

How Much Proof Do You Need?

Today's Gospel passage presents what may seem like a relatively insignificant exchange between Jesus and the disciples. Jesus has just spent three days teaching and healing along the Sea of Galilee. He has miraculously fed a crowd of thousands for the second time. He has also gotten into yet another spat with the religious authorities – both Pharisees and Sadducees this time – over his refusal to give them a “sign” on command. Now, back in their boat, the disciples realize that they forgot to bring bread for the return trip. When Jesus tells them to “Watch out, and beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” the disciples misunderstand, and decide that Jesus must be scolding them for forgetting to bring his lunch. A smidge exasperated, Jesus reminds them that they've recently seen him pull vast amounts of food out of thin air on two separate occasions and asks, “how could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!” Only then do the disciples realize that Jesus is warning them about listening too closely to the teachings of the religious establishment.

We might be forgiven for seeing this episode as a bit redundant. The disciples almost always misunderstand Jesus at first. They repeatedly try to understand his teachings from a secular rather than spiritual perspective. They frequently worry too much about upsetting the religious authorities. What, if anything, can this passage teach us that we don't already know?

In fairness to the disciples, Jesus's warning isn't entirely clear. This conversation takes place just before Jesus asks the disciples who he is, and only Peter comes up with the right answer. If he's concerned that the rest of them don't yet understand that he's the Messiah, Jesus could say something like, “you're too much in the habit of deferring to the authority of the Pharisees and Sadducees – don't let them poison you against me.” Instead, he warns them about

yeast. The disciples have some reason to be confused. We, too, need to talk a little about yeast to understand Jesus's point.

Yeast is a living, single-celled microscopic fungus that originated hundreds of millions of years ago. To feed and grow, yeast converts sugar and starch into carbon dioxide and alcohol through fermentation. It's the carbon dioxide produced in fermentation that causes bread to rise. There are over five hundred known varieties of yeast, and it grows naturally all over the world. 21st century bakers buy commercially processed yeast in neat little packets and jars, but people have been using natural yeast to make bread, beer, and wine since long before Jesus was born.

Yeast, or leaven as Scripture sometimes calls it, gets a mixed rap in the Bible. Natural yeast takes a long time to rise. That's why Adonai told the Hebrews to eat their bread unleavened before they hurried to escape from Pharaoh and unleavened matzoh is still eaten to honor the Passover. If you've ever made sourdough bread from scratch, you know that natural leaven can be unreliable and spoils easily, which may be why only unleavened bread was offered to Adonai and eaten by the priests in the tabernacle. Yeast is powerful stuff. It only takes a quarter ounce of yeast to raise a batch of bread dough containing forty or more ounces of flour. That's why Jesus compares the Kingdom of Heaven to yeast that a woman stirred into sixty pounds of flour until it was all leavened. A little yeast can transform an enormous batch of dough.

So, when Jesus likens the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees to yeast, he's talking about how huge doubts can arise out of seemingly small, innocuous questions. There were hundreds of eyewitnesses to Jesus's healing miracles, thousands of people who ate the fish and bread he multiplied on two separate occasions. No one could truthfully deny that Jesus was very, very special. The Pharisees and Sadducees didn't need any more proof to know that. Their insistence that Jesus had to provide them with what they, in their infinite wisdom and authority,

would consider a satisfactory “sign” was just a way to plant seeds of doubt in the minds of his followers. Jesus knew that such doubt could grow, like yeast in bread dough, until his disciples’ faith in him was seriously compromised.

I have a particular aversion to preachers who insist that faith is only valid if it never admits to doubt. We live in a complicated world where tragedies abound and hope can be hard to find. We Episcopalians are blessed that our tradition doesn’t require us to check our brains at the sanctuary door. But Jesus was right to warn us against the kind of insidious teachings that erode our trust in him and our joy in the life God has so generously given us. We have eyes and intelligence, and I believe we’re called to use both to see everything around us, the good as well as the bad, and to recognize when we’re being manipulated by powerful cynics who want to retain their control.

The environmental catastrophes that have burst into our collective awareness this summer have been a worldwide wake-up call. Scientists have warned us for decades that our patterns of consumption and pollution were depleting the world’s resources and poisoning God’s Creation. But the people who have grown rich off of our careless consumerism have done a masterful job of downplaying the damage. Small suggestions – eco-science is unreliable, the data is overstated, environmentalists are politically biased, the solutions they’ve proposed are too expensive or unworkable – have been dropped into our minds and allowed to develop, like yeast, into a doughy mess of complacency and confusion. Properly used, yeast produces nourishing bread and beautiful wine. But yeast can also cause infection if it’s left to grow where it doesn’t belong.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were never going to be satisfied by any of Jesus’s miracles because they didn’t want to admit that he was the Messiah. No matter what he did to convince them, they were always going to demand more proof. Those who benefit from environmental

degradation don't want to acknowledge that it's happening, because then we'd have to make changes that would cost them money and prestige. There's still plenty of hope if we're willing to look honestly at the condition of the world and take action to make things better. Like the disciples, we have to trust in what we know to be true and not allow ourselves to be manipulated into uncertainty and inaction by people who will never admit there's a problem no matter how much proof confronts them.

Our passage from Ezekiel promises that we won't be alone in this effort. The great prophet wrote at a time when the Israelites had been defeated by a foreign army and exiled into captivity in Babylon, leaving Jerusalem and their sacred Temple in ruins. At first, Ezekiel blamed the Hebrew people's idolatry and faithlessness for bringing Adonai's wrath down upon them. But, as we see in today's reading, Adonai relented, promising to bring his chosen people back to the promised land that he would heal and restore for them. If we are humble enough to admit that we've abused Creation and step out in faith to heal our wounded planet, I believe that God will do the same for us.

As Christians, we are surrounded by proof both that God loves us and that we've made an ungodly mess of the world he created. If Jesus were preaching today, I believe he would say far more eloquently than I have that we need to beware the yeast of political inaction and corporate lies. Our faith demands that we trust in God and care for his Creation. The proof, as they say, is out there. Amen.