

“For the Common Good”

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 13:33
October 4, 2026

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Three measures of flour is not three cups. Commentators tell us that three measures of flour would be somewhere between forty and sixty pounds.

I don't know if you bake or not, but my guess is, that even if you do bake a lot, you aren't handling forty to sixty pounds of flour.

Amy-Jill Levine, that excellent scholar of the parables and former Didier Lecturer here at House of Hope, teaches that this “image is one of extravagance, or hyperbole.” Three measures of flour is enough to feed a multitude.

In her commentary, Levine draws upon the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria to interpret this passage. Philo wrote that “everything that is leavened rises, and joy is the rational elevation of the soul.” The leaven here in this story is a positive image of generosity, abundance, and overwhelming delight.

In other places in the Bible, leaven might be used to signify impurity, but Levine argues convincingly that that is not the case in this particular parable. Here the leaven is a good thing, a sign of the coming reign of God.

The New Revised Standard Version, which is maybe the translation you use, tells us that the woman “mixed” the yeast into the flour. In a footnote, the NRSV offers the translation “hid in” as an alternative reading.

Now, most of commentators I studied prefer “hid” over “mixed” as the best translation of the Greek word. Meaning that the woman didn't mix the yeast into this abundance of flour, she hid it in the flour.

Why hid? Doesn't that seem like a puzzling idea?

Tom Long, in his book on the parables, claims we should imagine that underneath the visible world there is a “hidden deep, where God is working out of sight, ultimately to transform all things.”

The hiding isn't something nefarious, it is a reminder that deep down in things, God is at work.

Which teaches us that the kingdom of God is at work even where we don't see it. The reign of God is hidden within the ordinary things of our lives. And when the kingdom breaks forth, it manifests itself as an abundance that transforms the world.

I love how Amy-Jill Levine concludes her discussion of this tiny parable:

Perhaps the parable tells us that despite all our images of golden slippers and harps and halos, the kingdom is present at the communal oven of a Galilean village when everyone has enough to eat. It is present . . . in everything, and it is available to all, from the sourdough starter to the rain and the sunshine. It is something that works its way through our lives, and we realize its import only when we do not have it.

The kingdom of God is present in everything and available to everyone. Hidden deep down in things, God's grace does its work, bringing about transformation.

Today is World Communion Sunday, when the liturgy draws our attention to the ways in which the sacrament connects us, through ordinary things like bread and wine, to people everywhere across the global and throughout time. A connection that is both spiritual and physical. The very concrete ways that we are all deeply connected to one another. And the moral lessons we draw about our care, concern, and solidarity with others from the celebration of this sacrament.

Writing about the principle of solidarity, Pope Leo XIV teaches, “Faith invites us to see this reality as a call: we are not merely neighbors to one another, but entrusted to each other, so that each of us may take responsibility, as best we can, for the lives and wounds of our [siblings].”

He writes that “solidarity arises precisely when we decide not to remain indifferent to what happens to our neighbor” and instead take action to help.

The parable of the leaven teaches us that God’s grace is abundant, overwhelmingly and extravagantly so. There is plenty available for everyone who needs it. We do not need to hoard resources, hold onto privilege, or remain frightened by scarcity. All of that grasping can lead us to deny to others what is rightfully theirs. Instead, we can live into the joyful abundance of God’s reign. Working towards a world where everyone has what they need and together humanity can flourish.

Leo’s words on solidarity were included in the encyclical he released earlier this year, entitled *Magnificent Humanity*, with the subtitle “On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence.”

Over the last few years our concerns about artificial intelligence have increased, and then in these last few weeks, the topic has really exploded to being of primary concern, as the AI execs themselves warn about impending dangers.

It can at times bewilder, as one attempts to take in the information, think critically about it, and respond. Most of us feel like passengers on a speeding train, with little control over what the future holds. And we don’t like that uncertainty or the anxiety it creates.

Pope Leo believes that Christian teaching on solidarity and the common good, the sort of lessons we learn from Jesus’ parables and the sacrament of communion, are relevant to humanity’s discussion of these technological and existential developments.

Leo opens his encyclical letter by framing the situation we face in biblical terms:

Humanity, created by God in all its grandeur, is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together. Each generation inherits the task of shaping its own era, of guiding history to become a place where the dignity of every person is safeguarded, justice is promoted, and fraternity is made possible. Yet every era also runs the risk of creating an inhumane and more unjust world.

As is repeatedly the case in human history, our technological abilities present choices. We can use technologies in ways that are unjust, harmful, and destructive. Or we can use them to advance humanity dignity, alleviate suffering, and foster the common good. Often, we do some mix of both, of course.

Here, once again, humanity faces these choices. Leo frames the options by drawing upon two biblical stories.

First is the familiar story of the Tower of Babel from the Book of Genesis. Humans build a tower trying to reach the heavens, trying to become like gods. Only for God to judge their hubris. The community falls apart, breaking into different groups who can no longer talk to one another.

The other story is from the Book of Nehemiah. The Jews return from their exile and begin to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. But the effort has stalled. In particular, the walls of the city lie in ruins.

Nehemiah has been sent to Jerusalem by the Persian emperor to take charge of the reconstruction. Nehemiah, after surveying the situation, calls all the people together and speaks to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”

The Bible tells us the response of the people—“then they said, ‘Let us start building!’ So they committed themselves to the common good.”

Committed themselves to the common good. This, of course, is the path humanity should take.

The Book of Nehemiah then describes how the whole society mobilized in order to work together on the project of rebuilding the city walls. Each person did their part. The book lists the names of those who worked on the various sections of the walls. For example, for the rest of human history it has been recorded that Malchijah son of Rechab repaired the dung gate. No task is too small when people work together, in solidarity, for the common good.

If we are to create a better world for humanity, where the dignity of all is respected and everyone has what they need, then that future cannot be built by an elite few; it must be constructed by all of us working together. Therefore, any efforts we make towards neighborliness and the common good, will help humanity.

On World Communion Sunday, we recommit ourselves to solidarity and the common good, because God's grace is abundant, available to everyone.

Which is why I find I must speak to the topic that roiled our culture this week—rape and sexual assault and the systems that enable them.

The story out of Cornell, and others like it, are disgusting, terrifying, and enraging. Not just because of the victim's story of the assault, but because of how clearly that assault was embedded within a larger system. None of the young men on the text thread alerted authorities or defended the victim. The university, law enforcement, and the judicial system all seem to have barely responded and responded poorly.

I feel an obligation to speak to this issue because I'm a man with some institutional power and privilege, and frankly we men with institutional power and privilege have quite clearly not spoken enough or loudly enough or often enough to condemn this violence and to dismantle these systems.

We cannot hope to build a better future for humanity, that respects human dignity and provides for the common good, in the face of the significant challenges of artificial intelligence and global climate change, if we cannot first learn some far more fundamental moral principles such as do no rape, do not assault, and speak out against such behavior when you see it.

Men, we obviously must do more. And World Communion Sunday is a good day to commit ourselves to do this work. We know the lessons of the sacrament of communion, that we cannot "remain indifferent to what happens to our neighbor." We are entrusted to each other, responsible for each other. We are obligated to care for and support and defend each other. For the reign of God to come in fullness, everyone should get what they need, and safety from such harm is the most basic of human needs.

We can commit ourselves to solidarity and the common good, because God's grace is abundant. We have enough to feed multitudes. And that grace is at work transforming us, through gratitude and generosity, into people filled with delight. Oh, may it be so. We desperately need it to be so.