterile little packages. It is almost white, and when it is added to salt, warm water, and a cup of flour, it offers a delicious aroma that smells like home and hearth. As wonderful as this image is, it perverts the original text and what Jesus meant to say.

Quite simply, leaven is mold. In ancient times leaven was the agent that was added to dough to make it rise. When we find mold on our bread we immediately throw it away. Not only is leaven the mold of bread; it is a metaphor for all that corrupts Israel. Throughout the Bible leaven is

understood to be corruption that should be avoided and discarded. During the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, the Jews are required to throw out all leavened bread because it represents that which is unclean. Even the pantry that housed the leavened bread must be cleaned, and all bread eaten during this holiday must be unleavened. As you probably know, unleavened bread is flat because there is no fermenting agent that will make the bread rise. But leavened bread tastes good, and after the Feast of Unleavened Bread the Jews would take a piece of their festival bread and put it in a dark and damp place where it would become moldy. The mold, or leaven, was then added to the dough so that it would rise.

Jesus refers to the teachings of the Pharisees as hypocrisy, a leaven that can corrupt Torah and the faith of the people.¹ Yet in another context, quite unexpectedly, Jesus uses this unclean object as the focus of the kingdom parable. The kingdom of God is like corrupt mold. But he goes a step further. He uses an unclean agent to do the work of the kingdom. The one who brings corruption to the flour is a woman. Women are recognized throughout the Bible as unclean and religiously impure when they menstruate. What is more, bread making in ancient times was generally a family affair, held the day before the Sabbath.

¹ See Matthew 16:12 and Luke 12:1

Enough bread would be made to get the family through several days, even a week. Everyone in the family helped in this huge project. But in this parable the unclean woman worked alone. And to stress how big this baker's plans are, we are told that she used three measures of flour, about fifty pounds. That would be enough flour to make about one hundred loaves of bread! Other members of the family, probably men, would be needed to physically manage such a huge amount of dough. And if it is not enough to suggest that a very strong, unclean woman was baking the staff of life, we are told that she hid the leaven in the dough. Why hide it? Why not put it in, or mix it in as the newer translations suggest? What kind of female skullduggery is going on here that she would slip it in, hide it, pull one over on the rest of us? The whole thing sounds a little dishonest, not quite on the up and up. Corruption is compounded by more corruption in this parable.

To conclude, Jesus does not tell us that the corrupt leaven gave rise to one hundred loaves of delicious and nutritious bread. This is not Wonder Bread! Jesus says that the corrupt leaven was hidden in the flour and it was all leavened. That is to say, it was all corrupted.²

² For a fuller discussion on this interpretation, see Bernard Brandon Scott's *Hear then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 321-329.

I do not know what it will be like when all human beings reach Abraham Maslow's "self actualization." I do not know what the Age of Aquarius will be like. I do not know what nirvana or heaven will be like. But I do have a clue what the kingdom of God will be like, and it will not be what I expected. Jesus uses this parable to inform us that our presuppositions about what is good and holy miss the mark. The sacred is not so predictable, or so comfortable, or so pure as we might have assumed.

Consistently Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God is free to manifest and express itself in whatever company it chooses. The kingdom is free to flower in the midst of corruptions and even those who represent corruption in our society.

When I was a Methodist minister in Clermont, Georgia, a small group of us convinced the Hall County Sheriff to allow us to serve Holy Communion to the inmates of the county jail on Christmas Eve. We had been working in the jail for several months, ostensibly to teach the Bible, but also to monitor the jail and see that the inmates were treated fairly. Of course, whenever a Bible study or religious service was offered, many of the prisoners wanted to attend so that they could get out of their cells.

I remember one young man who thought he had really co-opted our intentions by his attendance. The smirk on his face said nothing less than, “Go to hell.” He was flippant through the reading of the nativity story in Luke’s gospel. He fidgeted through the homily and appeared bored. He snarled through the confession and the prayer of Thanksgiving. As we shared the elements we sang “Silent Night, Holy Night.” And before the first stanza ended the snide anger and false bravado broke apart and the young prisoner was reduced to tears. His hands trembled as I stood before him with the bread and said, “The body of Christ which is broken for you.”

Please do not assume that I am trying to offer you some tall tale of salvation. Whatever is extraordinary here occurred in the very ordinary office of Holy Communion. In the midst of a dank and overcrowded jail a troubled young man’s heart was touched. In the isolation of guilt and judgment the boy was given a moment of grace; a moment to experience hope; a moment to sing about a mother and child. I have served Holy Communion in many beautiful sanctuaries adorned with Advent wreaths, candles, and Christmas trees. Yet that moment impressed me as one of those genuine experiences of the holy.

Now in case you did not understand me, that moment of holiness did not come because I gave the man a piece of bread and repeated sacred words. The moment of holiness came when his tears bore witness to fear and hope, loneliness and community, judgment and mercy. At that time, he was far more human than the role I played. He spoke eloquently of the possibility that life can have meaning in the most desperate circumstances. In the midst of the compost pile that boy had made of his life, rich material was being processed that he might use one day to grow a new future. Hope is always before him, if he will choose it.

Many people expect their lives to be orderly and healthy. We expect to get through life in safety and peace. Life should make sense, have meaning, and fill us with a general sense of well-being. But, of course, life does not really work that way. There are failures, moral lapses, suffering, and death. I read once of the suicide of Carla June Hochhalter. Carla's seventeen-year-old daughter is Anne Marie. Anne Marie was one of the students who were wounded during the Columbine High School massacre. She was shot in the school's parking lot and suffered a paralyzing injury to her spinal cord. She moved her legs for the first time a week before her mother's suicide. Now Anne Marie must

cope with the fact that her mother shot herself in the head at a pawnshop where she bought the pistol.

I do not know how Anne Marie will compost all of that waste and manure. Some of the garbage in the compost heap takes years to process. Some of it never does. But if Ann Marie is ever to know life and hope she will have to work with such offal. The gospel of Jesus declares that the kingdom of God grows even in the midst of such horrible tragedies. Anne Marie, as incredible as it sounds, can find grace in the corrupt and unclean experiences of the human condition.

There are men and women in this sanctuary who have known suffering. Some of us have been abused or neglected by the people we thought were supposed to protect us. Some of us have been in marriages that must have been licensed in hell. There are those among us whose religious heritage damaged our souls or minds. Some of you are fighting with disease whose prognosis is bleak. I have sat in many homes and hospitals watching your loved ones die, some of them long before time was meant to take them. I have visited parishioners and parishioner's children in jails and psychiatric wards in this city and others.

I wish that none of this had happened to any of us. But it is not possible to go through life without suffering. There will always be weeds

in the garden. The will always be material for the compost pile. I do not believe that authentic faith turns a blind eye to the reality of suffering and chaos in human relationships. I do not believe there is divine intent to maim or distort the lives of human beings for the purpose of teaching us a lesson or testing our faith.

I do believe that faith seeks out the sacred in everyday experiences, even those that cause us pain. Even in the most corrupt margins of our society, or in the corrupt corners of our own souls, grace happens. I believe that faith turns the compost. And given time, that which is corrupt can manifest wholeness and God's peace. I offer you this blessing "For Courage" by John O'Donohue:

When the light around you lessens
 And your thoughts darken until
 Your body feels fear turn
 Cold as a stone inside,

When you find yourself bereft
 Of any belief in yourself
 And all you unknowingly
 Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
 Your whole heart,
 And it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see
 That it is your own thinking
 That darkens your world,

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light

Know that you are not alone
And that this darkness has a purpose;
Gradually it will school your eyes
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner;

Invoke the learning
Of every suffering
You have suffered.

Close your eyes.
Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark.
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear.

A new confidence will come alive
To urge you toward higher ground
Where your imagination
Will learn to engage difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!³

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³ John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 107-108.