

Alan Potter
April 3, 2022

The Bread is Rising

Luke 13:18-21

Hi, I'm Alan Potter. Since I joined the church in the middle of a pandemic, there's a good chance that we've never met. My wife and I moved here from the island of Kauai for her to attend Duke Law School and me to attend Duke Divinity School. It took a while but when I finally found United Church, I was thrilled, and I quickly became a member AND immediately found myself on a board, which is apparently how ya'll roll around here. And now I'm an intern working downstairs with your amazing youth, and it's been SO much fun! They are so smart, informed, self-possessed, and I'm always learning from them.

Now, I've worked in youth ministry since I was in my 20s, so, a while, and I think this is a particularly interesting time to be working with youth because it's a particularly dark time to be growing up, or as Wilda Gaffney might say, "a particularly bleak time" to be growing up. Young people today face many of the same anxieties that many of us did growing up. Tragically, issues like racism, homophobia, and war are problems that every generation has experienced in different ways. However, all these things show at least some hope of improvement.

The ecological crisis, however, is a different story. Young people today are growing up in a world that many scientists say is doomed—that it's too late. And even if it's not quite too late, we're simply not doing enough to save the planet and ourselves from the looming destruction.

I mean, imagine growing up in a world where the insects, fish, forests, and animals are all dying, where the earth is crying out, but the adults in charge aren't listening. Imagine growing up without hope. As you can tell, it weighs on me too, in fact, for Lent this year, I seriously considered giving up hope. We all feel the dark clouds looming; it's what draws many of us here every Sunday. We come to church for hope.

And that's what I see in the Luke reading today, hope. I see a hope that starts small and grows into something unexpected. Luke 13:18 begins with Jesus asking, "What is the realm of God like? And to what should I compare it?" Right away, some interesting things are happening here.

First, you might have noticed that Gafney changed the "kingdom of God" to the "realm of God" for similar reasons, I imagine, that Ian often called the kingdom of God the "kin-dom of God" and Walter Brueggemann calls it the "dream of God." When I imagine a kingdom, I see a king, an army, peasants, and royalty. This is not the society that I hope for, so I personally find these alternative images quite helpful.

Second, apparently, the realm of God isn't something Jesus can just describe in the way that you and I might describe Chapel Hill or Kauai with a list of facts. He has to think about something else that it's like. Jesus has to use his imagination. Maybe because the world that Jesus is talking about, the realm of God, doesn't yet fully exist. Maybe the realm of God is "the world as it should be" but has yet to be born. So, what's this world that Jesus imagines like? He says it's like a mustard seed. So, it starts small, really small. It's like a mustard seed that "someone tossed in the garden." It strikes me that it's just "someone" that does the tossing, but even more interesting is the word "tossed."

I don't know about you, but if I'm going to plant a seed in my garden, I don't just toss it in and hope for the best. I get down on my knees, I make a little hole with my finger, I place the seed in the hole, and I carefully cover it with soil. But this seed was just...tossed. It feels kind of careless, doesn't it? It's a little haphazard even, just "tossing" and hoping it will find its way under the soil and grow. But grow it does. The tiny mustard seed grows into a tree large enough that birds come and make nests in it!

So, according to Jesus, the realm of God is like a tiny seed tossed somewhat haphazardly into a garden that grows into something surprisingly large, a tree that becomes housing for "the birds of the air." Jesus' audience might have remembered Jesus saying, "Look at the birds of the air, God takes care of them, aren't you much more valuable than birds? Is Jesus saying the realm of God is a world where everyone is housed? Even the birds of the air?"

"Speaking again Jesus said, "To what should I compare the realm of God?" Digging back into his imagination, Jesus says, "It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." Again, Jesus describes the realm of God as beginning with something very small. This time it's yeast. But unlike the seed that "someone tossed" into the garden sort of haphazardly, this time the yeast is "kneaded" into the dough by a "woman." This picture of the realm of God feels more... personal, more hands-on, not as careless, but more careful.

But like in the previous parable, something unexpected happens. Did you notice how much flour the woman used? Three measures. Now, to me, that sounds like three cups, but it turns out that three measures of

flour would make enough bread to feed about 150 people. It's a LOT of flour! The tiny mustard seed grew into a tree that provides housing for even the birds, and the tiny yeast is kneaded into the dough to provide enough food for 150 people. So, what's Jesus getting at? What's the realm of God, the dream of God like?

Apparently, it's like something very small that grows into something surprisingly large that provides food and shelter for everyone. It sounds like hope. I love that Jesus describes the realm of God as a tiny bit of hope because that's all I've got most days. As I said, these are dark times, and in my experience, no one feels that looming darkness quite as acutely as our youth. I wish you could be a fly on the wall and see what goes on downstairs in Confirmation and Youth Group because it's beautiful, it's inspiring, and it gives me hope.

These parables actually remind me a bit of how we do confirmation. In the beginning, we're intentionally a bit careless. We sort of "toss" the seeds. It's a little hands-off because we want to hear what they believe. In fact, on the first day of confirmation, we rolled out a big sheet of butcher paper onto the floor, invited them to write on it everything that they've been told to believe, then we had them tear it up, put the torn pieces in a metal trash can and... we set them on fire. Haphazard with an emphasis on hazard, some would say, but it was fun, and it made the point.

We wanted to listen carefully to what they believed before we said a word about what we believe. After spending a few weeks exploring what they believe and why, our time together started to look more like the second parable. It became less hands-off and more hands-on as Ian, Kathryn, and I began to knead some Scripture, church history, and

different theological perspectives into the conversation to give them more to work with when thinking about their faith. And I'm SO excited for you all to experience what has been growing downstairs in the hearts and minds of our youth in a few weeks on Confirmation Sunday.

Working with youth and experiencing their anger and frustration with "the world as it is" and their hope and determination to create "the world as it should be," reminds me of the words of civil-rights-lawyer, Valarie Kaur who asked, "what if the darkness of this moment is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb?" What if there is a new realm, a new way of living with the planet and each other- that is getting ready to be born? What if the seeds and the yeast that will transform "the world as it is" into "the world as it should be" are growing right beneath our feet in the Sunday school classrooms and the youth rooms of United Church?

Every day there seems to be a new way to instantly receive all the bad news about what's happening in our world, and it's easier than ever to get overwhelmed and give up hope. But ours is a faith where hope rises from unlikely places. Even when it seems that all is lost, hope can rise, and "a tomb of death" can become "a womb of life," giving birth to the realm of God, giving birth to hope. I want to leave you with the words of another group of young people, the New York Young Lords, who used to chant in the streets, "God is not dead. God is bread and the bread is rising!" Amen?