

Leaven and Levity

Matthew 13:33

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Church, I need to start with a confession. I've been in a bit of a mood this week.

I don't know about you, but I have hit my emotional threshold with this quarantine. I'm a pastor, for goodness sake! My job is people. What am I supposed to do when I can't be with people?

This thing is, I believe human relationship is one of the greatest natural resources we have. As I see it, love and connection are the things that matter most in this world. They are what give life meaning.

And that's the problem with this pandemic.

Usually when we hit a crisis — whether it's in the family, in the community, or at the national level — our human relationships are *strengthened*. We come together in moments of crisis. Family fly in from all over. We gather around dinner tables more eagerly. We worship together more earnestly. We *lean* on each other.

But that's what makes this crisis so different. Instead of *leaning on* each other, we're being asked to *push away* from one another. Social distancing requires physical separation, and, in some circumstances, complete isolation. It's putting stress on the very relational connections upon which we depend for our emotional wellbeing. And, I suspect that for many of us it is resulting in fear, loneliness, and uncertainty.

Now — I want to be clear. I don't want you to hear me wrong this morning. Quarantine is the right decision. Social distancing is the right practice. I wear a mask when I'm in public and I change my clothes and wash my hands for 20 seconds the moment I walk in the door when I come home. In the front door, pants on the floor has a totally different meaning these days. I am not condemning the practices we've adopted. They are necessary and appropriate.

But I am feeling their effect at a deep, emotional level. So, I've been in some kind of mood.

It hit me last week.

I wouldn't call it depression. It's not quite that severe. But some of the symptoms are similar. I'm feeling a sense of malaise, of apathy, of lethargy. I'm listless, but I can't seem to muster up the energy to care about anything. I feel like I'm in a *funk*.

What I know is that my heart is bent down under the weight of it all.

Maybe you know what I'm talking about, too.

The ancient monastics of the Christian faith had a word for this affliction. They called it *acedia*. It's a Greek word that literally means, "not caring" or "without care" as in without the ability to care — *unable to care*.

Leaning on the writings of the fourth century monk, Evagrius, Kathleen Norris talks about *acedia* as "restlessness and boredom and sorrow and sadness all combined into one nasty little feeling."

Do you know what's most interesting about this little word?

The word, *acedia*, was in vogue in the middle ages during the "black plague" epidemic.

Then it fell out of favor to the point that in the 1930s, the Oxford English Dictionary marked it as obsolete and removed it from their dictionaries. But it made an unexpected resurgence. Can you guess when?

Acedia was back in the Oxford English Dictionary just after World War II.

"Why did we need this word again?" Most likely, says Norris, [it was due to] the *postwar mood*. "The violence had been so horrible all over the world. The Holocaust in Europe and the atomic bomb in Japan. And in America . . . we were supposed to forget about all of our troubles by *buying a dishwasher*," a suit, a television, a shiny new car.

As if a little "retail therapy" can unbend heavy hearts...

I don't know about you, but I suspect that what I'm feeling this week is *acedia* — and I'm in need of something sturdier than filling my shopping cart on Amazon.

There's a joke about a man who became fed up with humanity and decided to spend the rest of his life in a monastery. The abbot warned him that he would have to take a vow of silence and live a life of obedience.

The man replied, "No problem. I'm sick of talking, and I'm sick of people talking at me."

Ten years went by, and the abbot called for the man. He told him that he was a model monk and they were very happy with him. As per tradition he was allowed to say two words. So he nodded and said, "Food cold."

The abbot sent him on his way.

Ten years later, he was brought before the abbot again and told how pleased they were with his performance, and he was again allowed two more words. The man said, "Bed hard."

The abbot sent him back to work.

Again another ten years went by and the abbot sent for the man, who was allowed another two words. The man nodded and said, "I quit."

The abbot replied in a disgusted tone, "Doesn't surprise me. You've done nothing but complain since you got here."

That's what the acedia looks like. It looks like giving up on humanity, and then giving up on giving up on humanity!

But do you see what we did there?

We were able to lift the weight of acedia for a moment by telling a silly joke.

You see, there is another word that is as powerful at *lifting up* as acedia is at *pulling down*. That word is *levity*.

Levity literally means "light-heartedness." It's not always easy to describe, but we somehow know it when we've been in its presence.

Dave Barry jokes that "no matter what happens, somebody will find a way to take it too seriously."

That is levity. It is somehow finding a way to joke about otherwise serious situations — not to undermine the seriousness of the situation or to deny its reality — but to help our souls endure it. Levity has a way of lifting up our bent down hearts.

Anne Lamott once wrote that "laughter is carbonated holiness."

I suspect that's why, right now in the midst of my own feeling of acedia, I crave comedy, I crave laughter, because when I laugh I feel close to God.

Acedia. Levity.

Surely by this point, you're wondering what in the world any of this has to do with that one-line parable Jesus taught about the kingdom of God being like yeast that woman took and worked into three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Matt. 13:33).

Jesus believed in the power of words. He believed that words don't just describe things, but actually make things happen; that words aren't merely descriptive, but *evocative* — *creative* even.

This was especially true of his parables. Jesus' parables don't *describe* the kingdom of God, so much as they actually *evoke* some element of God's in-breaking reign and reality in our lives.

The problem — the issue — in Jesus' day, you see, was that the people were having doubts about the presence of the kingdom that Jesus said was already here.

They were looking around at the world that by-and-large looked exactly as it had before he ever showed up on the scene. The violent Roman Empire was still in power over Israel. King Herod was a corrupt puppet of the Roman government, serving his own interests over that of the people. Everywhere you looked, people were poor, hungry, sick, broken, listless. It was enough to want to give up on humanity.

Even with Jesus on the scene, what people thought ought to be happening was not happening — and they began to doubt. Their hearts began to bend down under the weight of their reality.

So Jesus told them a couple of jokes:

“Friends, friends: why are you so disheartened? Why do you doubt?

Don't you know that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field? It's the smallest of the seeds, but, *man*, can that thing grow!

Don't you know that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and worked through a triple batch of dough until *all* of it was leavened?”

To be fair, his jokes don't seem all that funny to us. But that's because we aren't first century Jews. The thing is, neither mustard nor yeast were viewed in all that positive of a light in Jesus' day and time.

Mustard, frankly, was a weed, dreaded by farmers the way today's gardeners dread kudzu, crabgrass, or bindweed. It starts out small, but before long takes over your whole field — so the idea of someone sowing mustard on their farm on purpose was absurd!

And leaven was literally fermented dough — *spoiled* dough! It was a contaminant, a pollutant, an impurity. There's a reason Jewish folk are known for eating *unleavened* bread.

In fact, Philo, and early Jewish writer once suggested leavened and unleavened bread were symbols of spiritual states. Leavened bread, which rises, was “being haughty and swollen with arrogance,” while unleavened bread, which stays low, was “being unchangeable and prudent.”

And, in the New Testament, yeast almost always represents the pernicious nature of sin!

So, why would Jesus compare the kingdom of heaven to a weed or a pollutant?

Maybe he told these parables “tongue-in-cheek.” Maybe he told them with a wink and a wry smile on his face. Maybe he told them almost like a good joke — because he knew that his people needed a little *levity* and a little *hope*.

The kingdom of heaven doesn’t come in the usual way of kings — with parades and trumpets and fanfare. It comes, he says, like a weed that you just can’t weed out! It comes, he says, like yeast worked into a huge batch of dough. You can’t undo that! There is no way to separate yeast from dough. And there is no way to separate Christ from you (Romans 8:39).

Levity is a small, but powerful weapon against the weight of the world. Because it can simultaneously lift our spirits and remind us of deep truths. It can’t necessarily solve the world’s problems, but it can give us the power to endure them. It can give us *hope*.

I recently learned of someone whose life stands as a witness of hope in the midst of a difficulty. His name was Martin Rinkhart.

“Rinkhart was a gifted musician at several prominent churches in Saxony, Germany, before turning to the pastorate. He then served as pastor the people of Eilenburg for thirty years before his death — years that almost exactly overlapped with the dreadful Thirty Years’ War.

Because it was a walled city, refugees from the surrounding countryside, besieged by invaders of the Swedish military, poured into Eilenburg. It didn’t take long for famine and pestilence to set in. In 1637 alone, 8,000 people in Eilenberg died of disease — including other clergy, most of the town council, and Rinkhart’s own wife.

Martin Rinkhart was left to minister to the entire city, sometimes preaching at burial services for as many as 200 dead in one week...

In the depths of the communal suffering that enveloped him, Rinkart wrote a hymn with words now familiar to many of us:

“Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things has done,
in whom this world rejoices.”

(Peter Marty, “The resource of relationship,” *The Christian Century*, April 8, 2020.)

Now, how is that possible? How could Rinkhart write words of gratitude when the world was falling into broken pieces all around him? How could he write words of praise in the face of disease and death?

I think it’s because he got the punchline to the joke.

He got that the kingdom of heaven cannot be removed from us any more than yeast can be strained from dough.

It isn't dependent on what's happening outside of us. It's dependent solely on *Who* is with us.

And *that* One is like a weed that you just can't weed out; *that* One is like leaven mixed through the whole batch of dough.

Good luck trying to get rid of *that* One.

Amen.