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“The Last Supper”

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Mark 14:12-25

Today I began a series of sermons for Lent focusing upon the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. Those last 24 hours begin with last meal that Jesus ate with his disciples. Today we will examine what exactly was happening at that Passover meal, and then I will invite you to reflect on these questions:  
Who tells you who you are? Who will be at your Last Supper?

I want to set the stage for those last 24 hours, by revisiting what happened in the preceding days. Earlier that week, Jesus made the 75 mile journey from the Sea of Galilee, where nearly all of his ministry took place, down to Jerusalem. It is here that he has come with his disciples to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread or the Passover. It is here Jesus has come to die. Jesus entered into this holy city on what Christians call Palm Sunday. It was not a good week for him. He upset many people that week. Although he entered the city as a King, by Friday he would be nailed to a cross. He would enter the temple and find people buying and selling everything. He would turn over the tables and kick out the money changers. This infuriated the religious leaders who had control of the temple.

On Monday afternoon and again on Tuesday and Wednesday Jesus was teaching in the temple courts. Each day he would push harder on religious reforms, and further irritate the spiritual leaders. He would say things like, "Woe unto you, you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites—because you are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but filled with filth on the inside." He would tell people, "Do what the religious leaders tell you to do but don't do as they do, for they are like the blind leading the blind." You can imagine that he was not well received. They decided that Jesus had to die.

By Thursday they had come up with a plot to put him to death and Jesus was no longer showing his face publicly in the temple courts. At noon on Thursday, Jesus tells Peter and John, "I want you to go into town and prepare the Passover feast for us." They were going to find a secret place to eat where no one could arrest them during the Passover Seder.

Jesus said, "There you will find a man carrying a water jug (which is typically a woman's job). This was to be a clear sign. Follow that man and he will take you to a house where you will find an upper room. Talk to the master of the house and tell him that your teacher wants to know where they will be eating in the Passover feast." And it happened just as Jesus had foretold it.

This is most likely the same upper room where the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus. It was probably a large room owned by a wealthy person, and they were taking a great risk by allowing them to use it.

This meal was a Jewish Passover Seder. Jesus is very intentional that the Last Supper would take place as a Passover meal and so I wanted you to understand the significance of this. In Exodus chapter 12 you find the story of how the children of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They were building the buildings of the pharaohs. They cried out in their oppression and finally Moses was sent to deliver them. Moses pleads with Pharaoh to let his people go. But Pharaoh refuses, so one plague comes after another. Pharaoh adamantly refuses to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt. Finally God says to Moses, "I will perform one last terrible deed in this land. After this the Pharaoh will let my people go. I will send the angel of death by night and he will go through the entire land of Egypt and every firstborn son in every house will perish that night."

God then tells Moses, "Tell the people of Israel to take a Lamb and slaughter it. Put the blood of the lamb on the doorpost of their homes and then when the angel of death comes to those homes with the blood of the lamb on the door the angel of death will pass over those homes and will go on to the next." Hence the name Passover. That night the blood of the lambs was placed on the doorpost, and the lambs were roasted and eaten, and one last meal was shared in Egypt by the Jews before the people would be delivered the next day. There was great sorrow that night as the firstborn was taken, even in Pharaoh's home. So Pharaoh finally demanded that the children of Israel should get out of Egypt.

The people had to leave quickly in the middle of the night, so there was no time for their dough to rise. This is why they prepared unleavened bread. This is what they had to take with them on the journey to eat which is why the Passover feast is also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

They were eventually led by God to the Promised Land and this is what is celebrated at the Passover. God commands the people of Israel, from this time forward, every year, to prepare this meal. They are to sacrifice a Lamb and roast it. They are to have certain things to eat including unleavened bread so that they can teach their children that you were once slaves but now you are free.

We have had some memorable Seder Passover meals here over the years, and they are very significant. Lamb is served as a reminder of the lamb that was slain on Passover night. An egg reminds us, of new birth and new beginnings and new life.

There was the unleavened bread or the matzo. Then there were the 4 cups of wine or maybe more interspersed throughout the evening, which are to symbolize the four promises made to Israel by God. The Passover Meal was not something to be done quickly, or taken lightly. It was a long meal, probably taking about four hours. In the Jewish tradition, to break bread with someone was a high honor, and a way of creating deep intimacy. All meals were spiritually significant in this tradition.

When I think of the importance of long, meaningful meals in our spiritual history, I recall an episode of “Leave It To Beaver” in which Wally and the Beaver are setting the table for dinner, and then clearing the dishes after dinner. Exasperated, Wally says, “Gee, Mom, can’t we just eat all our meals over the sink—it would be so much easier!” In our Jewish tradition, no meals were ever eaten over the sink!

The Passover meal was a sacred, time consuming and celebratory time as the Jewish people remember that they were once were slaves and now they are set free. But this Passover Seder with Jesus was not festive at all. Everyone was wondering what was going to happen to them. There was fear and anxiety, and those feelings became intense when Jesus turned to the disciples in the middle of the meal and said, "One of you will betray me." The disciples began to ask aloud, "Is it I Lord? Am I the one who was going to betray you?" This question rings through the ages and echoes to us still today. "One of you will betray me. Which one?"

Ultimately the answer is: All of them. Every last one. They would all fall away, betray, deny, and run and hide their faces and pretend like they never knew him at all. Judas would be the one who would betray Jesus in terms of leading the Temple guard to Jesus to arrest him. Peter would deny ever knowing Jesus that night. The rest of the disciples would desert him and run and hide. These, his closest friends, would all turn on him and abandon him within the next 24 hours.

At that Last Supper Jesus knew what all of his friends would do, and yet he expressed his deep love for them. He washed their feet. He served them the bread and the wine, as symbols of his body and blood, and he looked at them and said, "You are no longer my disciples, but you are my friends." There is a lesson there for us. Every friend you have ever had is going to fail you—not be there when you need them, desert you, deny you or betray you at some time—and you are going to do that to your friends. Jesus knew this about people and he still loves them with a life giving, unconditional love.

That is part of what the season of Lent is about—really understanding the love

Jesus has for all of us, for we have all betrayed him. Lent is about returning to the One who shouldn't love us, but does love us with an everlasting love.

After he announced his betrayal, Jesus did something fairly normal for a Passover. He took the bread and he gave thanks to God, and he blessed it, and he broke it.

But this is where that particular Passover meal gets strange. After he broke it he gave it to his disciples and said, "Take and eat for this is my body given for you." This was not part of the Passover Seder.

"This is my body given for you. I lay my life down for you." These were powerful and mysterious words. He then does something else unusual, he says, "This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." This was incredible, Jesus turning the Passover into a remembrance of his life and death.

Jesus completely transformed this meal. He is giving his disciples a new covenant, a new relationship, and a new beginning. He is promising to always be with them in Spirit, as a symbol of God's covenant with them. Jesus is doing something profound and earth shattering.

What happened the night of the Last Supper is huge, really huge. And really, if you are a follower of Jesus, you have to get it. You have to understand this story. Every time you take the bread and the cup you remember this story. It should shape your life and should be the defining story of who you are now and who you will be in the future. It is the story about new beginnings, new birth, and an enduring relationship with God. A God with you and within you. In a deep theological sense, Holy Communion is what defines us. It tells us that we belong to God and God belongs to us; nothing can ever change that fact. It defines us.

So as we think about the theological significance of this meal, let me ask you: Who tells you who you are? Who defines you?

Do you allow the most negative voices in your life or past to tell you who you are? What tapes in your past do you continue to play over and over again? Was it the abuse you received as a child? Was it your alcoholic parent? Was the time someone hurt you, or was it something a friend did to you when you felt betrayed? Is it a sense of your own inadequacy or ugliness?

I know that some of the voices in my head that tell me who I am are not the voice of God. They are voices of judgement, criticism, and self hatred.

There is one voice, one memory that is meant to define us more than any other. It is the memory of the assurance that we are loved and forgiven by God. That we are

children of God. And we remember that every month when we have Communion. When we receive this evidence of Jesus laying down his life for us, it reminds us that God loves us dearly, and only God can tell us who we are.

If you had only 24 hours to live, who would be at your last supper?

Who would be sitting around your table as your life comes to a close? Of course your family members, but what others would you want to spend your last hours with? Who would you want to remember your legacy? It is interesting who Jesus selected to be with him throughout his ministry. In 3 years they grew very close, and these would be the ones who became his dearest friends. Even though he knew they would betray and deny him, they were still the best friends he had.

We all need spiritual friends, the people who pray us through tough times, people who will be there for us no matter what, people who can bear our darkest secrets and deepest fears. Do you have those kinds of friends? If Jesus needed them, you need them too. We are trying to create a climate in this church where those kind of relationships are possible, where they can be nourished and nurtured. As you heard last week in Julie's sermon we are trying so hard to strengthen our ministry of congregational care. We are trying to get everyone involved in a small group of some sort, whether a class, Men's Breakfast Group, Women's Discussion Group, to help you develop deep and lasting spiritual relationships.

I know that at times of struggle in my own life, it has been my Christian friends who have saved my life. They have spoken hard words to me that I needed to hear. They cried with me and lifted me up in prayer. They loved me when I could not love myself, or did not have the energy to go on. That kind of support from brothers and sisters in the faith has made all the difference in my life.

Do you have spiritual friends like this? We all need these kinds of friends and that is a part of what a spiritual community can provide. But you have to work at cultivating spiritual friendships. They don't just happen. You have to say, "I am going to make this a priority in my life. I am going to reach out to others."

At that Last Supper Jesus sat with his disciples, a band of misfits and ragamuffins, one a Roman collaborator, one a tax collector, one who wanted to kill the Romans, one who was bashful, and one who was brash. There were some who were fishermen and some were carpenters. Most of them could not even read or write. One would betray him, one would deny him and all would desert him, and they were his dearest friends. And he gave them the authority to continue his ministry on earth, to make sure his memory would never die. He loved them dearly.

Jesus himself would die, and they would all be in despair. It took time for them to understand that the truth was really true. But they always had a last meal to remember, the Passover meal that he transformed. Throughout the rest of their lives, when they celebrated this, they would remember him and what he had done for them. And we are to do the same.

As Jesus began his last 24 hours on the earth, he gathered with his imperfect friends, and he told them he was going to lay down his life for them. He promised to be with them in the breaking of the bread, as a reminder of his presence with them always. My friends, this sacrament are an essential part of what defines us.

It not only tells us who we are, it tells us whose we are--dearly loved children of a God who laid down his life for us.

Let us pray: Eternal God:

As we begin our journey through Lent, we remember how Jesus transformed the Last Supper into a remembrance of his life and death. We recall how he freely laid down his life out of love for us, that we might have abundant and eternal life. Help us to live in the light of that love and to remember it always. Amen.