

The Day That Changed the World: A MEAL LIKE NO OTHER

Mark 14:12-25

A good meal reminds us what's important.

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Fort Smith, Arkansas
February 18, 2024

Do you ever have drama at the dinner table? If you don't, you can look it up on Youtube, especially with so-called reality TV shows. Mealtime seems to be when they have their biggest fights. I don't generally like reality TV. I don't like drama at dinner. I prefer good food and pleasant conversation; that leads to good digestion. Conflict ruins your digestion. That's why I think so many people approach Thanksgiving and Christmas with some anxiety. It's those family dinners where people don't get along! Yet we are drawn into the experience of eating together. It can be, as Charles Dickens said, "the best of times and the worst of times."¹

The story of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples is sort of a "best of times/worst of times" story. There was betrayal and fear, and there was love and hope. I can't imagine that anyone enjoyed good digestion that night.

This Lenten season, we are going to do a series called "The Day That Changed The World." According to the Gospels, Jesus lived 33 years on this earth; that's about 12,000 days. His public ministry comprised the last three years of his life, which is almost 1,100 days, just one-tenth of the total. But the direction of Jesus' life and the thrust of the Gospels point to just one day, one remarkable, earth-shattering, history-making period of 24 hours in which Jesus was betrayed, arrested, condemned, beaten, crucified and died. It's the one day that we need to know in detail. It's the most important day in the history of the world. It was followed, of course, by Easter, but without understanding the passion and death of Jesus, you really can't appreciate the resurrection. That's why Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"²

Pastor Adam Hamilton wrote a book a few years ago called *24 Hours That Changed The World*, and I'll be using that book as a resource for this series. In the book he says, "The last twenty-four hours of Jesus' life is the story of God whose love for his people is so amazing and profound that he would send his Son to lay down his life as the sign and seal of a covenant that would deliver the human race from death."³ So for the next six

weeks, we are going to drill down into this epic, supremely significant, eternally important day. All four Gospels tell the story; Matthew, Mark, and Luke pretty much tell it one way, and the Gospel of John tells it another way. Mark is the most concise, and probably the first written, so I will mostly follow his story, with some add-ins from the other Gospels.

The last day of Jesus' life started in the evening, because that's how the Jews count their days, from sunset forward. Earlier in the day, Jesus had sent two of his disciples into Jerusalem to make arrangements for dinner. That night was the annual celebration of the Passover, and it was a big deal to commemorate the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Jesus told the disciples to look for a man carrying water. This would have been easy to spot, since carrying water was women's work. It has all the earmarks of a spy story—a secret signal and a connection to a secret room where preparations had already been made for their coming.

That evening, Jesus sat at dinner with his 12 friends, his students, his disciples. The Passover meal, or *seder*, usually follows a prescribed order, like a liturgy. As they were going through the steps, Jesus shared some bad news: “*one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.*”⁴ The disciples were shocked, and they all wanted to know, “Is it me?” Jesus reiterated that it would be one of the twelve who reclined at the table with him, and it would not go well with the betrayer: “*The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.*”⁵

At a certain point in the meal, bread is broken. This would not have been soft, fluffy white bread. The other name for Passover is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and for seven days, the Jews only eat flatbread without yeast (*matzoh*), because the Hebrews left Egypt so quickly their bread did not have time to rise. So Jesus, the host at the meal, took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. But then, unexpectedly, he didn't say the words of the Passover. He said, “*Take; this is my body.*”⁶ His body?! What was that supposed to mean?

Things became a little clearer a few minutes later, when Jesus took one of the cups of wine that is shared at particular points in the *seder*, and he went off script again, saying, “*This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many.*”⁷ This was clearly a reference to the prophet Jeremiah, who had predicted the day when God would write a new covenant with God's people, a covenant not written in the blood of Passover, but etched in the hearts of believers. This was the beginning of a new way of relating to God: “*No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.*”⁸

It is so important to understand the Last Supper of Jesus, as it is told in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke), as the Passover *seder*. It makes everything fall into place. The Passover is the meal that draws the Jewish family together. The Passover tells and teaches the story of God's liberation of Israel. The Passover defines the Jewish community.

When Jesus departs from the script and changes the *seder* to the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, it is an equally definitive move. The Lord's Supper then becomes the defining meal of the Christian community, as the *seder* is for Jews. Adam Hamilton says, “When Jesus said, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Matthew's version), he changed everything. He transformed the

Passover *seder*, giving to all people instead the Eucharist: Holy Communion. The Israelites had become a covenant people by the blood of animals; the Last Supper was the establishment of the new covenant by the blood of Jesus, not only with the tribes of Israel, but with all humanity.”⁹

How does the Lord’s Supper/Holy Communion/Eucharist define our community of faith? How does it make us who we are?

As a community of faith, we are defined by our memories. In the Passover, the Jews remember a special night in the story of their liberation from slavery. God sent Moses to negotiate with the Egyptian Pharaoh, and they had endured nine plagues, some really nasty stuff. But still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened. So the tenth and final plague was the killing of the first-born of every family in Egypt. Moses warned the Israelites that this was coming, and to protect themselves, they slaughtered lambs and put the blood of the lamb on the door of their house, so the angel of death would “pass over” them. After that, they were practically thrown out of Egypt by the Egyptians, until Pharaoh’s heart hardened again.

Despite the problems with a God who would murder children, the Jews to this day celebrate the Passover and the subsequent flight from Egypt with this meal of remembrance. It is one of the defining traditions of their community of faith, just as Holy Communion is one of the defining traditions of our Christian faith.

In Holy Communion, every time we celebrate it, we remember the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples. We tell the story over and over again in the Great Thanksgiving prayer: “On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: ‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ When the supper was over he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: ‘Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”¹⁰ That story never gets old, does it?

We are defined by our collective memories. One Christmas several years ago, my mother gave me and my brother amazing Christmas presents. She was already in an assisted living facility, but she and a friend of hers had spent months putting together a cookbook of all the recipes that had been our favorites growing up. All the desserts, all the casseroles (She was big on casseroles.), all the dishes that were part of my childhood, I could almost taste as I flipped through the book. On top of that, she had copied and placed in the book pictures from our family through the years. There were pictures that were burned into my brain from seeing them a thousand times on the walls where I grew up. My mother was sick that Christmas and was not with us to open presents, but the tears came to my eyes as I recalled the memories.

Every time we share Holy Communion, it is like opening up the family album or the family cookbook to recall again the stories of our faith, from Moses to Jesus to John Wesley to our own ancestors and mentors in faith. Mmm—good!

By definition, we are a community of faith. The Jews use the Passover *seder* to recreate the sense of community that goes back to Moses. This meal forms their identity. It is a primary way of teaching the story to the young people so that they remember who they are. In the order for the *seder*, the youngest person at the table asks four questions about the meal: Why do we eat unleavened bread? Why do we eat bitter herbs? Why do

we dip our herbs in salt water? Why do we recline rather than sit at the table? The answers to all these questions answer the basic question “Why is this night different from all other nights?” They open up the re-telling of the story of liberation.

At the Last Supper, Jesus gathered with his people. They were his community. Yes, they were his disciples, learning to be like their Master. But they had also shared three years of traveling, teaching, watching, and sharing life together. They were friends. In Luke, Jesus says, “*I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you.*”¹¹ In John’s version, Jesus says, “*I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*”¹²

When we share Holy Communion, we come as friends. We invite “all who love [Jesus], who earnestly repent of their sin, and seek to live in peace with one another.”¹³ The old ritual invited all who “are in love and charity with your neighbors.”¹⁴ When we come to take the Body and Blood of Christ, we leave behind our conflicts, hostilities, resentments, and bitterness. Or at least we attempt to, and we repent if we can’t. We come as friends, and our friend Jesus meets us at the Table.

Finally, as a community of faith, we are defined by our hope. The history of the Jews has been one disaster after another: exile, persecution, pogroms, and the Holocaust. Still, they have remained a people of undying and resilient hope. The Passover concludes each year with the 4th cup of wine, which is the cup of Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. An empty chair is left at the table, and when the fourth cup is shared, the door is opened, in case Elijah should arrive. The last word that is said in the *seder* is the exclamation, “Next year in Jerusalem!” Who knows? The Messiah may come, and God’s Kingdom may be established.

The Lord’s Supper, too, is more than a history lesson. It is an exercise in hope. Whenever we share the bread and juice, we look forward to the great banquet of the Messiah in heaven with Jesus at the head of the table. When he shared this meal with the disciples, Jesus said, “*Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.*”¹⁵ Paul reminded the Corinthians, “*As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*”¹⁶ When we eat the Holy Meal, we see a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. We hear the voices of the angels singing. We catch the distant notes of the trumpet of victory.

The Last Supper of Jesus had a past, a present, and a future. It defined their little community by their shared memories, their friendship, and their hope. It reminds us today of what is important.

On January 27, 2005, a Los Angeles commuter train wrecked and killed 11 people and injured several others. That event left an indelible impression on a Fire Department Captain named Rosario. Hours into the rescue operation, hope for finding other survivors was diminishing. Then one passenger indicated that another man was trapped under the debris. Using the jaws of life, rescuers were able to extricate a man named John from the wreckage. That’s when Rosario saw the message.

Pinned under a train seat and other debris from the crash, having trouble breathing and fearing he would die, John wrote a message to his wife and children using his own blood.

Rosario said, “With whatever energy he could summon and a heartbreaking economy of words, he scrawled a farewell in blood on the seat. ‘I ♥ my kids. I ♥ Leslie,’ he printed. The blood ink seemed to be running out as he got to the second sentence.”

Relating that story for the TV cameras, Captain Rosario choked with emotion as he recalled the message. “The fact that this guy in this situation had the amount of love he had for his family, and for him to realize ‘I’m possibly going to die here,’ how could any words explain it?”¹⁷

Words also fail us when we try to explain the Holy Meal. Two thousand years ago, Jesus left us a message: “This bread is my body. This cup is the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of me.” It was a message of love, an offer of grace. In less than 24 hours, he would sign the message with his own blood on the cross. Remembering that meal, sharing Holy Communion with our friends, looking forward to the glory of heaven, we discover again what the community of faith is all about.

¹ Charles Dickens, “A Tale of Two Cities,” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/341391-it-was-the-best-of-times-it-was-the-worst>.

² I Corinthians 2:2.

³ Adam Hamilton, *24 Hours That Changed The World*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 25.

⁴ Mark 14:18.

⁵ Mark 14:21.

⁶ Mark 14:22.

⁷ Mark 14:24.

⁸ Jeremiah 31:34.

⁹ Hamilton, *ibid*.

¹⁰ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 14.

¹¹ Luke 22:15.

¹² John 15:15.

¹³ *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *United Methodist Book of Worship*, p. 44.

¹⁵ Mark 14:25.

¹⁶ I Corinthians 11:26.

¹⁷ Charles Ornstein, "Crash Survivor & #9829's Family," *LATimes.com*, January 29, 2005.