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Sermon 11 July 2021

Title: Food for Thought 6 (Sourdough Starters)

- Good morning church—we are glad to be with you on this another beautiful Sunday morning and we are so glad that you have taken the time and made the effort to join us at LargsNaz online today—we welcome those of you who are watching from our Sunday Brunch here in Largs as well as those of you who may be watching from your own home or from one of so many other places all over the world---and wherever you are, we are glad that you are here with us.
- This is the sixth and final Sunday in our “Food for Thought” sermon series—next Sunday we’ll be taking a virtual trip to Psalm Beach just as we did last summer—and that’s going to be a lot of fun, and we trust it will be inspirational and edifying as well—but today we will be partaking of one last course as we look again at some verses from the scriptures in which food plays a particularly important role.
- Now you’ll remember that we started out in Genesis, with the forbidden fruit, and then moved to the Book of Numbers where we found that some of the children of Israel were fed up with the “bread of heaven”—the manna that God was providing them—they had a craving for something else—and then for the past few weeks we have been looking in the gospels—we’ve heard about grain plucked on the Sabbath by Jesus’ disciples, and about the bread that Jesus didn’t make, even though he was starving in the wilderness, and then last week we

considered the multiple messages that the story of the “feeding of the 5000” had for us

- Now the scriptures that we have looked at for the past two Sundays have had one very obvious thing in common, and that is this—they’ve both involved bread-making—when we looked at Jesus temptation in the wilderness, the basic temptation was to make bread—and the take-home point about Jesus’ response to that temptation was that he didn’t make bread when the devil tried to get him to—and then last week, we saw how enough bread was made from five loaves and a side of fish to feed a crowd of thousands with basketsful leftover.
- And today we’re going to continue that trend, and we’re going to stay in the gospels and look at a few passages of scripture that have to do with the processes involved, and the ingredients needed, in making a specific kind, a specific type, of bread—and that type of bread is what we would call, in modern culinary terms, sourdough.
- And what makes “sourdough bread” “sourdough bread” is the use of a “sourdough starter.”
- About seven years ago, give or take, I made the decision that I was going to learn to make sourdough bread
- And as anyone who knows me could have predicted, the first thing I did was buy a book. Actually my Mom bought the book for my birthday, but the book was written by a writer and baker named Samuel Fromartz, it had just been released at the time, and it’s called “In Search of the Perfect Loaf” because that’s what he was searching for, and I was too—in fact I still am—but there’s a lot of good stuff

in that book and one of the best things is when Fromartz describes a method for making a sourdough starter that was written down by Pliny the Elder, way back in the first century—around the time that the gospels were being written—and Pliny says that his recipe will make a particularly active starter—that means one that will produce a lot of bubbles and quickly

- Now I should probably back up and tell you that there really are only four basic ingredients that you need when you make bread—if you're going to make the kind of bread that rises, leavened bread, and not flat unleavened bread—and they are flour, water, salt and yeast—and really the salt is only there for flavour so all you really NEED is flour, water and yeast—and the yeast, of course, is what makes the bread rise—it's what fills the dough with air and makes it expand, makes it grow—and when most people think of yeast they think of that stuff that comes in a packet that you get at the supermarket, and that is what “yeast” means—the stuff in that packet is baker's yeast—and that's an organism, a microscopic living organism called “*saccharomyces cerevisiae*.” But nobody knew what yeast was until about 200 years ago when Louis Pasteur figured it out and then they figured out how to produce *saccharomyces cerevisiae* and package it and preserve it so that now you can buy yeast whenever you want it. In fact, before a few hundred years ago nobody knew about ANY microscopic organisms, because the microscope needed to be invented so that we could SEE them.
- So before Louis Pasteur, for thousands and thousands of years—at least 5000 and probably longer than that--if you wanted to make bread that would rise, you had to grow your own yeast or get some yeast that somebody else had grown,

and the way to grow yeast was to make a sourdough starter. And what a sourdough starter is, is just water and flour that yeast and some other organisms called lactic acid bacteria have grown in—those bacteria can impart a sour taste to the starter and to the bread that’s made from it—that’s where the word “sourdough” comes from—another word for a sourdough starter is “leaven” or “leavening,” so we talk about “leavened” and “unleavened” bread.

- But let’s get back to Pliny the Elder—way back 2000 years ago, he recorded a recipe that was used by bakers in Italy and elsewhere to make leaven—and what they would do is to take flour and water and add some grape skins—and Pliny said that if you want a really good starter you should use grapes at the time of harvest, when they get ripe and full and burst open—and it turns out that Pliny’s method does make a very good, strong starter, but neither Pliny nor anybody else knew WHY until almost 2000 years later. And the reason is that two really good places in nature to find the microscopic organism called “*saccharomyces cerevisiae*”—that’s the yeast you can buy at the supermarket—two places in nature where that organism occurs are in the guts of wasps and on the skins of grapes—especially at the time of harvest when the skins burst open and wasps are attracted to them—during that time of year there are literally hundreds of millions of organisms on each grape. So even though he didn’t know it, what Pliny was doing was literally putting a high concentration of baker’s yeast into his sourdough starter—and that’s why it was so good.
- And people today still make sourdough starter very often by adding grapes or some other fruit or honey to increase their chances of creating a good strong

starter with lots of the yeast that you want in it. And as you bake, you don't use all of your starter, you just use part of it, and you add more flour and water to it and it will last indefinitely. You can take a sourdough starter and divide it in two, feed both of them with flour and water, and then do the same the next day and the next day and the next, and in just a few days you'll have so much starter you won't know what to do with it all—just a little bit can quickly turn into an abundance.

- The same thing happens when you put leaven into your bread—as you knead it, that yeast and those organisms spread from the leaven into the dough until they fill all of it, and as they do their work they produce gas that fills the dough with air and it expands like our lungs do when we inhale, when we inspire—if you're working with good leaven
- Now keep in mind that sourdough starter LOOKS just like flour and water—but there's something invisible that's different about it—there's more going on than meets the eye
- Now one last thing about sourdough starters—starters in different places can have very different organisms in them—so one person's starter can taste very different from another, and another person's starter can be much more active than another, because of the different varieties and amounts of bacteria and yeast—but the thing to remember is that some starters are better than others—maybe because they taste better, maybe because they're more powerful—starters can be good or bad depending on what's in them—some might not even work at all

- Now it would certainly be the case in the area where Jesus lived and ministered, that certain bakers, maybe even certain towns, would have a reputation for better or worse bread—and it's also certain that anyone or anyplace that had a reputation for good bread had that reputation not only because of their baking ability, but also because of the quality of their leaven—their sourdough starter.
- People might say “if you want to bake good bread, get you some of Sarah's leaven,” or “the best bread is made with the leaven of Bethlehem”—and they might also say “watch out for Samuel's leaven—it's terrible”—people would not have gone to the market and just bought some generic “yeast” like we do—and people would know that different starters, different leavens, are better or worse than others.
- And so today I want us to look at two types of sourdough starters—now these are metaphorical sourdough starters, metaphorical leavens—that Jesus refers to in the gospels—
- And the first of these two is the leaven that Jesus mentions when He tells his disciples “Beware the leaven of the Pharisees.”
- Now I was just a child when I first heard that phrase—I remember hearing a preacher, probably my Dad, say it from the pulpit when I was only maybe 5 years old or so, and I remember wondering why the disciples should be afraid of the Pharisees when they had them outnumbered—because I thought “beware the leaven of the Pharisees” was a reference to how many of them there were—the eleven of the Pharisees and the 12 of the disciples—that's one more of the disciples than of the Pharisees

- Now if my Dad, or whoever that preacher was, had used the New Revised Standard version instead of the King James, I wouldn't have been confused—because the NRSV, as you heard Pastor Tasha read for us, uses the word “yeast,” but remember, there was no such thing as yeast that wasn't IN leaven—in a sourdough starter—so really the King James is a bit more accurate in its translation of the Greek *zumé*—the word for leaven or starter
- We find Jesus telling his disciples to watch out for or beware of the *zumé* of the Pharisees in all 3 synoptic gospels—and these passages, Matthew 16: 5-12; Mark 8:14-21; and Luke 12:1-3, are an excellent example of the contrasting styles of each of the synoptic gospel writers.
- Now Matthew and Mark are quite similar, and the basic story they tell is that Jesus and the disciples cross a lake in a boat, and the disciples forget to bring bread—Mark tells us that there's one loaf in the boat, but I have a feeling he's referring to Jesus there, because almost immediately the disciples say they have NO bread—but anyway Jesus tells them to “be careful” and to “watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees.” Mark's version says the Pharisees and Herod, and Matthew's says “the Pharisees and Sadducees” but in both cases they're talking about the religious and political authorities—the powers-that-be.
- Now what happens next in Matthew and Mark's version has GOT to make us feel a little bit better about ourselves, because yet AGAIN—this happens ALL the time in Mark and very often in Matthew—the disciples are pretty clueless about what Jesus is saying to them. We are reminded that the disciples are very human—and quite thick humans actually

- In both Matthew and Mark's narrative the disciples discuss what Jesus says and they come up to the brilliant hermeneutical conclusion that what Jesus MEANS has something to do with the fact that they don't have any bread.
- Now Jesus hears their discussion and basically says "what's wrong with you? Why would you think I was talking about not having any bread? We just fed four thousand people, that just happened right before this-- and before that five thousand---have you forgotten how many baskets of leftovers there were? There were 12 and then there were 7" Have they forgotten that Jesus brings abundance from scarcity?
- In Mark's gospel Jesus asks the disciples how many baskets there were and they answer—and then Jesus says "Do you still not understand?"—and Mark stops there
- Mark doesn't give us an explanation nor does Mark's Jesus explain things because Mark's gospel doesn't have time for a bunch of explanation—he's got a story to tell and he's not going to take the words needed to explain everything to his reader—he's got to get to the crucifixion and the empty tomb—
- He could've told us that the 12 baskets represent the 12 tribes of Israel, which are also reflected by the 12 disciples, and that 7 is the number of completion and wholeness so the 12 and 7 baskets point toward the way that the Kingdom of God is moving out into all the world and fulfilling what began way back in the history of Israel, and that Jesus who is broken for the world, will call his own body the bread that is the medium for God's provision and redemptive action—but Mark lets somebody else do that

- Now Matthew tells us that that the disciples DID finally understand that Jesus wasn't talking about bread or literal leaven but was warning them about the teachings of the Pharisees, and Sadducees—but Matthew doesn't tell us exactly what teachings
- Luke is more specific—Luke reduces this whole narrative to only 3 verses—but his three verses make clear what Mark had left obscure and Matthew had only pointed toward when he reports that Jesus told his disciples to “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”
- Hypocrisy. Saying one thing and doing something else. Acting one way but believing another. Doing the right thing for the wrong reason—trying to look righteous when your heart's not right—like sourdough starter that looks like flour and water but there's something else going on inside—and what's going on inside gets worked out—when it gets mixed into the dough that leaven spreads out and reveals itself—the kind of power and life that's in it becomes obvious—and so Luke tells us in verses 2 and 3 of his 12th chapter that Jesus says “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. 3 What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.”
- I can't help but hear the voice of Johnny Cash singing the words of that old folk song “As sure as God made black and white, What's done in the dark will be brought to the light—you can run on for a long time, run on for a long time, run on for a long time, but sooner or later God'll cut you down”—Johnny Cash got

prophetic every now and then—and Jesus is being prophetic here as well—He is giving his disciples a warning about what happens when you work with the wrong leaven—the wrong starter—it works its way out into every part of what you’re doing

- Luke and Matthew use the word “prosechó” –no not the sparkling Italian wine, but it does sound the same, prosecho—it means “beware.” The word Mark uses just means to see or to perceive, but Luke and Matthew use this word “prosecho” –it’s a warning, a caution—a way of saying that there’s danger ahead—but a warning is useless if it is misunderstood—and we see in Mark and Matthew that the disciples misunderstand what Jesus is saying here at first—they misinterpret His warning not to get mixed up with the hypocrisy of the religious and political authorities or that hypocrisy will spread—it will be revealed—that leaven will fill and flavour the bread you try to bake with it—it won’t stay hidden
- there is a stern warning here from Jesus Himself to the church—one the church would do well not to misunderstand—one the church should have heeded long ago—a call to beware of the hypocrisy of religious and political authorities—because that’s bad leaven—that’s bad news
- But this is not a bad news sermon, this is a good news sermon—this is a gospel sermon, and Jesus not only tells us that the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is like leaven, Jesus also says that the Kingdom of God is like leaven, like sourdough starter—we find Jesus’ words in the 13th chapters of both Matthew, where it’s in verse 33 and Luke, in verse 20 and 21. These verses are almost identical, but since Pastor Tasha read from Luke for us, let’s use that one—now Jesus is

teaching in parables about the Kingdom of God, and says that it is like yeast that a woman took and hid in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’

- The word for yeast is again *zume* here—leaven, sourdough starter—and since we’ve just seen the way that the hypocrisy of the Pharisees works its way out it’s easy to understand that Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is working its way out in history, in the church, in people’s lives—after all, Jesus’ appearance is a testimony that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that the redemption of all creation has arrived, that the Messiah who announces a new age has appeared in the flesh—like leaven working its effects on dough, the Kingdom of God is expanding in space and time—
- Now notice that Jesus says the kingdom of God is like leaven that’s been hidden in flour—some translations say “mixed in” but the Greek says “hidden,” because we just heard Jesus tell his disciples in the previous chapter, chapter 12 that there is nothing hidden that will not be made known—and so Jesus is comparing the way that the Kingdom of God is interacting with history to the way that leaven interacts with dough—it may start out imperceptible, and its power may be invisible, but its effects are undeniable
- But Jesus is saying more here than meets the eye—He is talking about more than the expansion of the kingdom into the future—He is talking about the history of the Kingdom of God as well
- Because Jesus says not only that the Kingdom of God is like leaven, but that it is like leaven hidden by a woman in three measures of flour—now that’s a very

specific amount, and that's a lot of flour—about 50 pounds of flour in fact—to put that in perspective, I put about half a pound of flour into one whole loaf of my banana bread, so this would be enough flour to make 100 of them—so this is an image of abundance—the same kind of abundance of the Kingdom of God that we saw in the feeding of the 5000, and the feeding of the 4000, and in the garden of Eden, but this woman and three measures of flour isn't just a way of illustrating the abundance of the Kingdom, it's a scriptural reference that Jesus' audience would have recognized—one going all the way back to Genesis—where we began this series and to which we return—

- In the 18th chapter of Genesis the childless and elderly Abraham and Sarah are told by 3 visitors that Sarah will bear a son, and that they will be parents not only of a son but of a mighty nation, of multitudes, generations of the people of God—Sarah laughs at the enormity of such a preposterous promise—but when those 3 visitors arrive, Abraham tells Sarah to “make ready quickly 3 measures of flour and knead it and make cakes”—and so Jesus is reaching back to this time when scarcity—even barrenness—turned to abundance—as an example of the way that the Kingdom of God has been working its way through history from Genesis, through generations, through to the one born in Bethlehem, literally the House of Bread, the one who is the Bread of Life, the one who breaks bread and says this is my body, whose body we the church are to be because even today the leaven of the Kingdom of God is transforming and expanding as the hidden becomes made known, and as God grants His abundant provision to each one of us and to all of creation. Just as leaven causes dough to be filled with air, so the

expansion of the Kingdom is demonstrated by the infilling of the Spirit, that *pneuma*, which you'll remember also means the air that fills our lungs—and that is the GOOD NEWS—the good news of the Kingdom—the good news of the gospel—the good news that if we have been crucified with Christ, if we have been broken and kneaded and transformed, then we can hold fast to the promise that we may also one day rise to be with Him.