Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15).

Gn 6:5-8; 7:1-5, 10; *Mk 8:14-21*

One aspect of the gospels and of Jesus as a teacher is the power of language to transcend the literal meaning of words that reveal a much deeper realm of metaphor

and symbol. If we cannot cross this threshold to grasp the underlying truth in the imagery Jesus uses, we will find it hard to understand his invitation to faith.

The evangelists used the frequent misunderstanding of the disciples to illustrate how Jesus had to push them past the literal to the figurative. Today's passage from Mark is a good example.

After another frustrating encounter with some skeptical Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples get in the boat to cross the lake. The disciples forgot to bring enough bread. When they lament this, Jesus uses the situation to warn them to "be on guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod." The disciples think Jesus is talking about physical bread.

No, Jesus responds, reminding them of his ability to multiply bread at will. Why are you worried about having enough bread? He is warning them against the subtle, pervasive influence of culture and authority that, like yeast, can permeate their minds and block them from trusting him. "Don't let this yeast get into your thinking," Jesus says to his confused disciples.

There is another leaven they should be cultivating —the leaven of faith, which also has the power to shape their understanding of everything. This is the leaven of the parable in Luke 13:21, when a woman takes and hides leaven in a large batch of flour to produce enough bread to feed a whole village. This is what the Kingdom of God is like.

St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (5:8) tells the community to replace "the old leaven of malice and wickedness with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth." Jesus' death and resurrection has transformed the ancient Passover from slavery in Egypt to liberation from death to new life.

This Passover is explored in the gospels by the frequent trips back and forth across the lake, where so many astonishing revelations occur for the disciples during violent storms and when Jesus walks on the water. If these are actually resurrection appearance stories, we are encountering a powerful metaphor in the gospels about "passing over," but we must grasp it to understand who Jesus is and what faith in him demands of us.

Jesus is surely warning us today to guard against other kinds of leaven, invisible and pervasive influences that shape our thinking without our knowing it, but with serious

consequences. Fear is one of these -- fear of people we see as different or threatening. Nationalism -- a sense of superiority that justifies inhumane treatment of strangers – blocks our memory of our own ancestral history and any openness to newcomers. Consumerism -- a seamless world of desire for things, food, entertainment and pleasure, constantly stimulated by television, film and social media -- can replace reality with illusions.

Such leaven cannot co-exist with the leaven of the Gospel, which is the Holy Spirit, who requires total collaboration with our spirits. One leaven must replace all the others entirely.

Editor's note----------

In the weeks ahead, leading to Lent and Holy Week, many of the scripture readings will reflect the political and religious divisions and uncertainty that roiled Judaism and the earliest decades of Christianity. Our reflections will take into consideration that the texts contain language that historically served to foster ugly stereotypes and fuel ancient hostility toward Jews. The Catholic Church took a huge step toward correcting those perceptions in the Vatican II document Nostra Aetate. More than 50 years after the promulgation of that document, the church is still wrestling with how to interpret our sacred texts in light of new research and understanding. A good point of reference is a 2019 talk by Pope Francis to the Pontifical Biblical Institute as it addressed the topic, "Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reappraisal." He spoke of the need to "find ways to overcome ancient prejudices."