

**Parable of the Leaven**  
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Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church  
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Genesis 18:1-16; Matthew 13:33

## **I. Be Extravagant**

With all the turmoil, uncertainty, and unrest in our world – not to mention the ongoing effects of two catastrophic hurricanes – many of us are feeling a bit worn out as we move into Thanksgiving Week. You may feel both weary and wary as you anticipate gathering with in-laws or other relatives whose social, political, or religious views differ from yours. Uncork a bottle of wine, and Uncle Fred becomes Fundamentalist Fred, Aunt Karen turns into Conspiracy Theorist Karen and Cousin Jimmy? Let's not even go there ...

Happy holidays!

What if we could replace bickering and badgering with joy and generosity; arrogance and arguments with humility and humor?

While Jesus is known for turning water into wine, his Parable of the Leaven might just turn your impending Thanksgiving Family Feud into an actual Thanksgiving *Holy Day*.

In Matthew's Gospel, this parable follows the Parable of the Mustard Seed, which I preached on last week. It is known as the shortest of Jesus's parables:

*"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman  
took and mixed in with three measures of flour  
until all of it was leavened."*

Because this parable is so short, we tend to think its meaning is simple. Like the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus tells us that experiencing the Realm of Heaven while still on Earth starts with something small and grows exponentially. That's all well and good. But how does this teaching help us at the Thanksgiving table? We already know how something small, like a family disagreement, can escalate into a family fight. Yet a contentious gathering is rarely transformed by a small dose of anything – be it kindness, humor, or a quick prayer for peace before dinner.

As with most of Jesus's teachings, if the message seems clear and easy, we're likely missing something important. To fully grasp the depth of Jesus's teaching, it helps to understand the significance of the 'three measures of flour.' This detail might seem trivial to us, but to Jesus's audience, it would immediately call to mind a story deeply embedded in their cultural and spiritual memory – the story of Abraham and Sarah and the 'three measures' of flour she uses to make bread for three angels who visit them.

Now, in the Bible, angels don't appear as glowing, winged figures. Instead, they look like regular people, with their true nature revealed only when delivering a divine message. Abraham and Sarah have no reason to believe these visitors are anything more than ordinary travelers, at least at first, so they treat them according to the customs of their time by offering food, drink, and lodging.

In the ancient Near East, this custom was important, as long-distance travel was dangerous. There were no hotels, supermarkets, or convenience stores. Running out of food or water could quickly lead to starvation or death. Hospitality, therefore, was not merely polite – it was a moral obligation.

Yet, even though Abraham and Sarah fulfill their obligation toward these visitors, they go far above and beyond the requirement. Abraham has a fattened calf slaughtered – about 200 pounds of meat! Sarah works three measures of flour into bread. In biblical times, "three measures" was the equivalent of 50 pounds of flour – enough to make about 50 loaves! In other words, they prepare so much food that, even if their visitors were sent off the next day with a mountain of doggie bags, there still would have been too much for them to consume on their own.

The only reasonable explanation is that Abraham and Sarah also invited friends and neighbors to join the feast. This was common practice, as travelers were often a source of news, and the whole community would want to hear their stories.

Now imagine you're one of those travelers. You're no angel – you're just you. How would you feel if strangers not only offered you food and lodging but treated you like royalty, throwing a feast in your honor? When your journey ended, wouldn't you recount this incredible experience to everyone you knew? Abraham and Sarah's extravagant hospitality would become part of your most cherished travel memories.

Jesus's point in this parable is not that "a little goes a long way." Instead, *a lot goes a long way*. Extravagant generosity leaves an indelible impression, one that often spreads far and wide.

Let's take this a step further. Imagine traveling to a country you've heard only negative things about and meeting a couple like Abraham and Sarah, who extend the same level of hospitality that they showed the angels. They treat you as if you're the President of the United States; they prepare a great feast; you stay up half the night partying and sharing stories and pictures of your children and grandchildren with their friends and neighbors; then you sink into the soundest sleep you've had in years on a bed lovingly prepared for you. Would you leave this country feeling the same as when you entered it? If your friends spoke negatively of this country, would you confirm their prejudices or argue, at the very least, that "they're not all like that"?

Jesus understood that his followers would face suspicion and hostility, whether from Jewish or pagan communities. The Parable of the Leaven offers them a strategy: don't

just show hospitality toward others – show *extravagant* hospitality. Be so generous it takes people’s breath away. Introduce them to your friends. A little joy and generosity may go a little way, but extravagant amounts change lives – and public opinion.

Just as Abraham and Sarah transformed the lives of their visitors through radical hospitality, we, too, are invited to bring this spirit into our everyday interactions. This Thanksgiving, as you gather with family and friends, how might you extend generosity – not just to meet obligations but to create lasting joy and connection, even among those who challenge your patience or beliefs?

## **II. When Heaven Comes to Earth**

Imagine applying Jesus’s parable to your holiday gathering, yet despite your best efforts, it doesn’t work. After all, Jesus never promised success on the first attempt or guaranteed results every time. What then?

For centuries, Jewish tradition has offered an answer. While Jesus’s audience would surely have thought of Abraham and Sarah when hearing the Parable of the Leaven, they likely also thought of their weekly Sabbath observance. Beginning at sundown on Friday and ending at dusk the next day, the Sabbath is a day of rest, marked by a celebratory meal prepared in advance so no one has to work. At the heart of this meal is bread – traditionally *challah* bread – which was always made by a woman in ancient times. Thus, Jesus’s story about a woman working leaven into dough would have naturally evoked the Sabbath for his listeners.

The Sabbath is meant to echo God’s resting on the seventh day of Creation. It’s not just a day off work but an opportunity to recreate heaven on earth. A rabbi friend once described it as a day to “pray, play, and practice procreation,” calling it the “trifecta of goodness.” For centuries, this tradition has provided resilience and joy, helping the Jewish people weather unimaginable challenges.

Now imagine what would happen if you added Abraham-and-Sarah-level hospitality to this weekly practice – not with respect to the quantity of food, but the quality of generosity. This combination is precisely what a group of students at the New College of Florida offered in 2010, when a young man named Derek Black arrived on campus.

Derek was a quiet, polite, and unassuming student. No one at New College knew that he was deeply entrenched in white nationalist ideology – at least at first. His father, Don Black, founded the white supremacist website Stormfront, and his godfather was David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard. Derek was born into the movement and by age 10 had created a children’s section on Stormfront. By the time he entered college, he was hosting a white nationalist radio show with a substantial following.

Derek’s background eventually came to light, prompting widespread condemnation on campus. Amid this backlash, an Orthodox Jewish student named Matthew Stevenson

did something extraordinary. Instead of ostracizing Derek, Matthew invited him to his weekly Shabbat dinners.

Surprisingly, Derek accepted.

These dinners became a transformative experience for Derek. Each week, he encountered a diverse group of students who engaged him in open, respectful dialogue. The warmth, acceptance, and generosity he experienced stood in stark contrast to the hostility he had been taught to expect from those outside his ideological circle. Over time, these interactions began to erode his deeply ingrained beliefs.

Through his continued attendance at these Shabbat gatherings and the friendships he formed there, Derek began to recognize the profound flaws and harms of the white nationalist ideology he had embraced. By 2013, he publicly renounced his views in a heartfelt statement to the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Last May, Derek published his memoir, *The Klansman's Son: My Journey from White Nationalism to Anti-Racism*. His story stands as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of extravagant hospitality.

Derek Black's story reminds us that genuine hospitality and persistent kindness can challenge even the deepest divisions. By extending radical generosity, Matthew Stevenson and his friends didn't just confront Derek's beliefs – they invited him into a space of connection and grace, where transformation could begin.

This Thanksgiving, the Parable of the Leaven invites us to consider how we might treat not just the angels in our midst with extravagant hospitality but those who seem more like demons, at least in our perception. Don't demons need more love than the angels, anyway? As Martin Luther King famously observed, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." Sometimes, the darkness we need most to drive out through acts of generosity toward those who make us uncomfortable is our own.

Who would have thought that Jesus's shortest parable, the Parable of the Leaven, may also be one of his most profound?