

## **"Patience, The Yeast of Grace"**

Rev. Bill Eichhorn

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*Bill and Fiona (and a sourdough loaf)*

### **Readings**

Matthew 13:33

from Eugene Peterson

Another story. "God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread – and waits while the dough rises."

At the Cancer Clinic

Ted Kooser

She is being helped toward the open door  
that leads to the examining rooms  
by two young women I take to be her sisters.  
Each bends to the weight of an arm  
and steps with the straight, tough bearing  
of courage. At what must seem to be  
a great distance, a nurse holds the door,  
smiling and calling encouragement.  
How patient she is in the crisp white sails  
of her clothes. The sick woman  
peers from under her funny knit cap  
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward  
and take its turn under her weight.  
There is no restlessness or impatience  
or anger anywhere in sight. Grace  
fills the clean mold of this moment  
and all the shuffling magazines grow still.

I want to introduce you to Fiona, my sourdough starter. She is nearly four years old and is my essential partner in baking sourdough bread like this loaf baked yesterday. Fiona is a simple gal. Just flour and water. No sugar or honey or baker's yeast. Flour and water. I feed her every morning with a bit of water, some flour and a small amount of the starter she made the day before. When I am going to bake, I take some of the starter, mix it with water and flour to make a dough. I also take the starter left over and add some flour and water to refresh Fiona.

This tape on the jar marks her height when I fed her this morning at 6:00 a.m. As you can see, she has risen this much since then, and it will take another hour or so before she would be ready to make more bread. At that point, I would add some of her to flour, water, and salt, and for four hours she would be busy turning the lump of dough into a silky, pliable dough with lots of airy bubbles. Fiona accomplishes this transformation with lactobacili bacteria and wild yeast that comes in the flour and exists in the kitchen and on the baker's hands. The baker assists Fiona by turning the dough a few times every half hour.

After the dough is shaped into loaves, they go into the refrigerator overnight for a slow proofing that slows down the fermentation process and gives the lactic acid bacteria time to create that unique sourdough flavor and texture. This process I use to bake sourdough bread at home was developed by Chad Robertson of Tartine Bakery and takes about twenty-one hours from start to finish, which is much longer than when I used to bake bread with the dry commercial yeast. It is bread baking that teaches patience. That is why, when Jesus wanted to teach his disciples about patience, he used the parable of yeast wisdom.

Jesus and the disciples had been at it for several months. Jesus is an itinerate Jewish teacher with a small band of followers, going from village to village teaching, healing, and attempting to organize common folk around a vision of peace and justice he called "The Kingdom of God." The initial enthusiasm of the disciples was waning as people were more concerned about bread on the table and getting the boot of the Roman Empire off their beleaguered necks. They muttered among themselves: How long will it be until the kingdom he talks about arrives? Why aren't more people joining up to help us? Patience was wearing thin. Jesus reminds them that he doesn't have a timetable for the realization of his vision for the human community. He notices a woman preparing to make bread: how she mixes the barley flour with water, a dash of salt, and a small piece of dough from yesterday's baking, which contains natural yeast. "Look," Jesus says, pointing to the woman. "God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread – and waits while the dough rises." What he wants them to get is the waiting part. He wants them to see that their small efforts will grow a community, but it will take time, maybe a long time. It will take keeping on keeping on with the hard work of building a just and peaceful society and world. That's not what they want to hear.

Sometimes it is not what we want to hear. We want our congregation to grow, to reflect more diversity and to include younger generations. We have worked at that here at CCC for a long time, yet today we hover around the minimum number of members to be a viable congregation. We want to be a vital, growing congregation, active in helping to create what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the Beloved Community, here and out there; but that will take time, my friends. It will take our being patient, and it will take our continued commitment of time, money, and creativity. It will take our working alongside David, Tripp, Joanne, Scott, and the Board. It will take time. By being patient, we give grace the time it needs to rise among us.

The poignant poem by Ted Kooser shows us how patience works to enable grace. How it creates space in the world and in our daily lives for grace, for the Spirit to transform fear into courage, despair into hope. As you listen again to the poem, notice how patience is the yeast of grace, which is another way of saying patience is the yeast of the Spirit. "At the Cancer Clinic" by Ted Kooser:

She is being helped toward the open door  
that leads to the examining rooms  
by two young women I take to be her sisters.  
Each bends to the weight of an arm  
and steps with the straight, tough bearing  
of courage. At what must seem to be  
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The patience of that incredibly busy nurse holding the door open for the cancer patient heading for her chemo infusion cleanses a waiting room by scrubbing the fear from the room so that grace can fill "the clean mold of the moment." The compassionate patience of the two sisters accompanying their sister disinfects the room of despair and anger. "There is no restlessness or impatience or anger anywhere in sight." That's the power of patience. It creates a space for grace, for the Spirit, to bring something beautiful, healing, forgiving, empowering into our lives, into the world. Patience ignites the Spirit to renew us, to give us the strength to endure the hurts and losses we all experience in living our lives.

Patience, that capacity for calm waiting or endurance is, I believe, one of our most important spiritual practices. When St. Paul wrote his famous definition of love, his first declaration was "love is patient." Almost every day we are given the opportunity to curb our impatience and practice calm waiting.

It just might help us to do that if we remember the yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread – "and waits while the dough rises." In closing, I want to quote what Chad Robertson says in his book *Tartine Bread* about natural yeast as starter and leaven:

*A baker's true skill lies in the way he or she manages fermentation. ...Up until the 1930's, French bakers used natural leaven in bread, croissants and brioche. After commercial yeast became available, the skilled practice of care for and use of natural leaven declined. ...The substantial gains in savor, keeping qualities and versatile uses with the natural leaven justify the time it takes to build and care for one.*

I can only add "Amen" to that. It takes time.