

Bread Instead

*A sermon preached on Ephesians 4:25-5:1 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on August 19, 2018*

I.

Our beloved former pastor and friend Dr. Randall Lolley once told a story about a man and his outlook on life. The year was 1958, you see, and on a cold and bitter February morning, a hunter strode into the local police station there in his northern Japanese home. The hunter was racked with fear and terror, his face white as a sheet. When pressed, he could barely choke out the words: “I’ve seen it!”

The police commissioner couldn’t gather much else from the frightened man, but convinced that he’d seen something of note, organized a search party sent to crisscross the snowy woods and fields. Hours passed, and right at the point the search party began to think they’d leave empty-handed, one of them poked what looked like a pile of leaves under an overhanging bank. In an instant, that pile rose up and erupted in a shower of dirt and debris.

Two dark eyes peered through the mud-cracked, soiled face, and “it” tried to speak, but could not. At long last, the figure lifted its fingertips to its lips and bowed three times, the typical Japanese way. Matching the searchers’ fear for fear, this figure turned out to be a man named Liu-Liang-I.

Liu-Liang-I, they learned, was a 46 year-old Chinese man who had been captured by the Japanese some fifteen years prior and brought to a Prisoner of War camp in Japan. It seemed that while he was in captivity, he escaped and — for fifteen years — had been on the run and hiding. For fifteen

years, he hadn't communicated in any way with another human. For fifteen years, he had no idea what was unfolding all around him, what had transpired in the daily news, what changes had occurred. Fifteen bitter-cold winters, he stayed alive by foraging the countryside for food and digging a hole in the ground with his knife, burrowing in with leaves and straw and hibernating like an animal down below. The loneliness and isolation he endured was horrid. For until that day when rescuers told him otherwise, Liu-Liang-I continued to live as if the war still raged. And it took a scared hunter and a search party for Liu to learn that the war had in fact ended some thirteen years ago.¹

II.

As Dr. Lolley told the story, he called it a modern parable for 'us and our 1996 world.' And if I may, I add to that to say that this modern parable is as prescient in 1958, as in 1996, and even still in 2018, is it not?

We may not be covered with leaves and mud, but we are caked in our own pride and anger and greed and envy, all that bitter debris of our souls clinging on for dear life. We may not burrow into a hole to survive the winter, but we do nestle into the corners and echo chambers of our own making, curling into ourselves and our opinions for comfort and reassurance. We may not be silent with fear, but we fear the silence, filling our moments with clicks and clacks and soundbites and tickers and dings and beeps, sounds humming and words droning behind us so we never have to feel the bald hush of stillness. We may not go fifteen years in solitude without encountering another, but we do cut ourselves off from our neighbor across

¹ Story told by Randall Lolley, "Ephesians," *Journey With Me: Redemptive Threads Woven Through the Bible*, p265-266.

the street, on the other side of the wall, around the world, or even in our very own home out of self-preservation and a healthy dread for what might happen if we saw and allowed ourselves to be seen. Time and time again, we choose the way of fear, the way of anger, the way of isolation. For we live as if the war within us and among us and between us still rages on.

It is to we who bear the human condition, then and now, that the letter to the Ephesians is written. Scholars are increasingly convinced that this letter, once attributed to Paul, was actually written pseudonymously – meaning written in the style and the spirit of Paul by an anonymous writer.² Regardless of its authorship, we hear throughout the letter these themes of living the Christian life, what it means to be the body of Christ, how Christ unites even the most divided places of creation, breaking down walls of hostility through the promise of reconciliation.

The Bible I use each day has a heading for this particular passage in Ephesians that I find to be wholly helpful: “Rules for the New Life.” And yet, the more I read this letter, the more I see these rules less like a catalogue of do’s and don’t’s, but rather as one scholar says, “the mark of the transformed and transforming community.”³ The writer of Ephesians understood that those who claimed Christ didn’t automatically cease to live as if the war still rages. He knew that those Christians in Ephesus and all to follow must be reminded to “put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.” He understood the way that anger clings like mud cakes, that all too often our tendencies with anger are

² Pheme Perkins, “The Letter to the Ephesians,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p351.

³ Paul V. Marshall, “Ephesians 4:25-5:2,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, p326.

to deny it, ignore it, passively aggressively sidestep it, and refuse to address with the object of our anger the way in which we feel. He recognized that even after experiencing the redemptive grace of Christ, we must be reminded to speak truth to one another, reminded that we are members of one another, reminded of even the simplest postures we should adopt, like being kind and forgiving. And lest we forget this goal toward which we press, we are “marked with a seal for the day of redemption” by the Holy Spirit, a seal that indicates our possession by God, our protection towards the enemy, and our proof of authenticity before God.⁴ In so doing, we’re called to be no less than “imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

All these ‘rules for the new life’ aren’t just plucked out of the air, nor are they pedantic and moralistic maxims for life. Rather, let’s look to the first part of Ephesians 4 to find the theological ideas in which these rules find their grounding. The chapter opens like this: “I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”⁵

Did you hear it, that alternative way of life unfolding right before us? Instead of bitterness and wrath and malice, what about humility and

⁴ Per usual, a brilliant read on this passage from William E. Hull in his sermon “The Seal of the Spirit,” found in *Harbingers of Hope*, p77-79.

⁵ Ephesians 4:1-6

gentleness and patience? Instead of anger that simmers and threatens to fracture relationships, what about the one body, united as ligaments and muscles and bones and sinews, bound together in the oneness of God in Christ revealed through the Spirit?

This alternate reality, this new way of life, is not some distant future, some dreamland that we may emerge into after years of hunkering down within ourselves or some heavenly beyond we'll never experience here on earth. No, it is available through the grace of God to each and every one of us – not by what we've done or who we are, but because of what God does and who God is. For Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is at hand!”

What if we lived as if that were really true? Might we dust off the envy that clings to us at work, the pride that roars in our ears with our spouse, the greed that goes with us to the mall and the party and our school? Might we come out of our foxholes and see the face of God in everyone we encounter? Might we allow God's Spirit to still even the roughest waters of our minds and our souls instead of turning to whatever we can to numb the pain? Might we pour into each other, loving more than our friends and family – our neighbors and yes, even our enemies? Might we begin to wage peace instead of allowing the rage of war?

What might it take for this to become our way of life?

IV.

In Winkler Bakery just down the street from us in Old Salem, all manner of homemade treats have risen from this bakery since it was first opened in the year 1800. Wrinkled hands of wise bakers fashion mounds of

sugar- and butter-infused dough into what will become sugar cake. Young apprentices knead the paper-thin folds of ginger spice and molasses into the tray from which hundreds of the classic Moravian cookie will be formed. The old dome ‘beehive’ oven reaches its peak of 500 degrees before cooling a bit in order to receive its bread for the day. Baking techniques more than 200 years in the making persist, grounding the daily work of mixing and molding, whisking and waiting.

That challenge of waiting for the yeast to rise is one every baker must contend with. But as the old story goes – at Winkler’s, *the yeast is simply in the air*, captured in the rhythms and wonder of this space day after day, week after week, year after year.⁶

Ever since I heard this story, I’ve been captivated by it. I wonder what it might be like to be part of a place like that, where the spirit of God is as palpable and pliable in the air as yeast is in a bakery. I wonder what our church might be like as a laboratory of love, one where our bold love and boundless compassion created a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. I wonder what we must do so that our dome might capture the same spice and spirit as that of the dome oven at Winkler’s. I wonder what God might do with us if we emerged from the sunken holes and tunnels of our solitude and ourselves, and instead became, as Ephesians says, ‘members of one another.’ I wonder what we must do to speak truth to our neighbors and to each other in this day and age of fabrication and fiction. I wonder how we ourselves might become change agents if, instead of foraging through our differences,

⁶ Story told to me by Rev. Scott Dickison. Further illumination about Winkler Bakery from this wonderful story and video found here: <https://www.ourstate.com/unearthed-winkler-bakery-offers-sweet-history-lesson/>

we modeled what feasting together on the bread of life would be instead. I wonder what might happen if we stopped living as if the war raged on and started living like the peacemakers and the beloved children we are called to be.

Perhaps our internal change would be dramatic. Or maybe such transformation would be like that yeast in the air, imperceptible to the naked eye until, like that dark morning at the tomb, it can't help but to make all things rise. Amen.