

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
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**“The Depth of Faith”**

**Luke 13:18-21** | *Read the scripture online* <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=218095157>

Presbyterian ministers pretty much have to go to church. Skipping church is not an option for me. But what happens when you're away from Pittsburgh, living overseas for three months? When we were in New Zealand, our lives were guided by routines similar to our lives here. Ian and Charlotte were enrolled in school, so there were clothes to wash, lunches to be packed, and homework to oversee. Beth and I would drive around Auckland during the week doing errands and buying groceries, chanting to ourselves “stay left, stay left.”

But when Sunday rolled around, we suddenly had a choice: to go to church or not go to church. Because one of my goals during this sabbatical time was to learn about the church in New Zealand, we ended up attending church pretty regularly and I preached for three different congregations. But church attendance in New Zealand is much lower than here in America. They pride themselves on being a secular society and it is estimated on any given Sunday less than 15% of the people are in church. That compares to about 43% in America who attend nearly every week.

If being part of an intentional, worshiping, church community is truly optional, is Christian faith also optional? For many people here and overseas, the answer is: Yes. Faith in God can be treated like a classic book you have on your shelves, something you occasionally pull down and flip through its pages, but not something you actively read or reflect on daily. In today's world, many treat faith as an idea or an insurance policy. In classic liberalism, faith is simply an idea, a theory about how to live together in peace and harmony. Or in popular piety, faith is an insurance policy that we pull out in times of loss or need, suddenly offering a quick prayer to heaven that begins this way: “God, you know I haven't been to church much and I almost never pray to you, but I need your help now.” These types of optional, superficial faiths are very prevalent both inside and outside church walls, and even in some church pulpits across America. Yet Christianity was never intended to be a shallow, superficial part of our life. It is designed to be something with real depth to it, something like yeast that leavens and changes every aspect of our lives. Let me say more about this.

As an American of largely European heritage, I arrived in New Zealand and learned it was an island nation visited by Captain Cook in the 18th century; a place where missionaries arrived in 1814 that is now part of the British Commonwealth. It is populated by about 4 million people and 40 million sheep. It is a beautiful land of dense forests and snow-capped mountains, where the waters lapping the rocky shore last touched the beaches of Antarctica. But once we lived in New Zealand for a while, we learned quite a bit more: that the aboriginal Maoris arrived there from the Pacific Islands sometime in the 14th century. To the Maori, this land was called “Aotearoa,” the land of the long, white cloud. The different clans or *iwi* settled mostly on the north island, establishing villages on the dormant volcanoes, since those places let them see for



miles around in case enemies were approaching. The Maori caught fish, collected mussels and shellfish, and trapped the plentiful birdlife.

Knowing those additional details about Aotearoa/New Zealand changed our perception of that land. It is similar to remembering that American history is not simply a tale of colonial pilgrims and a revolutionary war. Our history necessarily includes the traditions of Native Americans and our sad, inhumane treatment of those tribes and cultures. It also includes the legacies of slaves stolen from Africa and the West Indies, immigrants shipped in from Eastern Europe, and much more. For a few months, my life straddled North America and the Pacific Islands with their very different histories and geographies. The Summer Olympics were on, and while we saw glimpses of Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte, we saw far more of New Zealand shot putter Valerie Adams or equestrian Mark Todd. Some American restaurants, like McDonalds, are there, but they sell lamb-burgers alongside their Big Macs.

Suddenly my life perspective had an added depth to it. America plus New Zealand—a glimpse of just how diverse and amazing the world truly is. And in that moment, I understood the familiar parables of the mustard seed and yeast far better. The earliest Christian traditions that were later formed into our gospels tell us that Jesus himself said something like this: *The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, smaller than all seeds. But when it falls on the ground, it sends forth a great branch and the birds of the air take shelter in it. The Kingdom of God is like a woman who takes a bit of yeast and hides it in dough until all of it is leavened.* When we think about these parables, we comment on how the seed and the yeast were so small, scarcely worth noticing, but how big and expansive they became. We know that their growth is similar to the mysterious ways by which God works in the world, but there appears to be nothing unusual or particularly profound in these parables.

What we overlook is the fact that the seed is buried deep in the ground; the yeast is sprinkled deep within three measures of flour. The realm of God is not a superficiality we encounter as we blithely walk over the face of the earth. It has depth to it. It exists deep down in the soil of our life experiences. It is mixed deep within the messy, pliable, doughy substance of our lives. And its goal is not just to stay buried and dormant within us. No, by God's design, it's a seed that seeks to grow and burst forth, pushing aside soil and pebbles and even boulders if necessary to put forth deep roots and break through the surface, until shoots and branches can extend high enough to shelter others in need. It is yeast that seeks to leaven and infiltrate every nook and cranny of our lives, transforming our priorities and re-directing our actions until what had been simple flour and water becomes huge loaves of bread that feed and nourish all the people God gathers around our table.

This is not just a metaphor. This is a core principle of our faith. The German theologian Helmut Thielicke wrote, "What an unspeakable comfort it is to know that in the midst of man's mischief, in the midst of [our] scheming and bad speculations, ... there is still another stream of events flowing silently on, that God is letting [God's] seeds grow [to achieve God's purposes.]"<sup>1</sup> This is something that our Presbyterian heritage associated with God's grace: the active intentionality of God that is at work in our lives far beyond our merit or our full understanding. This type of deep faith is based on the good news that God is always at work, yesterday, today and tomorrow; that the seed and the



leaven “carry their futures within them.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus looks us in the eye and says: *In the Kingdom of God seed and yeast are present in the soil and dough of your life. Will you work with them or against them? Will we be partners, co-creators of the realm of God or will you impede and obstruct the emergence of what God intends for this world?*

That is not an easy question. I will never have my own television ministry, because in my heart, the gospel cannot be over-simplified and electronically-enhanced to make it easily consumed for a mass viewing audience. Faith requires serious choices, like whether or not to go to church on Sunday, where we can encounter the language and mystery of the scriptures, and to be a part of a messy congregation of men, women and children gathered in one place. Faith requires choices that are personal, that take seriously the fact that others are beside you on this planet, who don't call their islands New Zealand but who call it Aotearoa; or who don't speak in proper English but in Iroquois or Spanish or Yiddish. Faith takes seriously the fact that good education should not be a commodity that only a few can purchase, but a basic right for every child; that insofar as marriage is a civil contract, all states should offer that contract to whatever couples or same gender partners seek it; and that women are not to be kept in binders somewhere but given true equal opportunity in the workforce. Deep faith knows what it feels like to open your eyes in the morning even though there's cancer in your body somewhere, or a death-scar from a loved one seared on your heart, or a stack of bills unopened on the kitchen table, or a hundred reasons to stay in bed. But who, by grace, have felt that seed take root in them? Have felt that yeast leaven their souls so that they are no longer prisoners to fear but rather children of hope, grateful for God's gift of another day?

I'll say more about the depth of faith in the coming weeks, as we also look at the hands of faith and the heart of faith. But I'll close with a word of encouragement. The Kingdom of God is near: around us, within us, behind us, and before us. It has both depth and intentionality. It is not something haphazard. It is a seed carrying the future within it. And it is trustworthy and good. That has been true from the beginning of time and will hold true until the end of the age. But because it is deep-seated and intentional, it is designed not to tolerate injustice, not to accept abuse and violence, not to shrug off pain or tears or greed. The Kingdom of God seeks to bring renewal, repentance, and change. It pushes through soil in what can only be called a disruptive force. It leavens flour in what can only be understood as a total transformation.

We know this to be true because the one telling us about the Kingdom of God was born in a poor, small, mustard seed of a manger. He was sent into exile as a child into the land of Egypt, an illegal immigrant in a foreign land. He lived under the shadow of Roman oppressors, who weighed his worth as a Palestinian Jew in the scales of global power and found him wanting. Yet, like the yeast in the immense loaf of human history, Jesus' life, death and resurrection have leavened everything and shaped all we understand about what is true and good. Believe that this is the way of God's Kingdom: small, buried deep within, intentional, trustworthy, justice-seeking – and it is literally, actively, at work here and now. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, 1959, p.86-87. Quoted in Luke (Belief: A Theological Commentary), Justo L. González, 2010, p.176.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, Luke (Interpretation Bible Commentary), 1990, p. 171.

