

Water, Bread, Wine, and Love

No story involving a significant period of time in the life of Jesus of Nazareth is complete without a dinner break. So much of Jesus's ministry took place at the table. He was famously indiscriminate in his choice of companions, regularly breaking bread with prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners as he scandalized the religious elites. He ate with Pharisees too, but they dined with him at their peril. Those who decided to match wits with Jesus over dinner often found themselves nursing a bruised ego after he cheerfully demolished their arguments and shattered their pretensions. Having grown up poor, our Lord enjoyed a hearty meal and a glass or two of wine. No exaggerated penitential fasting for him. In Matthew, Jesus readily admitted that, unlike his cousin John the Baptist's near-starvation diet, which inspired John's critics to call him possessed, his own enjoyment of good food and wine earned him the epithets of "glutton and drunkard" from those who thought a prophet should abstain from secular comforts.

So, it makes perfect sense that Jesus chose to spend his last night as a free man at dinner with his friends. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that the Last Supper was also the Passover dinner, celebrated by the Jewish people in memory of their deliverance from slavery by the grace of God. These gospels also tell us that, at the end of the meal, Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, inviting his friends to partake of a little more bread and wine so they would remember the sacrifice that he was soon to make. As followers of Jesus, we still partake of bread and wine for the remembrance of our Lord, as we will tonight.

John's Gospel tells a somewhat different story. As theologians Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan note in their book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, John sets the events of Holy Week a day or two earlier so that Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice, is crucified on the same day as the lambs are ritually sacrificed for

the Passover dinner. (Borg and Crossan observe that both timetables are historically questionable and largely symbolic; our own Holy Week schedule aligns more closely with John.) The Last Supper is portrayed in John's Gospel not as a religious observance, but as a casual, intimate dinner between Jesus and his closest friends. There are other differences. Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John makes no mention of the Eucharist. Instead, John alone gives us the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

Then as now, feet are a ticklish thing. In a society where everyone wore sandals and only the wealthy few could afford to ride, people's feet tended to be hot, calloused, and dirty. People reclined at the table, however, which put their feet on display. To prevent embarrassment, gracious hosts offered their guests a footbath before dinner, with a slave providing the service. It would have been unthinkable for the lord or lady of the house to wash their company's feet. The disciples must have been positively dumbfounded when Jesus insisted on washing theirs.

Peter frequently takes a hit in sermons for his initial resistance and continued failure to grasp what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples when the towels came out. In fairness, though, this is another instance where Peter simply said out loud what the other disciples were probably thinking. We may do Peter a disservice when we imagine Jesus sternly scolding him for refusing to have his feet washed. Perhaps Jesus merely indulged in a little playful banter with the disciple who loved him most enthusiastically, if perhaps not most perceptively.

The obvious lesson in this passage for the disciples, and us, is to be humble enough to serve one another, just as Jesus served his friends by washing their feet. It's completely in line with Jesus's insistence that, to be truly great in the Kingdom of Heaven, one must become a servant to all. With such a memorable illustration, the disciples surely must have taken his point. But there's another lesson in this passage that may not be so obvious. At the point where Jesus

takes off his robe and picks up his towel, Judas is still in the room. Jesus doesn't pick and choose among the disciples at this critical moment. He has a few choice words for Judas but, if John's Gospel is correct, every one of the disciples got a footbath from the Son of God that night, even the one who was about to sneak off to the Temple and betray him for a fistful of coins.

It's tempting to demonize Judas. If there's any worse betrayal in all of human history than his betrayal of our Lord, I don't know what it is. But Judas isn't alone in coming up short. Jesus knows that Peter will deny him to save his own skin. He knows that Peter, James, and John will fall asleep as he agonizes in the Garden of Gethsemane, another episode that John's Gospel omits. He undoubtedly knows that the other disciples will flee when confronted by a crowd of Temple police and armed Roman soldiers. Yet, he kneels before all of them and washes their feet, trying to teach them one more lesson before the earthly authorities drag him away.

Iconic and memorable as the foot washing is, it's not the last lesson Jesus offers to his students and friends. Our lectionary tonight skips over the point where Judas heads out to earn his blood money. Perhaps he hesitates for a moment, his resolve softened by Jesus's extraordinary gesture. Jesus has to confront him, referencing his betrayer as the one who ate bread with him and handing Judas a telltale piece. The other disciples don't get it, but Judas certainly does, especially after Jesus tells him, "What you do, do quickly." We can't be sure what Judas is thinking and feeling in that extraordinary moment, but it wouldn't surprise me if he takes great offense at Jesus's words. There's nothing like self-righteous rage to persuade a person that the terrible thing he's about to do is entirely justified. It's only later, when the deed is done and the heat of the moment cools that remorse can set in and, for Judas, it unquestionably did. John doesn't tell us what became of Judas, but Matthew and Luke do, and it isn't pretty. Judas did a monstrous thing, and he paid for it with his life.

If Judas had stayed at the table, the Crucifixion would have occurred anyway. The authorities, religious and secular, were gunning for Jesus, and they would have caught up to him sooner or later. But by leaving when he did, Judas missed Jesus's final instruction to his beloved friends, the teaching we know as the "new commandment." John begins this chapter by affirming that, "having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end." Everything he taught the disciples came down to this one commandment, so simple to say and sometimes so difficult to do: "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

We gather to remember Jesus's final dinner with his friends before his Passion, but we don't call this day "Last Supper Thursday." We don't call it "Eucharist Thursday" or "Foot Washing Thursday" either, though both contribute to our liturgy. We call this *Maundy* Thursday, which comes from the Latin *mandatum*, or "command." That suggests that, while the Eucharist is a priceless gift from our Savior and the foot washing was a valuable lesson in humility, the most important thing we need to take away from the Last Supper is the new commandment to love one another as Jesus loves us. He's not asking for a small thing. Jesus is a whole lot better at love than most of us are, so even attempting to love each other the way he loves us is a stretch. But our Lord asks us – commands us, in fact – and so we have to try. Which leads to the other lesson of Maundy Thursday. Like the disciples, we will fall short of our own aspirations. We can hope to do better than Judas and might even be able to give Peter a run for his money, at least before he repented, but none of the disciples fared especially well when the going got tough, and we won't always, either. Jesus knew they wouldn't and he loved them anyway, so we can trust him to love us just as much. My prayer is that you will always know how much you are loved, and that your knowledge will strengthen you to love just as much in return. *Amen.*