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Maundy Thursday – 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 – The Lesson in the Leaven
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Would you take a look at this beauty! Who doesn't love fresh-baked bread? We love the way it smells, we love the way it looks, we love the way it feels with its crunchy outside and soft inside. And we most especially love the way it tastes – a beautiful loaf of sourdough like this one makes excellent French toast and grilled cheese and so many other things, too.

But back in Old Testament Israel, at Passover time especially, this was public enemy #1. See, back in those days before yeast came in convenient glass jars or paper packets, the way people would make bread with yeast was pretty similar to how sourdough is still made today. Flour and water is mixed and allowed to sit and ferment over a period of days, so that the wild yeast spores in the flour and in the air can work into the mixture and begin to divide and grow. And eventually, that starter gets to a point that it can be fed and used on a continuous basis to leaven loaves of bread for baking.

Well, the process of baking bread took on a symbolic meaning in Israel's worship life, and even Jesus himself and the Apostle Paul in our text for today key on that same idea. From the institution of the Passover meal in Exodus 12 all the way to the New Testament church in 1 Corinthians 5, yeast in baking bread became a symbol of sin in our hearts. And God gives us this lesson in the leaven to teach us not only about sin's seriousness, but ultimately also about sin's only real solution.

So first, think about how yeast spreads. Once it gets into the dough, even just a little yeast will keep growing and puffing up until the entire batch is affected. You can't see it, but it's always there and working. Well, the same goes for sin in our hearts. It may start small – so it seems to us, anyway – but it always grows on the inside and puffs us up with human pride; it feeds on itself and leads to other sins. It's just like Jesus said, "*Out of the heart come evil thoughts,*" attitudes, lusts, desires – and before we know it, they can totally take over our lives.

And what makes that so dangerous is how pleasant and harmless sin can seem to us at first. Again, who doesn't love the smell of fresh-baked bread? You smell it, you see it, and your mouth starts to water. You want it because you just know how good it's going to be... and yet, with yeasty bread, if you have too much of it or if you have an allergy, it can end up hurting your health, giving you a bad stomachache, or simply going to your waistline. Well the same goes for the sin in our lives. It may seem at first like it's going to be so fun, so easy, so harmless, but in fact sin is always harmful and it always makes

our lives harder in the end, because it hurts us, hurts others, and most especially hurts our relationship with God.

And that's why God told the Israelites to be so careful about getting all the yeast out of their houses during festival time. Sweep your floors, wipe your counters, dust your shelves, wash your clothes – anywhere yeast could be collecting, get it out so your house can be clean! God wanted them to be careful about their surrounding environment, and he wants that for our spiritual lives, too. It's not just the devil and our own sinful flesh that tempt us to sin – it's also the influences of the world around us. Believers need to take special care about the company they keep, the entertainment they're exposed to, the activities they take part in, because if we don't do our best to keep our lives and surroundings free from temptation, sin is always going to find its way in.

But as any scientist can tell you, that's actually a futile effort. See, there's so much microscopic yeast in the air and all around us that we could never keep our bread totally, 100% unleavened, and once that yeast gets into the bread, there is no possible way for us to ever get it out. And again, the same is true for our sin – we are *born* in sin, and no matter how we might try to "*get rid of the old yeast [of] malice and wickedness*" by resisting the devil, or turning away from the world, or disciplining our flesh, our own efforts could never be enough to totally rid our hearts and lives and homes of the sin that permeates them.

So learn the lesson in the leaven, friends: in this world, it would take a miracle to make a truly *un*-leavened, entirely yeast-free batch of bread dough... And it is an even greater miracle to make and keep our lives free from sin. But what's the definition of a miracle? Something only God can do – so that's exactly what he did in sending Jesus Christ. What we could never accomplish by our own righteousness, Jesus accomplished for us by winning our forgiveness. He lived a perfectly *unleavened*, perfectly holy life for us – not one spore of sin's yeast contaminated his flesh! And then, best of all, he gave that perfect body in sacrifice for us on the cross, and he still gives it for the forgiveness of all of our sins every time we come here to his Supper. Yes, Christ is our true Passover lamb – the one whose blood covers our hearts to deliver us from death, and the one whose body sacrificed for our salvation purges the yeast of sin from our lives both now and forevermore.

So this day and every day, even as (in New Testament Christian freedom) you may eat yeast with your mouth, remember the lesson in the leaven that Jesus has cleansed the yeast of sin from your heart. As you come forward to receive Jesus' true body under this unleavened bread, remember and rejoice that Jesus is making *you* into unleavened bread – *spiritually*, with the "*sincerity and truth*" of faith, so that you can one day take your place at his heavenly Supper in eternity. Amen.