

Golden Joinery
A Sermon based on Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2
August 12, 2012 – Marsha Vollkommer

...”unity cannot be maintained except in great difficulty, with constantly renewed sacrifice, with lucid honesty, openness, humility, the readiness to ask forgiveness and to forgive.” I chose these words from Thomas Merton for the silent meditation at the beginning of our worship this morning because – well, just listen to what we heard in the letter to the Ephesians: “...let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors...labor and work honestly, so as to have something to share with the needy...let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you...” The gift has been given – the gift of the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ (as we heard again this morning in volume three of the five-volume set: *The Bread Chronicles*). The gift has been given – once, for all...for the Ephesians in the first century, for the world of Thomas Merton in the twentieth century, for us today as we barrel along in the twenty-first century, henceforth, now and forever. And yet...and yet...we are *still* struggling with the question, “How then shall we live?”

Maybe we’re not so much struggling with the question. It is both an honest and an easy question to ask. What would God have me do? Who would God have me be? If we are honest, we can find the answer just as easily. Religions all around the world, whatever they are named, and even the tenets of civil society are based on love of neighbor, truth and trust. We found guidance in the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, and, we can find it in so many places. I think, closer to the point, we struggle with intentionally living out an answer we already pretty much know and understand. It is part of being human, this struggle, and as Merton says, it is difficult. There are times when it feels as though the struggle has been abandoned. I heard on the radio this week that the current political campaigns are not only consuming a tragically obscene amount of money, but have been dubbed the meanest in history. I suppose you could dismiss this by arguing that this is said about every election cycle. But mean is mean. How did we come to this? What has happened to honesty and forgiveness? To truth and trust? How then shall we – you, and I, and all of us together – how shall we live?

Truth and honesty are very, very, very complicated concepts. They can be intellectual, emotional, or physical; scientific, sociological, or psychological; Biblical, spiritual or religious...the list goes on. Truth is regional and historical – what is true today was not necessarily true long ago and may not be true in the future; what is true in this place is not necessarily true somewhere else. Yet just as the ills of the world and the woes of humanity can seem so overwhelming that we are tempted to throw up our hands in despair and shout, “What’s the point?” we *cannot* turn our backs on honesty, for if we do we have said, “No thanks” to all that God intended in our creation. The only place we can begin – the starting point in the struggle for

unity, for trust, for truth – is here. I within me. You within you. You and I together as a community of God.

Complete and honest openness with oneself is not as easy nor as common a practice as we like to imagine it is. We can quite easily adopt the ways and attitudes and language and belief systems of others that under close examination fly in the face of what we know to be important – *God's* intention not only for us but for all of *God's* children. I don't know about you, but when I buy one more thing I truly do not need, when I am drawn into a conversation taking place at someone's expense, when I start thinking of "we and they," of "those" people, when I agree with someone I perceive to have power or influence despite my convictions to the contrary, I have not been true to myself. I have borne false witness to God. If you and I cannot be true to ourselves, how can we ever hope to be true to one another? How can we hope to grow unity in *God's* kingdom on earth? I am not speaking here of the silly little conversations about the limits of honesty in polite society. You know, the ones that suggest honesty isn't always the best policy? The ones that suggest honesty can be carried too far...when your best friend asks if you like her new dress and you honestly feel it makes her resemble a Volkswagen beetle? Well, that is just silly – silly not only in the analogy, but silly because we don't build relationship, unity and love by knowingly wounding another. We build relationship, unity and love by being honest with ourselves, open with one another, radically transparent...because in our transparency we let the light of *God's* love shine through us...we have received the gift of the Bread of Life, and we are called to share.

Alan Jones, former Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, wrote a book called Living the Truth. Therein he expands a bit our understanding of the multifaceted gift of the Bread of Life. He writes: "When we wake up in the morning, we can see the world through a variety of prisms. If we are truly aware, we will have glimpsed some terrible truths: that life is often very hard, that we are going to die, that we are not in control. It is at that point of recognition that we have a choice. Far from being depressing, such knowledge of our frailty can be the occasion of liberation, even hilarity. Amazement and gratitude can put us in touch with purposes and possibilities larger than ourselves. It comes as a relief not to find ourselves at the center of the universe. Believing in destiny (there's that gift again) rather than fate is a gamble of faith worth taking.

Human beings are a choosing sort of creature. So why not choose to do good rather than evil, to choose the generous view of the world rather than a crabbed one?" Why not choose to say nothing at all, rather than something unkind? To not buy a thing if the money spent might be helpful to someone who has no things? To remember that the person with whom I disagree is my brother, and may well have something to teach me, rather than deepening the divides by labeling him "other" and making him my foe? Why not choose, as the Ephesians were taught, to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, and malice, and instead be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in

Christ has forgiven us? The struggle to act as we know we are to act – to live as we are taught to live – lies in the effort it takes to be constantly mindful and true to ourselves. The choice is ours, if we only remember.

What then of forgiveness? Whether you call it concept, practice, or way of life this, too, is a gnarly one. I know that we oft times say we have far greater problems forgiving ourselves than we do forgiving others. This may well be true. And again, it may be that the some of the things I think I have forgiven others are simply buried deep within me in an effort to get on with life. The author Molly Wolf uses the metaphor of a broken teapot to illuminate the brokenness in lives and relationships. Upon receiving a tea set from her grandmother – one that Molly remembered from her childhood – she noticed for the first time that the teapot itself was a web of glued pieces. She realized that the instant it had fallen to the floor, smashed into a hundred pieces, it could never again serve the function it had served. No matter how much anguish, anger or heartache accompanied the breaking of the pot, there was no way to go back in time and undo the moment of its destruction. So, too, when relationships are broken – and *we* are suffering the anger or heartache, or have been the *cause* of anger or heartache to another – the one thing we cannot do is go back in time. We can never hope for a better past, but we can pray for God’s help in a healing future.

The scary part is that we cannot know as we begin what that healing future will look like. Sometimes it can mean that in relationship we are better than before. To use another metaphor, just as Rob and I learned that a blocked artery is the sign of a broken system, we also learned that a mended artery makes you healthier – and more diligent – than before. Or the healing may be an ending – an acceptance of the way things are rather than the way we hope they might be, allowing others to be who they are rather than who we would have them be. It may be an ending of the old parameters of a relationship as we build a foundation for something new. It may be, as Wolf says, “a complete parting of the ways without reconciliation because the shards are too sharp to handle until time’s long, slow erosive power make their edges less dangerous.”

Or – something else entirely may occur...

There is a Japanese arts called kintsugi – “golden joinery” – which mends broken china with seams and fill-ins of golden resin. The results are startlingly beautiful as the gold erupts from the background of formal pattern or rough stoneware, following the lines of breakage, filling in smashed or missing bits. With golden joinery, Molly’s teapot, which she still thought mysteriously lovely, would have bloomed into something extraordinary, seamed with beauty. Kintsugi, you see, *requires* brokenness to work. And equally with fine porcelain and with humble stoneware, it provides elegance – both simple and powerful – to something made rough and useless in its brokenness. Jesus the man, Mary’s son the rabbi, was as broken as Molly’s teapot – beyond any conventional mending. God’s grace is the

golden resin that not only put him, and us, back together, but made him, as it makes us, into something new and radically different.

God in God's mercy looks at the ways in which we've broken our own hearts and others' trust and says "It is forgotten." Not that we haven't sinned — we have, of course, and there are usually consequences, not all of which can be managed with white glue and duct tape. (Repentance sweeps up the pieces, at least.) But God's purpose is to bring us into a new beauty, not to break us more than we've already broken ourselves. God is more interested in loving us and accepting our love than settling scores. The gift of the Bread of Life.

When Gloria said I might choose the silent meditation for today's bulletin, I asked if it was okay to use a quote from Thomas Merton. Her immediate response was, "Oh, is it my favorite?" and I knew exactly the one she meant. I think *that* quote in its context might serve us well. As we move boldly to our confession of sin – because if we are true to ourselves we know that we have sinned; as we move confidently to God's granting of forgiveness – because we trust that time and time and time again God tells us "it is forgotten...now let's move on together"; as we move gratefully to the gift of the Bread of Life, freely given in the Eucharist, freely given always, with Thomas Merton, let us pray:

Lord God,
We have no idea where we are going.
We do not see the road ahead of us.
We cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so.
But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing.
We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire.
And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road though we may know nothing about it.
Therefore we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.
Amen.
And amen.

Thanks to Alan Jones and his book [Living the Truth](#); and to Molly Wolf and her blog, "Scrambling Towards Zion: Looking for God in Real Life."
(<http://molly2rivers.wordpress.com/>)