

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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“Betrayed: Dinner with Deserters”
Mark 14:12-25

The season of Lent began last Wednesday, and we are on the first of six Sundays in Lent today. This year, there’s a little wrinkle of the calendar that I found interesting. You might think it’s boring, but I’m going to tell you anyway. This Lenten season, at least as far as Sundays go, will begin and end on a Sunday when we observe communion. I went and looked it up, and that doesn’t happen too often. As a practice, we celebrate communion on the first Sunday of each month. There’s no magic rule for us to do that, but in order for Sundays in Lent to begin and end with communion, the first Sunday in March has to be the first Sunday in Lent, and there have to be five Sundays in the month of March. For that to happen, Easter has to fall on one of three days in mid-April, and I actually tracked down how often that has happened in the past 500 years.

Might not seem like a big thing, but for Lent to begin and end with a communion Sunday is something that only happens about once every ten years or so. Now, it’s a bit artificial because, when it comes down to it, we could celebrate communion every single Sunday if our Session decided to, but if we keep to the common practice of observing communion on the first Sunday each month, it means that having communion bookend the season of Lent is something that would only take place once every ten years, and this is one of them.

It was with communion in mind that we felt led to spend this Lenten season in the Gospel of Mark, and what we’ll do is drop in to the Gospel right at the moment Jesus establishes a meal with his disciples, and we’ll move forward a little bit each week, working through this 14th chapter of Mark. We start with a meal Jesus shares with his disciples, and it’s one that doesn’t go as they expect—at least not how the disciples expected—and certainly one they wouldn’t soon forget. Will you pray with me?

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

There are some meals you don’t just throw together at the last minute. Sure, you can get away with doing that for some meals. Nothing wrong with throwing together some leftovers, or ordering last minute takeout. If your household was anything like mine this weekend, when Frances was out for the Women’s Retreat, Jack and I were more or less scavenging all weekend. A meal was more of a guideline, replaced instead by something closer to a general grazing, and for this weekend, yeah, we could get away with it. But there are some meals you don’t just throw together. Those tend to be some important meals.

Thanksgiving comes to mind. That’s usually not a meal one throws together. It takes time and preparation. Often a bunch of dishes that need to be ready all at once. Usually a team effort. The turkey, if you’ve got a turkey, has got to come out of the fryer or the smoker or the oven with the right timing to be done and cooled a little bit just in time for all the other dishes to be ready to serve. It’s a lot. It’s a lot to juggle, and if you happen to be hosting Thanksgiving for

family or friends, there can be some stress along with it, but it's all hopefully worth it once you get everyone all in the same place, seated around the same table, ready to enjoy the same meal.

So imagine how you would feel if you had made all those preparations, gotten everyone together, and you start the meal, only for one of your cousins to start airing out dirty laundry during the meal, talking about all the ways that you did wrong by them, and just for good measure starts arguing with your other relatives. How grateful would you be for your cousin's presence there? How happy would your memories be about that meal? Probably not too great, I wouldn't think.

That scene, just that imagined scene, wouldn't be too far off from what the disciples and Jesus had at their last supper together.

They have all gathered for Passover, and Passover is one of those meals that, like Thanksgiving, you don't just throw together at the last minute. There are preparations to be made. This is the meal, after all, that commemorates how God delivered his people Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom. It's a ritual meal, with a lot of symbolism. It's a calling to remember what God has done and to look for God's faithfulness to continue that work. Among Jewish holy days, it's among the most important, if not the most important in the disciples' world.

It appears that Jesus is on top of things, because he seems to know exactly what to tell his disciples to do. He tells them in the earlier part of the passage where to look, who to look for, where to go, what to say, what to do. Jesus is on it. He knows what's coming. He knows what to expect. His disciples do their part too. They go; they follow instructions; they make the preparations that need to be made. And by all appearances, it's a well-done Passover meal. They're all together. They've taken their places, reclining on couches most likely—they probably weren't set up like a big long table but instead on couches around a room.

And then it's like you can hear a utensil start to clink on the side of a glass, signaling that someone would like to say a few public words to the whole group. When you hear that noise, usually you think it's going to be a toast or one of the hosts offering a prayer or a word of gratitude or recognition for something or someone.

They weren't clinking forks on wine glasses there, but at some point in the meal, in the middle of all the symbolic components to the ritual meal of Passover, Jesus gets everyone's attention, and when you might expect him to say something to the effect of, "I'm just really glad all of you are here," or "It's just so great having everyone in the same room under the same roof," or "I'm just so grateful for all of you," he instead says in v. 18, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."

The text says "They began to be distressed," and who can blame them? In what is perhaps the most famous rendering of this very scene at this exact moment, Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* shows Jesus and the disciples all at a table, but they're not all just pleasantly finishing their meals. By the way it looks in the painting, it's as if Jesus had horrible BO, because the disciples are keeping their distance. It looks like someone just drove a wedge between Jesus and the disciples. And the reason for that is that, as far as the painting is concerned, Jesus has just told them that one of them would betray him, and they are recoiling at the news. Because, with the exception of Judas, it's all a complete surprise to them. In fact they respond by each of them asking, "Surely, not I?" as if to say, "I couldn't be capable of ever doing that, could I?" like they couldn't imagine betraying their teacher, their master, but they're also kind of scared that they might be the one. "Surely, not I?"

But Jesus wasn't surprised. He came prepared. He knew what was coming. So he offers a few more kind of cryptic words, as well as some stern ones, about the one who would betray him, but then he doesn't say more on the subject. No doubt the disciples want him too. I mean, he just said, "One of you is a traitor," but didn't come right out and tell who. You don't just get to leave that hanging.

Well, if you're Jesus, I guess you do, because that's what he does. He changes the subject. He breaks bread, shares it, and says it's his body. He takes a cup of wine, passes it around, and says it's his blood. The disciples I'm sure are all still a bit stunned at this point, but not Jesus. He came prepared. He knew what was coming.

And I think it's the fact that Jesus came so prepared, that he knew what was coming, that makes this whole story so heartbreaking. Jesus knows that the cross is starting to loom larger on the horizon. He knows that he's getting closer and closer to his fate, and as we'll see in two weeks, it's an ordeal he'd in some respects rather not go through but knows that he must. And he knows that in the next 24 hours he would endure not just the tortuous, physical pain of the cross, but also all the heartache of being betrayed by one of his closest friends and followers. He knows what's coming. But still he goes forward.

And as he goes forward, in this final time that he'll have all his disciples together in private, he could've spent the time reviewing all of his teachings just to make sure they had things straight, that they understood what he had taught them about the kingdom of God and the good news, but he didn't do that. He could've spent the time going over ministry strategy, so that they could all have a head start later on, but he didn't do that either. He could've spent the time addressing what he knew would be controversial, divisive issues down the road, just so there would be no confusion, but he didn't do that.

Instead, he modeled for his friends a meal that they were to share with each other after he was gone, that they share in his body which was broken, that they share in his blood which was poured out. And he did this *after* he told them all that one of them would betray him, and all the while knowing that the rest of them would ditch him in short order themselves. It's as if to tell them, even if they wouldn't realize it until later, that even the traitors would be welcome back to the table.

When it comes to something like communion, like the Lord's Table, sometimes I think we can forget just how powerfully deep this sacrament is—same is true for baptism too, I think. But when we say words like, "The body of Christ, broken for you," or "The cup of salvation," we refer to this sequence of events, to this account of Christ's final 24 hours, during which he was betrayed and abandoned, during which his body literally was broken, during which his blood really was poured out. And in the background of all the words about Christ and Christ's sacrifice, comes the sobering reality that Jesus knew what was coming and went toward it anyway.

What could possess someone to purposefully keep company with those who would abandon him, and more than that, to teach them to continue gathering in his own name? If Jesus was so ready to welcome and break bread with those who would turn on him, what does it say about Jesus' readiness to be with us? The table he invites is a table where traitors are welcomed back. Why would Jesus institute such a thing, especially as his cross looms larger and larger in his mind?

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul
What wondrous love is this?

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