

Lessons with Flour Feb 20, 2022

There is a baking show that I love to watch on Netflix. The show is called *Nailed It!* It's a competition baking show where the contestants are "amateur bakers," or at least that's what the show calls them, which I think is pretty generous. They are completely hopeless and utterly inept bakers. They have no idea what to do in the kitchen.

Now I'll show my cards a bit: I have applied to be on this show, or rather, my dear wife has submitted my name to be on this show. I haven't received a call back though.

A show of clueless, inept bakers. And if you think I'm being too harsh, allow me to share a few examples of the mistakes some contestants have made.

One baker was making a batter for cupcakes, and instead of adding two cups of sugar to the bowl, he accidentally added two cups of salt. The judges did not care for those cupcakes.

Or another contestant needed melted butter for a cake. So he put a stick of butter in a plastic measuring cup and put it in the microwave. And rather than cooking it for 20 or 30 seconds, he zapped it for 5 minutes. In fairness, he did melt the butter. He also melted the container it was in, so there was a puddle of melted plastic goo when he opened the microwave door.

A couple other contestants (and this is an easier mistake to make) measured out some flour in a measuring cup and then packed it down like it was brown sugar, and added some more. The resulting cakes turned out to be dry and dense, though to be honest, not the worst thing the judges had tasted (and you can see why).

Now as I said, I'm no expert when it comes to baking, but my mother made sure I knew a few things about baking. And I remember her teaching me that when you measure flour, you scoop it out in a measuring cup, and you use a flat knife to level it and remove the excess... but you never pack it down. Cardinal sin of using flour.

But you know what? Jesus breaks that rule. He may have been sinless in the world, but as far as baking was concerned, he did not have a perfect record. Jesus talks to the crowds about flour today... and he talks about packing it down. Now the reference is quick and subtle, and we might miss it. It actually comes at the end of our Gospel reading today.

"A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." Jesus is talking about a measure of flour.

Imagine you're buying flour in the 1st century. You go to the market with your clay jar or pot, and you hand your jar to the flour salesman, and you say, "Fill this jar with flour." If it's a normal merchant, he'd fill the pot with flour, level it off, hand it back to you, and say, "There's one measure of flour. That will be 3 shekels."

What would be crazy, what would be just stupidly generous of the flour merchant, is if he filled your jar with flour, pressed that flour down (it just feels wrong even saying that), and then added more flour in there, and said, “That’ll be 3 shekels.”

And if the merchant is just giving away flour, he’d fill your jar, press it down, put more in, shake it, and then add more flour until it’s overflowing. That would be absurdly generous.

That’s the image Jesus is giving at the end of this Gospel lesson. “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be given to you, put into your lap.” That is the grace and abundance of God. And then, when we receive that grace, we are then called to live that ridiculously abundant life, in our loving of others.

Just think, if you received a bunch of free flour, wouldn’t you want to pass that on, or pay forward that good deed?

So that’s the end of our Gospel reading today. Now I’ll going to move backwards now through the story. Jesus ended with grace, but I’m going to start with grace.

We have this an image from God, flour that is packed down (*ugh*) and overflowing. An abundant gift, that we are called to pass on.

And that doesn’t just go for flour. We are called to forgive, because God forgives us. We are called to not condemn or judge others, because God does not condemn us. Be merciful, because God is merciful.

We see this, as it happens, in our Old Testament lesson today. We get a tiny snip-it of a long story, but when you have a few minutes, go back and read Genesis starting at chapter 37. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, and with God’s help, he becomes the vice-Pharaoh of Egypt. And when his brothers come to him, begging for food, he forgives them. It’s a moving story of forgiveness and mercy, because God has been merciful to us.

And then (again, moving backwards through the text), we are reminded that God “is kind even to the ungrateful and the wicked.” That includes the people we dislike (you know, the people who drive too slowly in the left-hand lane)... and us. We can be wicked and ungrateful, and God is still kind to us; God is still handing us this overflowing jar of flour and grace. So that means that we should be kind to others.

And then we get to it. The first paragraph of our Gospel lesson. I tried to ease us into this, but there’s no holding back now. Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. If someone hits you, don’t hit back. Give to everyone who asks something of you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Do good, and expect nothing in return.

This is one of the most important teachings of Jesus... and it is, I think, the hardest to live out. It is where the rubber meets the road. This is what separates true followers of Jesus from fair-weather Christians. Love the people whom you don’t like and the people who don’t like you.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians (we heard this a couple weeks ago): “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have endless faith, so that I can remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing,” (1 Cor 13:2).

What I hear in that and in Jesus’ words today, is, “If we have the most beautiful church buildings, the most moving music and sermons, the greatest worship service in the country... but if we don’t live out our love as Christians, none of that means a hill of beans.

Can we love our enemies, bless those who have no blessings for us?

Can we love people who refuse to wear masks... and people who won’t leave home without a mask?

Can we love folks who are on the far Right of society... and on the far Left?

And one fellow pastor of mine brought this up this week: Can we love Russian political leaders who are threatening war right now?

And now it gets real. Now we see that, yes, there are people we call enemies, but to them, we are the enemy. And if we know that those on the “other side” will refuse to treat us with love... can we still love them?

I think that’s possible, as long as we remember that to love is not to be a doormat. I know it sounds like Jesus is saying, “Be a doormat” when he tells us to turn the other cheek, and in another sermon on another day, I’ll talk about how Jesus is actually telling us to lovingly oppose and resist the powers that hurt us.

Today, let me say that Jesus does not say, “Let those who abuse you keep on abusing you.” He tells us to pray for them. You can pray for someone AND get yourself out of that situation. Love (especially with our enemies) sometimes requires asserting yourself. Love sometimes means saying, “No,” because that is the most loving thing you can say. Love sometimes means finding creative ways to resist, change the rules, to de-escalate conflict. Love sometimes means handing someone an overflowing jar of flour, not because it makes sense economically, but because it is grace. And grace, unexpected love and gifts, can change who we are. Grace reminds us that God is good, that there is love in the world, and that the world is not fair, usually in our favor.

I’ll close today with a few words from Martin Luther King, Jr., in his sermon, “Loving Your Enemies.”

It’s significant that Jesus does not say, “Like your enemy.” Like is a sentimental something, an affectionate something. There are a lot of people that I find it difficult to like. ...But Jesus says love them. And love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all [people], so that you love everybody, because God loves them. [...] If you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption.

Martin Luther King, Jr. “Loving Your Enemies.” Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church Montgomery, Alabama, November 17, 1957. <http://ipoet.com/ARCHIVE/BEYOND/King-Jr/Loving-Your-Enemies.html>. Public domain.

Amen.

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