

“The LAST Supper”
Luke 22:7-23
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Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

All throughout our Lenten season we’ve heard again how Jesus broke bread with all sorts of people: outcasts like Levi and Zacchaeus, honored Pharisees and learned scribes, women who dared to break social conventions, neighbors who crowded in to listen, the highest and lowest members of society, those who had come to adore Jesus, and those who grew more suspicious of him. Jesus’ practice of table fellowship was a sign of the mission for which he was anointed — to gather God’s children through the breaking of bread together that all might be one in the kingdom of God.

Today, we come to Jesus’ last supper of his earthly ministry. As will be true throughout all the events in the last week in his life, Jesus chooses to use this mealtime encounter to further reveal God’s plan of our salvation, not by engaging people in theological discussions, but through his very intentional actions and carefully chosen words. All the while, Jesus will offer his followers words of encouragement for the days ahead and for when he, their beloved leader, will no longer be with them beginning at this last meal.

Jesus — who had always been the invited guest — has become the gracious host, dining not among strangers but sitting at table with those who professed to love him most. He planned the place and the time, telling his disciples, “I eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” The Greek literally says, “with desire, I have desired to eat,” emphasizing the loving intentions of his heart and his deliberate choice of the Passover meal as his setting — a meal that was and still is a family meal celebrated in the home. Yet, Jesus and the other disciples did not return home to Nazareth to celebrate with their families. They gathered in an upper room as the new family they had become, born not of blood but of love — love for Jesus and love for one another. Jesus’ desire was to celebrate the Passover meal, celebrating God’s deliverance of Israel from their bondage in Egypt, and to institute the Communion meal as a visible sign of the grace of his forgiveness that liberates people from their spiritual bondage. He does so by re-imagining the symbols of the Passover ritual.

He takes the bread, asks God to bless it most likely using the traditional words of blessing, then he passes the bread around saying, “This is my body which is given for you.” While they must be thinking to themselves, what does he mean? Jesus takes a cup of wine and further shocks them saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” New, not in the sense we tend to think as in abolishing the old. The disciples knew immediately Jesus was referring to the promise God renewed through the prophet Jeremiah after the kingdom of Israel was taken off into exile and divided into two kingdoms. God promised, “The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel when I will put my law within them and on their hearts I will write it, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Each man his neighbor and each man his brother will say ‘know the Lord,’ for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

More than 500 years has passed since God made that promise. People were longing for it to be fulfilled and the kingdom restored. Jesus is assuring them that in the pouring out of his life, not just in death, as he had been doing through all his teaching, preaching, and healing, the kingdom had come among them. The righteousness contained in the law has been written on the disciples' hearts, and when they practice what he preached they will bring healing and redemption into the lives of those still in bondage to their sin and brokenness. The cup he shared with them is a visible sign of that reality.

In the Passover meal, there are four cups of wine, each symbolizing the way of repentance leading to forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. The first cup which is drunk at the start of the meal reminds those gathered of their true identity as God's people, called to be a holy nation and a priestly kingdom. The second cup begins with the son asking, "Why is this night different from other nights?" The father answers the question by proclaiming what the Lord did for Israel in Egypt. The third cup is the cup of redemption, also known as Elijah's cup. The story is retold of Israel's hope of final redemption through the coming of the Messiah. With this cup, the unleavened bread is eaten. This is the cup of the new covenant that will be sealed with Jesus' death. The fourth and final cup is the cup of praise at which Psalms are sung, including Psalm 118, where we hear, "The stone the builder's rejected has become the corner stone. Jesus didn't drink this cup saying, 'I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom comes.'" Forgoing the fourth and final cup meant the Passover meal was left unfinished, because Jesus knew his death would leave behind unfinished business. There was still kingdom work to be done, and he was entrusting that work to his disciples.

We can only imagine how much Jesus' heart broke the moment he realized that one (or more) of his closest followers was going to betray him. When he gives voice to that heartache rather than a unison pledge of undying loyalty, the disciples ask each other who it might be, even as they wonder to themselves, "Will it be me?" The very next day, when he is arrested, all of them will flee into the darkness of their fear, their self-centeredness, and their betrayal. It's a story we know so well and one that gets acted out in our own lives time and time again. We, like the disciples, want to be faithful — bravely trying to stick together through thick and thin, wanting to stand up for what is right, sacrificing our own good for the good of others — but in the end, when the going gets rough, when the price to pay for acting on our good intentions feels too high, we abandon our discipleship. Yet, as in all the other meals, Jesus shared with his disciples and others there is good news for us from this meal: The good news that a new covenant was being ratified that night; a covenant sealed by Christ's love for us even to death. Like the covenants of old, this new covenant will come at God's initiative not ours. We might not always be faithful in our undying loyalty, but God remains faithful to us. Our love falters and stumbles; God's love endures forever.

In the garden, Jesus himself will face the ultimate test of faithfulness as he prays for that third cup — that cup of redemption to be taken from him — but under the spirit's power he is able to ultimately say, "Not my will, but thy will be done." It is in that moment that the cup of redemption becomes our blessing cup. Every time we drink of it, we receive the grace to echo his surrender and become his instrument of forgiveness and reconciliation, as we pass that cup to others, that they might experience forgiveness and reconciliation that leads to freedom and joy.