

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Eighth Sunday after Pentecost • July 30, 2017**

**1 Kings 3:5-12 • Psalm 119:129-136 • Romans 8:26-39 • Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52**

I don't know about you, but I want to know more about Phoebe. St. Paul is good. Jesus is great. But I really want to know more about Phoebe.

If you don't know who Phoebe is, you're not alone. At the very end of the book of Romans, long after the lectionary tries to keep our attention by going off to greener (or at least newer) pastures, Paul starts to talk about a woman named Phoebe. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe," Paul writes, "a deacon of the church... so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require of you..."

Paul may be a gifted and eloquent writer. There's a reason why gets his name on churches, has volumes of books written about him, and gets his face etched in stained glass. But I want to know more about Phoebe. Because the entire book of Romans really depends on her. Because best we know, it was Phoebe who actually took Paul's letter to Rome. Phoebe was fairly well off, she had enough money to travel. Paul even describes her as a benefactor of the church. But when Phoebe got to Rome, she didn't go to the ritzy parts of the city. She didn't hang out with the other members of the donor class. No, she went to a working-class neighborhood right next to where the Vatican is now. A neighborhood that was filled with immigrants from Greece and Syria. Artisans, brick makers, potters. Laborers who worked on the river and came home sweaty and calloused every night.

And there, in small, crowded homes lit by candlelight. Filled with small groups of believers. Unwashed. Exhausted. Homesick. Phoebe would take out a brief letter of recommendation from Paul explaining who she was. And after everyone was on board, after everyone saw that she was legit, Phoebe would take out Paul's letter to the Romans and start reading.

I want to know more about Phoebe. Not just because she's overlooked or because she sounds interesting. But because she seems a lot like the woman Jesus talks about in today's gospel reading.

Jesus, remember, is in the middle of a day-long lecture about what the kingdom of heaven is like. Riffing on what it will be like when God and God's ways of being are fully present and recognizable in the world. And Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like "yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened." One interpretation of that is that the kingdom of heaven is about abundance. The kingdom of heaven is like a woman who put some yeast in flour and now there's more bread than you would have expected. The kingdom of heaven is about God's overflowing blessings. That's a fine interpretation. Not really surprising, not really all that interesting, to be honest, but fine.

But there's something more going on here. A reference the disciples probably would have caught. Something that, unless you've been digging into the deep cuts of the Hebrew Bible, most of us don't notice. Which is that the woman has three measures of flour. Now to be sure, that's a lot of flour. But it's also a symbolically important number of measures. In the Hebrew Bible, when Abraham makes bread for the angels of God, he uses three measures. When Gideon makes an offering to the Lord, he uses three measures. When David needs to feed the Israelite army while they fight the Philistines, David brings three measures of flour. When Ezekiel conjured up the idea for a new temple, it included a space for priests to go off by themselves and bake bread with, take a wild guess here, three measures of flour. So if you're going to make an offering to God or you want to have a ritually important meal, you're supposed to use three measures of flour.

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

So you could imagine Jesus telling the disciples about this woman baking three measures of flour and thinking, “Well yea, okay. That makes sense.” The religious symbolism is right there. But there’s also something you’re not supposed to do. You are not, under capital N-O, no circumstances, supposed to add leaven to it. If you are going to make an offering to God or if you are going to have a big ritual meal, the flour needs to be pure. There’s a scene in Zechariah, where an angel is giving Zechariah these visions to show him how the Israelites aren’t being faithful to the covenant with God. So pause for a second to think about all the symbols you could come up with to show unfaithfulness. You are an angel and you have to think about how to represent unfaithfulness. You could have fire coming down from the heavens. You could have floods. You could have locusts. No. When the angel wants Zechariah to understand how the people aren’t being faithful, he shows him a basket with three measures of flour and a woman sitting in it. Three measures of flour that isn’t ritually pure. And Zechariah looks at the basket and says, “This is wickedness.” Point is, if you want something to be holy, if you want something to be pleasing to God, you do not add anything to it. You do not add leaven to it. Because that’s not the way the ritual works.

But, Jesus says, the kingdom of heaven is like three measures of flour that a woman has leavened. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven works in a way that is wholly unexpected. Outside of the norms, rules, and rituals that we try to encase God in. What does the kingdom of heaven look like? What does it look like when heaven and earth meet? Ezekiel thought it was a bunch of priests, priests who were all men mind you, separated from everyone else, baking bread in an almost medically sterile environment. But Jesus says that no. The kingdom of heaven looks like a woman who adds yeast to the flour. A woman like Phoebe, who according to the powers that be, shouldn’t be touching the flour in the first place, adding the very thing that she’s not supposed to.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven can’t be encased by ritual. That there’s no magic formula for producing the kingdom of heaven. That the kingdom of heaven isn’t just something that happens when you prepare the right way. The kingdom of heaven is something that shows up wherever Jesus does, which means it always shows up in unexpected places. It shows up on the dry mountainsides where Jesus taught his disciples. It shows up in suburban sanctuaries like this. It shows up in drab hospital rooms, in messy classrooms, on crabgrass baseball fields. In crowded, stuffy homes like the ones Phoebe went to. Homes that were full of people who were overlooked and counted out. Full of kids playing and noise from the street and the smell of too many different meals wafting in from the neighbors. So forgive me if I want to know more about Phoebe.

I want to know more about Phoebe because I want to know what it was like when she read today’s reading from Romans for the first time. In today’s reading from Romans, Paul invites the believers to look at Christ and to look at the world. To look at how Christ lived and died. To look at their own lives, their own hopes and dreams. Their fears and their frustrations. And Paul asks, “What then are we to say about these things?” What are we to say about our lives? What are we to say about our grief? What are we to say about our joy? What are we to say about our ambivalence?

What was it like when Phoebe read Paul’s answer? Paul’s assertion that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rules, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. What did the people in that crowded room think?

If those words are familiar to most of us, they’re as the words we often hear at memorial services. They’re on the sympathy cards we leave at the wake. But when Paul makes that claim, he’s not just trying to reassure the believers in Rome. He’s not trying to tell them that things are going to be okay. No, Paul is pointing them to this table. Paul is talking about the Eucharist. Paul says there is

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

nothing that can separate us from Christ our Lord because Christ gives himself to us at this table. Paul invites them to eat of this bread and drink of this cup, so that there is literally nothing separating us from God's promises in Christ. What did that invitation mean to those believers in Rome? Those believers who had been separated from their families? Who had been separated from the wealthier parts of the city. Who had been separated from other believers? Paul says that at this table, there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

How close is God's love to you? As close as your own body and blood. So close, no one else can ever take it away from you. So close, it's made manifest in everything that you do. So close, that even death can't take it away.

The kingdom of heaven looks like a woman who put leaven in three measures of flour, Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven is like those weary believers and Phoebe breaking bread together. The kingdom of heaven is like all of us, young and old, confident and unsure, tired and hopeful, receiving and being empowered by the body of Christ here among us today. The kingdom of heaven is how our messy, complicated, imperfect, tangled up lives can be conduits of grace for the people around us. The kingdom of God is like three measures of flour that has leaven in it. It isn't pure. It isn't perfect. It isn't sterile. But it is good. Take and eat.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor