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**The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast which a woman took ... and mixed into three measures of the finest wheat flour until it was completely leavened.**

**Matthew 13:33**

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

In this parable Jesus conceals the Kingdom of God quite literally in our daily bread! He *conceals* it, so that it is hidden from our eyes. And he *puts it into* our daily lives.

The Greek verb *enkryptein*, “to hide within”, conveys both these meanings.

And at the same time Jesus reveals for us the mystery of the Kingdom of God – uncovers it for us! ... so that we can see the Kingdom of God which is concealed in the present.

### 1. **The image of yeast.**

We must be aware that Jesus is an expert on heaven. As an itinerant rabbi, “The Kingdom of Heaven” was his favourite theme. His parables are recognised by theologians as the most authoritative evidence for his message. “Heaven” is essentially the basic theme of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed one can say that it was already the historical Jesus who brought in the Kingdom of Heaven. As a wandering preacher he already represented that which he completed on his way to the cross and in his resurrection as saviour and redeemer of the whole world.

His parables and metaphors enable us to understand what this word means: “the Kingdom of God”, as it is called in Mark and Luke. In his teachings *and* his actions – in his entire way of life – Jesus demonstrated what it is like when God takes over as ruler of the kingdom. He saw himself, his personhood, and his actions as a token and a symbol of the kingdom ruled by God. The presence of the Kingdom of Heaven was and is realised in his presence as a person. “Can the wedding guests fast, so long as the bridegroom is with them??” So the Kingdom of Heaven is a party!

**“The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast, which a woman takes and mixes into three measures of the finest flour.”**

So the Kingdom of Heaven is certainly not somehow spiritual or beyond this world. Not at all. It is much rather something material. The Kingdom of God is in everyday life. Concealed in everyday life. In the midst of that which is most ordinary – in our daily bread!

In any case, the Kingdom of Heaven is that mysterious secret: that our daily bread is surprisingly “tasty”. Something is hidden within our daily life, which makes it taste surprisingly delicious.

Our daily bread normally tastes boring; after all, it is only flour, water and a little salt. Okay, we eat it. With cucumber and tomatoes, it tastes alright. It stills our hunger. And yet unleavened bread doesn’t really have much flavour. It represents everyday life: our hunger is satisfied, we go to work, we sleep ... the alarm goes off, breakfast, work, return home, do the chores, eat, sleep ... That’s everyday life!

“Give us today our daily bread!” It is already a gift when everyday life works out, when we have enough flour in store, a bed and new strength for our work each day ... It is bad, when something upsets things, when there are problems with our daily bread: when one loses one’s job, a member of the family becomes seriously ill, or there is no longer enough flour for everybody ... Neither everyday life nor our daily bread can be taken for granted.

But Jesus, by means of this parable, now draws our attention to a small detail: an observation about what happens with our daily bread and everyday life and – even better – what can happen as if by miracle:

A woman mixes a little yeast into some flour before she goes to bed and sleeps; she knows the secret: during the night the whole bowl of flour becomes leavened. What a surprise!! The bread rolls are really tasty all of a sudden!

Several contrasts play a role in Jesus' observation and his metaphor:

- Boring daily bread becomes something special;
- A small amount of yeast – two spoonfuls – leavens a whole lot of dough;
- An unremarkable secret of baking – no-one sees it, no-one thinks anything of it – has a major effect – overnight and of its own accord.

These contrasts cause amazement amongst the people listening to Jesus. They agree: "That's right!" "That's true!" "Yes, I knew that! But it's really amazing!"

And Jesus says: "What you can marvel at where this woman is concerned is the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven! It isn't spiritual, it isn't out there somewhere, it isn't a long way off; It's right here! In a mysterious and surprising way it is materially present in everyday life so that it turns the flavourless bread that we eat everyday into a delicious meal.

"That's really delicious bread you've made!", says her husband. "That tastes great just with butter!", says her son. The woman winks at her daughter. Everyone is in a good mood.

How does the Kingdom of Heaven work? That's important too. Not just what it looks like. Or what it's like there, etc.

No! How does the secret mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven actually work? The answer: There's a woman who mixes yeast into the flour. There! That's how it works. Put in two spoonfuls and later take two spoonfuls out for the next time. And that's how it goes on. The yeast which turns every day into a party – there is always enough of it. One just has to take it out of the dough and put it into the new batch. One just has to know the secret and put it into practice.

The woman mixes the secret ingredient into humdrum everyday life; she mixes it in and expects great results for the whole family. Jesus watches the woman and he causes the people to marvel at their own bread-making. He causes them to marvel at the mystery of the Kingdom of God. So it is obviously in their midst! That's how the Kingdom of Heaven works! That's how Jesus puts the Kingdom of God into everyday life.

## 2. **How the Kingdom of Heaven works.**

"God: mystery of the world." That's the title that the well-known Tuebingen theologian, Eberhardt Juengel, gives to his work on God. In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus talks about "the Kingdom of Heaven", this is what he means: The heavenly Father is mysteriously present in the world to all his children. Along with all the prophets Jesus proclaims the God of Israel as the one and only true King and Shepherd of His people. To those who think that His presence and effectiveness have yet to come in the future or in some other place, to those who keep to the law, and to the priests in the temple, he says: "Don't let yourselves be sent here, there and everywhere! The power of the Kingdom of God is here now! In your midst! Haven't you noticed it? The demons are already in retreat! Those who have gone astray are finding their way home! Those who are lost are being found! Those who are in despair are finding courage. The lame can walk and the blind can see clearly!"

In his parable about yeast he shows us that we just need to learn to see the mystery in a new way! God as a mysterious presence in the world. A celebration of his mercy in the midst of everyday life! Like the housewife, we should take the Kingdom of Heaven, the mystery of the hidden presence of God and “hide” it in the flour. We must “take up the offer” of the hidden reality of God, “take seriously” and recognise the importance, the decisive importance of the fact that God, though hidden, is there, here and now.

We should take this and mix it into our precious finest flour. That’s how God’s Kingdom works. The housewives reveal to us and demonstrate that they know how to put spice into daily life. God doesn’t want to live separately from our everyday life. He doesn’t belong behind a glass door in the china cabinet! We should spice up our daily life with his presence, so that he can bring about a mysterious transformation. Jesus tells us how the woman knows the secret and takes it and applies it. And overnight her humdrum daily routine is transformed. That which was boring and tasteless becomes spicy and delicious! How extraordinary! Amazing! Wonderful!

God as a mysterious presence in the world. The Kingdom of God becomes material reality in Jesus’ parable.

### 3. **The prophetic mission of the church.**

And now Jesus wants us to do exactly what the woman did in her household. We mustn’t forget or deny God as the mysterious presence in the world. We need to take him seriously as this mystery and “mix him in” as spice in the global “home economy” of the life of the nations.

Seek the common good!” wrote the prophet Jeremiah in Babylon. “If your salt becomes stale, what will you use as salt?” “Is it possible to hide the city on a hill?” “Do you put a light under a bucket?” – No! Without the spice of God’s presence, without the input of his liberating word, the daily life of the world would be truly dismal.

God has called his people out of captivity and servitude – he calls us out again and again – so that we can celebrate life in the light of his life-giving word and as recipients of his renewed declarations of love. The desert shall bloom in his presence. Jesus – with his parables, demonstrative actions, and skill – brought about the appearance of God’s Kingdom. That is the calling of God’s people amongst all peoples: to add spice to the everyday life of the world with the secret mystery of God’s presence in the midst of all spheres of life. The renowned theologian Juergen Moltmann puts it this way: “The purpose of Christianity is to serve humanity, not so that this world remains as it is or is conserved as it is, but rather so that it is transformed and becomes as it is meant to be.”

However, we must first admit that – standing in a widespread tradition of lack of faith – we tend to prefer to mix the small amount of yeast into a small bowlful... We prefer to preserve the true faith in small pious groups! We say with despondency – and many others have said it before: “The leavened dough must be saved, protected and kept pure!” “Don’t let it get lost in the large bowl. In the end one may not be able to taste anything of it at all.” Often enough we have left the world to be as it is and put our faith in small congregations, communities and monasteries where we can live in true discipleship. We have separated ourselves from the world and given it up for lost. Where we should have spelled out clearly that God loves the world and gave his only son to save it.

On the other hand we must also admit that, in another widespread tradition of lack of faith, we have left the whole of the precious leavened bread in the refrigerator, so that we have to declare that by doing this we are saving it for later. We say, as many have said before us: “The time is coming, *then* we will add some spice! Then there will be enough for

everyday life to be transformed into a celebration – just not yet awhile. Now we have to live according to the rules of this world, not of another world! Our daily bread is indeed tasteless! We have to put up with it!” Unfortunately we have to put up with the fact that we are not yet in Paradise. In this world things took their course according to their own “laws of nature”. In this way we have torn God’s world apart and created a temple for false gods, as if our heavenly Father were not Lord of heaven and earth and all His beloved creatures! Has God retreated and abandoned us?

But Jesus – in the prophetic tradition – uses this housewife to insert the Kingdom of God and God’s reign as prophetic spice into the midst of the everyday life of the world! We can and should be daring and generous in whatever we do with the saving mystery of God’s presence. We can and should use the revolutionary power of God’s justice, his merciful judgement, and the goodness-force of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount for investment, provocation and confrontation: Jesus demonstrated this in his way of life. And in this parable he created a lively, attractive, material, and everyday image. We may not and should not exclude the goodness of our heavenly Father from this world. His presence is the essential spice, the salt, without which everything will be spoilt.

We must not allow the so-called “realists” in politics to get their pessimistic war policies through on the basis that there is no alternative! We must protest the God-given dignity of every single child and remind people of the power of reconciliation! We are not allowed to avoid participation and withdraw into our own private spheres of interest just because getting involved requires so much effort and knowledge. God does not want to be denied and betrayed! He wants to be kneaded as salt and yeast into the daily interactions of people, especially where they are strangers and where conflicts arise because of differences in mentality, language and culture.

#### **4. The churches and their prophetic peace mission**

In the Church and Peace network we are called to knead such daring trust in God into daily life in which violence is present everywhere. We are called to overcome violence by acts of faith which bring God’s peace into the everyday life of the world. And we are called to oppose violence with active, courageous and creative steps of faith, hope and love in whatever ways the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus of Nazareth may spark within us.

In families and administration, in immigration legislation and in mobbing on internet forums, and also in the unimaginative militarisation of foreign policy ... the sin of brutal violence is poisoning the community life of human beings, so that their dignity is trampled upon. Wherever people encounter each other as strangers, fuelling fear and conflict, powerlessness fuels an escalation of violence. But we can’t put up with this! We hear God telling us the way to life: “Thou shalt not kill!”

We can follow the thread of opposition to violence through biblical texts and increasingly strict limitations from the traditions of the Pentateuch and the prophets through to the radical peace ethic of the Sermon on the Mount and the total nonviolence of Jesus giving himself up to execution on the cross by the Romans.

And all this makes it clear: The key is to be found in the vulnerability of human life and in situations of powerlessness. The key is to be found in the hope for the mysterious presence of God which should enable us to endure the inevitable experience of being wounded and weak! The key is to be found in the experience that I am at my wits end and yet I still cling to God’s presence or can at least hope against hope that God is there.

It is natural and a form of protection to cover up and repress the pain and shame that we feel when we are hurt or powerless. But all too often the feeling of powerlessness and helplessness is covered up and repressed by escalating reactive violence. So as not to be

left standing naked and ashamed, I smash everything to smithereens, even if it is my own feelings and my own self-awareness which are destroyed by depression. No-one escapes these feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. But through the crucified Jesus, God has shown us the Way in which violence can be overcome.

“By his wounds we are healed!” The words of the psalms and the promises of the prophets can enable us to live through the feeling that we have been abandoned by the whole world and even by God. We can resist these feelings in the mysterious fellowship with Christ crucified. As we put our faith and hope in Jesus our death is swallowed up by his death. And his living out of the power of God reveals God’s peace and love breaking through against violence. The door to overcoming violence is opened up by Christ and his Way of self-sacrifice. “By his wounds we are healed!”

This is how Paul describes it in his mystery of Christ: “I am crucified with Christ. I live, and yet it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me. For that which I now live in the flesh, I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me in my place!”

In this way, life in the power of God’s reign is both hidden and revealed. Jesus’ Way of sacrifice is the clear alternative to the escalation of violence, wherever we want to get past the experience of powerlessness and helplessness by a show of power. Jesus has shown us the Way in which violence is overcome by God’s power of peace. This Way passes through the experience of woundedness and pain. He rejected violent power. He resisted the temptation of violence.

Together with many more churches Church and Peace seeks through a growing renewal in terms of peace ethics this Way: confessing God as a mystery in the midst of everyday life in a world full of violence. The peaceful power of the Gospel shows us a liberating and saving alternative to violence. The peaceful power of God is there in Christ: Human powerlessness and vulnerability don’t have to turn over into violence. With the power of the Gospel we can walk the path of reconciliation and, putting our trust in God, become active peacemakers.

In 2011 the Peace Convocation of the World Council of Churches made “just peace” a new benchmark for church peace ethics globally. I quote:

“History, especially in the witness of the historic peace churches, reminds us of the fact that violence is contrary to the will of God and can never resolve conflicts. It is for this reason that we are moving beyond the doctrine of just war towards a commitment to Just Peace.”

This concept is an attempt to overcome the traditional black-and-white debate between pacifism and the just war doctrine. It focusses instead on the primacy of civilian conflict management and the priority to be given to the prevention of violence. During and after the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, Korea this autumn the churches will continue to move forward on the question of military violence and will in particular discuss further the so-called responsibility to protect. Let me quote once again from the Peace Convocation:

“We continue to struggle with how innocent people can be protected from injustice, war and violence. In this light, we struggle with the concept of the “responsibility to protect” and its possible misuse. We urgently request that the WCC and related bodies further clarify their positions regarding this policy.”

## **Conclusion**

### **“Seek the common good!”**

Knead daringly and full of hope the mysterious and saving power of the pentecostal presence of God into the daily life of the people who are poisoned by violence! Be realistic! Don’t be resigned and bitter and cast down by the lostness of the world! Be realistic about

the risen Jesus of Nazareth! Be realistic about the power of the in-breaking Kingdom of God! This is the world's only hope for reconciliation and peace!

We celebrate God's mysterious presence in this world as its great opportunity! With the wonderful power of the Gospel of this housewife who takes the yeast ... we will not put our faith and hope for this world into some other dimension, nor will we put off God's reign until later. We want to proclaim and celebrate God as the mystery of the world. We want to work actively here and now to overcome violence and war.

Juergen Moltmann says: "The eschaton" – let me elaborate: the reign of God, that which comes at the end and is finally valid, that saving power which is coming from God – "The eschaton is not just some aspect of Christianity, but rather it is **the** medium of the Christian faith, the base note in relation to which all other notes are tuned, the colour of the dawn of a new day, in which everything is immersed."

So let us therefore celebrate the memory and the presence of the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth as the bridegroom of the dawn of the new day in the confident hope that God is in our midst – mysteriously hidden and revealed at the same time! And let us pray with the motto of the coming Assembly of the World Council of Churches in November:

"God of life, show us the way to justice and peace!"

Amen.