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On Being Yeast In Batches of Dough¹

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Text: 1 Corinthians 5:6b-9

This is the time of year when I am always very conscious of the cycles in our lives. There is the cycle of the seasons with the advent of spring and the arrival of my mold allergy. There is the cycle of the church year as we begin the celebration of Easter. The cycle of life and death and rebirth. The cycle of aging (that one really hit me this year as you will notice as I constantly try to find out where I can focus through my bifocals!).

And tonight I am very aware of the cycle of the school year. At the end of the school year we say a lot of goodbyes. Some of the goodbyes are temporary – to classmates and faculty and staff and colleagues as you disperse for the summer. Some of these goodbyes are more permanent – the goodbyes said to and received from graduates, with a variety of emotions: some sadness, and a lot of relief!

When I was a High School teacher, one of the marks of the end of the school year was the ceremony of the cleaning out of the lockers. Every home room teacher had to supervise her or his home room students as they emptied out a year's worth of accumulations. For some students this was not a big deal; their lockers were always organized and tidy. But for other students this was a major undertaking as a year's worth of textbooks, library books, handouts, permission slips, gym clothes, sports equipment, backpacks, "boom-boxes," CDs, and best of all, forgotten lunches, were hauled out, looked over and either returned, taken home, or pitched. If you were lucky, the old lunches were still wrapped well so that they didn't smell or hadn't leaked. But with that kind of student you were rarely so lucky. More likely, it seemed as if aliens had inhabited the locker in question leaving behind strange looking and repulsive oozes and messes. Leftover lumps of unknown origin with so much growth on them they looked like they could have walked away on their own!

Against this background I want to refer back to the reading from First Corinthians and talk about being yeast and batches of dough.

Now I know that Paul is talking to a very specific community with very specific issues. In this passage he is reminding them that because of Christ's action they are indeed a new thing, an Easter people, a new batch of dough. At the same time Paul is challenging the Corinthians to put that reality into practice, or (as one commentator put it) be in reality what you are in principle, or be in actuality what you are potentially.

I think there are some good questions for us as individuals and as a community that come out of this text. At the end of a year, or a degree program, or a career, what is it that we need to clean out? What is it that we cherish and want to hang on to? For those of you who are leaving this place tonight, graduating or retiring, what from this place, this community, do you want to take with you? And those of you who will return in the fall, what do you need to do to make yourselves ready to reshape yourselves again, to add new leaven to the batch, to become a new community?

Over the course of a year, or a degree, or a career, many things happen, some planned and some unexpected. And I think it is safe to guess that for all of us this year there have been triumphs and joys, disappointments and sadness. What makes our individual experiences unique is the size and balance as well as the particular detail of these experiences. And at the end of the cycle – be it eight months or *x* years – it is good to look back. As Socrates reminds us, the unexamined life is not worth living.

If we are yeast, we are bound to affect the next batch of dough we find ourselves in ...for good or ill. So think about where you are heading now. Maybe you know, maybe you are still waiting to find out. Maybe it is to a new place and a new kind of work, like being a pastor in Timmins. Or maybe it is to return here and to continue doing the same kind of work, like teaching Greek. And think about the yeast you want to be in that community, in that batch of dough. I think we all want to be good yeast, not stuff that will run out of control and spoil the batch.

Think further. What has attached itself to you this year or to me this year that we may be unaware of, and that may hinder our ability to be good yeast? Are there relationships you need to mend, sorrows you need to grieve, grudges you need to let go of, hurts and slights

you need to forgive, disappointments you need to get over? Then by all means do the work you need to do to bring about those healings.

And on the flip side: What has attached itself to you this year or to me this year that may strengthen and equip us in our work as yeast? Are there skills you have learned, friendships you have developed upon which you can rely, joys you can treasure and remember in difficult times, compassion you have developed, successes that will strengthen you in the face of uncertainty or failure, wisdom you have acquired? Then by all means hold on to these gifts and value them for the treasure they are. They will help you be your best yeasty selves in the next batch of dough.

Maybe like my old home room students we need to take the time to sort through our lockers, and to return or keep or pitch what we find there. Maybe like the Corinthians we need to be in reality what we are in principle – yeast! Proclaimers of God’s love!

Here’s the good news: this is not a test! Whether or not you are able to acknowledge or change that which keeps you from being good yeast; whether or not you are able to list and use the gifts you have been given; whether you are stuck in a lump of dough or bringing new life to a new community – you are Easter people. You are God’s beloved children.

The Christ who commissions us to go out into the world as yeast, promises to meet us and be with us, in every batch of dough we find ourselves in, and in the bread which will nourish and sustain us. Amen.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon was preached at the Closing Service, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo, Ontario, April 23, 2003. The service also marked the retirements of Dr. Peter L. Van Katwyk, Prof. of Pastoral Care and Counseling, and Ms. Dorothy Godden, a much-loved staff person.