

Sourdough Spirituality

Matthew 13:31-35

I recently read about a guy, (I'll call him Mark), who has an ooey, gooey, yeasty, sharp-smelling sourdough starter. He got it from his mother, who got it from her mother, who got it from Alaska. It's over 100 years old. Mark says that his sourdough starter is one of his most precious possessions.

Mark's starter requires daily care and feeding, and as a purist, he only feeds it distilled water and flour. "The bread is only as good as the starter you use," he says, and knows just what his starter needs by smelling this gurgling, burbling cauldron of bacteria and fungi that lurks in the back of his refrigerator.

Keeping a starter alive – sometimes for hundreds of years – has been the hallmark and heritage of a simple yet ingenious ingredient – yeast. Before people brought yeast home from the grocery store in those flat little dehydrated packets, the only way to keep yeast around for baking was to keep a live yeast population going all the time.

And sourdough yeast has bacteria in it that can survive for decades, even centuries. Sourdough starters are live cultures of naturally occurring wild yeasts, lacto-bacteria and fungi. Literally millions of lactobacilli live in one little starter.

The yeast rises because of carbon dioxide. You see, the bacteria in the starter produces gas that gives the bread its lightness. It feeds on carbohydrates (like flour or sugar) and produces gas and alcohol (which the old sourdough miners called hooch) as byproducts.

These starters were the living source of the staff of life for centuries. In America's more recent past, the term "sourdough" was also a term used to describe frontier cooks themselves, who zealously guarded their sourdough starter and used it to keep the whole camp supplied with their daily bread.

Since each starter is a unique population, every starter has its own unique smell and taste, rising abilities and power. So distinct are the flavors and textures of each starter that when a really outstanding glop of starter comes along, it is its own form of viscous gold.

Just as Mark has treasured his starter, so did the simple households and small rural villages of first-century Palestine. In the first century, as in America's frontier, if you lost your leaven, you lost your ability to make bread for your family and for your community.

Jesus' parable of the leaven calls attention to that simple but life-sustaining element that was such a necessary part of the people's everyday existence – leaven, yeast, a starter - that added life and lift to their daily bread.

In Jesus' leaven parable, the most remarkable thing is how just a small amount of leaven - hidden or mixed well throughout a large amount of flour (three measures or an "ephah") can transform it completely. Flour - which was dry, inert material – became a living, transmigrating population of organisms that was formed into an entirely different substance – bread.

Jesus' parable of the leaven, combined with the parable of the mustard seed, makes a simple, powerful point. Small inauspicious-looking beginnings, a tiny seed, an insignificant lump of leaven, can generate tremendous transformation. And these changes are not simply cosmetic; they're organic.

Bread is something different than flour. Likewise the leavened community of faith, a community changed by the complete mixing of a spiritual leavening agent, is no longer just a geographic entity. It becomes a genuine incarnation of the kingdom of heaven.

Is your life leavened? Is our community of faith leavened? You see, it's that mixing-in process that's crucial to the flour's transformation, to the rise of a sourdough spirituality that occupies a lifetime of faith and action.

I remember back in my chemistry class that recipes of various compounds would be mixed in exacting proportions in just the right order and required a perfect stirring action. And to achieve that perfect stirring action, we depended on mechanical mixers, stirrers, and swirlers. People can't maintain the consistency and duration needed to achieve the results we desire.

In the same way, faith communities striving to bring sourdough spirituality to spongy, tangy, ripe starters must depend upon something other than their own resources. To bring about the perfect mixing needed to fully leaven the members of the body of Christ, Jesus left behind the Holy Spirit, (you could call her the "leaven of heaven").

The gift of the Holy Spirit allows the kingdom of God to be there, here and still not yet – all at the same time.

So, how do we make our faith community one that invites the Holy Spirit in and welcomes all the activity that follows in the Holy Spirit's wake? We do that by looking at sourdough starters, and learning a few things about a sourdough spirituality:

First - sourdough yeast **expands**. Whatever container you choose to keep it in – plastic or glass or ceramic, you need to keep your sourdough starter in a container that is larger than the starter itself to make sure it has room to expand.

Biblical faith is a Yeast Culture. It's an expansive culture. You can't contain it. You can't predict it. It's organic but it's explosive. The hippies of the sixties almost had it right. They talked about "flower power", but for the church, the leaven of heaven is "Flour Power."

Second, the **daily care and feeding** of a starter is required. You must add equal amounts of warm water and flour to an existing starter to keep it nourished and revitalized. It's called freshening or sweetening.

In the same way, our faith needs to be freshened and sweetened daily. The "Starter Pot," which was the most essential ingredient in every chuck wagon on the trail westward is still a necessary part of every new yeasty population. In every faith community, the starter pot is Scripture. Not the music program, or the fellowship hour, or the kirk night dinner.

It's God's Word - the place where faith rests, springs forth from, and settles back into.

And it would do us good to remember and keep fresh the whole manna experience in the minds of every new generation of faith disciples.

Manna arrived for the Hebrews on the run, fresh every morning. God's supply is fresh every morning. We don't need to hoard. We don't need to scrounge around for it. We only need to trust it will be provided and revel in its freshness.

God's Word, the starter that keeps our faith community going – keeping it fed and nourished – is alive and well and present for as long as the community of faith cares for it and nurtures it, bringing it to life in new and glorious ways for every generation of believers.

Third - the only way to keep the “leaven of heaven” going is to **give it away**. When you give your sourdough starter away, you're giving a little bit of yourself to another.

And now in the hands of another, in air other than in your own home, the starter takes on new life and is filled with indigenous, marauding microbes and spores that ambush the sugars in new and exciting ways.

And when that happens, there starts a bubbly cauldron of bacteria, a colony of microorganisms, that pounce on that sourdough starter, making it unique and original.

Lastly, as we stand in the present looking back at the past, **we must prepare for the future**.

We all yearn for things to go back to how they were before this pandemic. To gather together, shake hands, give hugs, sing hymns, come together for choral music. All of which is our hope; all of which might not happen for a very long time.

Yet while we yearn for things to go back to how they were, we must also prepare for the future. And in order for things to stay the same, they have to change. Because unless we're willing to bake some fresh bread for the world in which we live, we can't conserve the past. We can't go back to how things were.

Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But for Jesus to be the same yesterday, today, and forever, he must become fresh every morning.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a town where the production of grain for consumption was a prevalent occupation. And Bethlehem, or “Bet-lehem”, means “house of bread”. Did you know that?

So I wonder. Is Providence a House of Bread? Is Providence an oven baking fresh bread for the world? There's a whole world out there starving to death, hungry for the bread of life. Will we be a House of Bread for a hungry world?