

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Talking with Your Mouth Full”

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But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

John 16:4b-15

[Read passage.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If you were at a last meal with someone, or at least the last meal you would have with someone for a while, what would you talk about? Common answers might be, make sure you share how much you care about them, or reminisce about fond memories, or something like that. Or maybe that’s when you tell them something you had meant to tell for a long time, but just never found the right moment, and now you had to.

That had to be something of what was going through Jesus’s mind on this night, the night we remember on Maundy Thursday. This whole passage in the Gospel of John is part of one long discourse, one long conversation with his disciples, and it takes place during what we now call the Last Supper: the last meal Jesus would share with his disciples before he was arrested and crucified. So as far as what you would talk about at a last meal with someone, that’s what Jesus is doing with his disciples. And as he tells us here in v. 6, “Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.”

I remember something of a last meal I had with Frances—or at least the last meal we’d have together before we got married. She was heading down to her hometown about a week before the wedding, so before she left, we went and got dinner together. And we talked about the wedding and the honeymoon and all the family and friends we would see over the next week. And then that’s when she said, “There’s something I have to tell you.” Obviously if you’re in my shoes, nothing to worry about. But this is what she needed to tell me: she had forgotten to tell her apartment complex that she wasn’t going to renew her lease, and because of the cancellation

policy, we would have to pay an extra month's rent. Like the disciples, my heart was filled with sorrow. (Now that I think about it, she might have just been hedging her bets, but I guess that's water under the bridge.)

The point is, when it's a last meal, you think about what you need to tell someone, something that you might not have a chance to later.

So if that's the case, it means that as we come to this passage, and not just this one but any part of this conversation between Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, we have to ask, "Well why is Jesus telling them this, now?" Especially when he starts getting into all this stuff that, honestly, if I'm in the disciples' place, it's not going to make any sense to me, so why is he saying stuff that would only confuse them?

For example, v. 7. Jesus says, "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." We recognize now that Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Counselor, the Helper—those are other words that other translations use there for "Advocate"—the very presence of God that he would send to empower and guide his followers after he was gone, but this is all new information to the disciples. It was just a few minutes earlier that Jesus had even mentioned this "Advocate" for the first time.

Even if they could understand what all that meant, it's more likely they didn't even hear it, because they're still focused on what Jesus said right before then: "It is to your advantage that I go away." And to that, they've got to be thinking, "I'm sorry what? You're saying it's somehow better for us for you *not* to be here? And it's better so that this Spirit could come instead?" That's like a teacher saying a year ago, "Now we won't be seeing each other in person again for a long time, but don't worry, it'll be better, because we'll be doing class by Zoom." No one's going to buy that.

And so, when Jesus goes into all this about the Advocate coming to prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment, valuable insight though that would surely be, I get the impression that the disciples have stopped paying attention by that point, or are otherwise still so fixated on what he just said that they completely missed that part.

So I think Jesus takes a pause, takes a step back, maybe looks down at the meal they're sharing, takes a breath, and then continues in v. 12 slowly, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." Now that's saying something different. That's not just Jesus trying to get in every last bit of information he possibly can, maximize every minute of instruction time before he's taken away. He's saying instead, "There's a lot left that I have to teach you, but that'll have to wait." And it'll be the Spirit, he explains, that teaches you what I would have you learn.

Think about what that would have meant for them. Think about what that would have meant for you. Jesus had been talking a lot at this meal. These chapters in John are in fact the longest single section of teaching that Jesus ever gives, longer than the Sermon on the Mount, and if you were there, you'd feel like you had been drinking from a fire hose, and all along Jesus is saying stuff about how he's not going to be with you for much longer. You might be thinking, "I was just hoping to enjoy my meal, but I guess that's not happening tonight." But then imagine Jesus pausing, taking a breath, looking down at the meal you're sharing, and telling you, "There's a lot left that I have to teach you, but that'll have to wait." It's like he's saying, "Let's just enjoy this meal together."

I've heard it put that when it came to what Jesus left for his disciples, sure there were his teachings, sure there were miracles, but when it came down to what he wanted his disciples to remember, it's a pretty powerful

thing that he didn't leave behind a pile of scrolls for them to read or pages of doctrine to understand or catechism questions to memorize. All those can be good things, and they surely came later for the church. But when it came down to it, when it came down to what Jesus wanted his disciples to remember this last time they were all together, he didn't leave them a stack of books, he gave them a meal. A meal, and a commandment to love one another, as he loved them, and whenever they gathered, they should do so in remembrance of him.

I remember growing up one of my best friends was named Peter. And Peter was a great friend, but this story has more to do with his parents. I got close to Peter and his family during an especially hard time for me and my family, a stretch of time when things at home were just uncertain or frustrating or exhausting or even infuriating. It's tough being a teenager in a divorce, tough at any age for that matter, but definitely tough for me. But I remember, and really only realized it later on, that whenever I was with Peter over at his house, Peter's parents were always quick to say to me how glad they were that I was there, and always made sure to say as I was leaving, "We love having you here. Keep coming back." Honestly it really wasn't something that I recognized at the time; it was only some years later that it kind of dawned on me what they were doing, and when I ran into them a little later on, I shared my appreciation for their openness and hospitality and how much that had meant to me, especially when so much at home for me was unsettled. And they shared with me that their hope had never been to replace my family or to pass themselves off as the perfect family, because they weren't and weren't trying to be, but to simply make sure that I remembered that they loved me and that I could keep coming back, to simply make sure that I remembered that they loved me and that I could keep coming back.

And I wonder if that's a bit of what Jesus is doing not just in this passage but in this whole section of teaching at the Last Supper. Sure, he gives them a lot to chew on, and sure they probably didn't retain a whole lot of it, but when it came down to it, what did he want them to remember. He tells them there's help coming, and that this Helper would keep teaching them as he would. But for now, love each other as I have loved you, he says, and keep coming back to this meal.

But what about, the disciples might ask, what about what we should do when the authorities press down on us and we're brought up on charges and we're pressured to keep silent? We'll get to that, Jesus seems to say, but for now, love each other, and keep coming back to this meal. But what about as the message spreads and more people start coming in, people who don't talk like us or look like us or were raised like us, do we let them in, and if we do, do they have to do everything the way we do it? We'll get to that, but for now, love each other, and keep coming back to this meal. But what about as the church grows and we have to get organized and appoint elders and leaders and people to care for the congregation and people to preach and hold each other accountable and guard against false teaching and how do we know what's false teaching in the first place? We'll get to that, but for now, love each other, and keep coming back to this meal.

It seems Jesus really was getting his disciples ready for a time without him, a time when they would be entrusted with a message to share, good news to extend. And he wanted to make sure they always put first things first. I know my mother made me learn, and I bet lots of other parents gave the same lesson, don't talk with your mouth full. It's like Jesus wants his disciples to remember this meal first, and only speak once they've digested that. That probably goes for us too.

But what about, we might ask, what about when families and friends are facing what seems to be ever increasing anxiety and uncertainty in their communities, workplaces, and schools? What's the church supposed to do? We'll get to that, Jesus seems to say, but first, don't talk with your mouth full. Are you loving each other? Are you remembering this meal together? But what about when there's this big pandemic and for the sake of

public health we have to stop meeting together and then after that only gradually resume different kinds of activities and do some things indoors and some things outdoors and have registrations and capacities and it's all just seems like a lot? We'll get to that, Jesus seems to say, but don't talk with your mouth full. Are you loving each other? Are you remembering this meal together? But what about when the church is stepping into a new season and folks are coming back but we don't know what it'll be like to come back and we don't know if everyone is *going* to come back? We'll get to that, Jesus seems to say, but don't talk with your mouth full. Are you loving each other? Are you remembering this meal together?

There's a lot yet that the Lord has to show us, but may we never forget that simple command to love each other, and that simple invitation to keep coming back.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.