

Proper 12 Sermon
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Dennis and I don't get cable tv at home, but we do get Netflix. So every once in a while, he and I will find a series on Netflix that we can watch together when we want to unwind. Even though neither of us is an especially talented cook, we both tend to like cooking shows. We've watched Chopped, Good Eats, Iron Chef—for some reason we really enjoy watching other people make things that we probably lack the skill to ever make ourselves. So when we heard of a new show on Netflix called "Cooked" we figured that would be right up our alley. It's been out for a while, but we finally started watching it a few weeks ago. As it turns out, even though the show is called cooked, it's not a traditional cooking show. It's more like a documentary series by a guy named Michael Pollan, who is probably most famous for writing a book called the Omnivore's Dilemma, which I admittedly have never read. In the series "Cooked", Pollan talks about some basic elements involved in cooking across cultures, and the history of, and meaning behind, those practices.

In one episode he talked a lot about bread. Pollan cited someone who pointed out that if we were to eat all of the ingredients that make up bread, we could survive off just that for a couple of months. However, once we combine those ingredients and cook them to make bread, we could survive by eating just bread indefinitely. Pollan goes on to explain how the chemical reactions in bread, especially those involving yeast, change the ingredients in a way that makes bread more delicious and more nutritious than the ingredients that make it up. He pointed out that in ancient times, before people knew what yeast was and how it worked, bread was often viewed as something sacred or magical, which makes sense when you understand how ancient people made bread. Because they didn't know anything about yeast, when they made bread they simply put all of the ingredients in a bowl and left it in the open air for a while. Yeast and bacteria in the air would then enter this doughy mixture, and begin the process of fermentation, causing the dough to rise. We understand how this all happens, but for these ancient people, this process must have seemed extraordinary. In their eyes, they would put these ingredients in a bowl, and suddenly they would begin to bubble and grow spontaneously. And this spontaneous and seemingly miraculous event would transform their ingredients into something nutritious, something which could sustain them and their families—something life-giving.

When we consider the perspectives those who lived in Jesus' time likely had, his words take on new meaning. When Jesus tells the crowds, "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" that would have had a deeper meaning to those who heard it. The kingdom of heaven is like a small, unobtrusive, mysterious substance like yeast, that for some reason we don't understand transforms the things that it comes into contact with, creating something wonderful and life-giving—something that many people could not survive without. This part of the parable sounds especially powerful and reassuring when we view it in this light. The kingdom of heaven may seem confusing or unexplainable to us in this life, as ancient peoples would have found yeast confusing or unexplainable, but, like yeast, the effect that the kingdom would have on anything it came into contact with would be transformed and imbued with new life.

Yet, like last week, we are confronted with a different parable that seems more frightening—of the kingdom of heaven being compared to a net, capturing fish that are then sorted based on evil verses righteousness, with the evil being destroyed. These kinds of words can frighten us, and preoccupy us with worry about whether we will be counted among the fish that will be thrown in the furnace of fire. Last week we talked about Paul's teachings on the afterlife, and the interpretation of Christ's parable meaning that all parts of us that are inclined towards evil, towards sin, being destroyed on judgment day, leaving behind only the good in us, created in the image of God, to dwell with God forever in the

world to come. And if we still had any lingering doubt or concern, the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans that we heard today can help put our troubles to rest.

Paul reminds us first of the gift of the Spirit, and how the Spirit aids us and intercedes for us according to the will of God. He assures us that "all things work together for good for those who love God." No matter what happens to us in this life, in the life of the world to come all things will be set right by God. "If [then] God is for us, who is against us?" "Whom shall we fear?" If Christ has died for us, and intercedes for us, of what do we need to be afraid? According to Paul, nothing. Because "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is a fundamental truth of Christianity—that God, who created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, loves his creation, and loves us, and through Christ's sacrifice on the cross has redeemed us so that sin and death may no longer have dominion over us. And there is no power on earth or in heaven that can separate us from God or nullify that promise. God's love for us cannot be broken.

This can be difficult for us to remember, however, in the midst of the difficulties of this world. Paul tells us that hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword cannot separate us from the love of Christ. And yet all of these things may make us feel as if Christ's love is far off or distant. It is during these times, especially, that we must look to the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven which "is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." The kingdom of heaven which may seem mysterious and confusing, but which creates a miraculous transformation among all it touches, causing growth in that which seems stagnant—giving life to that which seems lifeless.

Through Christ's sacrifice we have become inheritors of this kingdom, and though we may become impatient waiting for its coming, or we may lose sight of it due to the cares of this world, that doesn't make that inheritance any less real—and it certainly does not drive the love of God any further from us. Though we may be tempted to become preoccupied with the fear of whether we will be thrown into the furnace of fire, that does not make Christ's promise of salvation any less effective. Though we fret and worry, we must strive to put aside our fear, and embrace the truths that all Christians can take solace in. Christ has saved us from the powers of sin and death. Through Christ we are inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. And nothing, nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.