

April 7, 2019

Luke 22: 14-27

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please stay close as we make our way through Lent. Help us to understand the sometimes poignant, sometimes terrible events of this season. We pray in the name you wore when you made this journey, Amen.

The Last Supper

When our son, Taylor, was four, we attended a large Baptist church where we sat in the balcony. One Sunday, Taylor looked over the railing and saw the brass trays and ivory cloth such as we have out today.

And he shouted, “Mom, look! The Lord’s Lunch!”

It *was* close to noon.

In the Baptist church, we actually called this observation the Lord’s Supper. Seldom communion. Never Eucharist.

But they all refer to the same thing, this commemoration of a meal in which Jesus compared his flesh to the bread he fed his disciples, his blood to the wine he poured.

Because today’s communion falls during the latter part of Lent, during the countdown to Holy Week, it quite literally re-enacts the *Last* Supper. The last Supper before the crucifixion. The famous Last Supper that Leonardo Da Vinci painted on the dining room wall of the Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan.

And so I want to talk about two stories surrounding this Supper that happened in this place.

When I arrived at Triune in 2005, Lee King was among the surliest of my new congregants. He spent every weekend sleeping in our dining hall, his head cushioned on his arms on a table. When spoken to, he grunted. When asked to take out trash, he rolled his eyes.

But we don't stop hassling you just because you ignore us.

So a couple of years in, I asked Lee to help me serve communion one Sunday. In those days, we had only one station – at the altar rail. So we made our way down the rail, Lee and I, just as Pete will help me do in a few moments.

“The body of Christ broken for you, Denise, Charles, Sippio,” we said. “The blood of Christ shed for you.”

Three weeks later, Lee caught me after worship and said, “Communion is next Sunday. Do I have to help you again?”

I said, “Yes. Yes, you do.”

Well, when the next Sunday rolled around, he declined. But then we started noticing that he was helping out in the dining hall. He started setting up tables and chairs, taking out trash. He started serving tea. Then he started *making* tea. He brewed the coffee. He began working with our serving churches to help them serve more efficiently.

We talked about him at staff meetings. *What's up with Lee? What's gotten into Lee?* Nobody knew.

But he was a different person. He was the Tasmanian devil of service. He wouldn't sit down and eat until everyone else had been served.

One Sunday morning near Christmas, I was going to visit Fourth Presbyterian for an alternative gift fair. I stopped in our kitchen to see if the coffee was ready. It wasn't.

"Don't worry," I told Lee. "I'll get some at Fourth Pres."

Ten minutes later there was a knock on my office door. There stood Lee with a steaming cup of hot coffee in his hand.

I just stared. "You brought me coffee?"

He said, "Well, you were taking so long the guys were going to drink it all."

I said, "That is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

And it was. (*pause*)

It may not sound like much. But for me, it was a watershed moment. Lee and I had become friends. (Note to congregation: A cup of coffee is all it takes.)

For all the years he remained with us, Lee brought me coffee every Sunday morning. Then David Gay got him into a veteran's rehab, and then he went to live with his sister in another town.

For years, he called on Sunday mornings to let us know how he was doing.

For years, I fielded questions from our serving churches. *Where's Lee? What happened to Lee? Man, we loved him.*

During Christmas of 2015, Lee ran into the middle of a service to give me a red, sequined baseball cap with Our Lady of Guadalupe on it. I guess all those Protestant sermons didn't take. Even so, it is one of my most cherished possessions.

I trace all of Lee's progress, all of his turnaround from surly to servant, all of his caring back to that communion table. That invitation to share the body of Christ, the blood of Christ. That invitation to join Jesus as one who serves.

This morning, we are going to read Luke's version of the Last Supper and how he links it to betrayal and to service. For the story of Christianity cannot have one without the others.

This story comes after Jesus and his disciples have entered Jerusalem for the Jewish holiday of Passover. Jerusalem is crowded with Jews coming in to celebrate.

Jesus sent Peter and John on ahead and they found a man carrying a water jar. They followed him until he entered a house, and they told the owner, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'"

Then Peter and John prepared the meal in this guest room.

Luke 22: 14-27.

14 When the hour came, (Jesus) took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. 15 He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired

to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.'

¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.'

¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'

²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²²For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!' ²³Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.

²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

I love how at this very moment of the Last Supper, Luke's other gospel messages are interwoven. First, betrayal. The hand of the betrayer is on the table. The hand of the betrayer has passed the bread, held the cup.

Jesus suffered betrayal at the hand of a friend, which I suppose is one of the most hurtful things we humans can endure. That one closest to us can have our undoing in his heart.

I imagine that knowledge carried as much pain as the cross itself.

As if that weren't bad enough, the other 11 disciples get into a dispute about who is the greatest. That was also a betrayal of sorts. They had traveled with him for three years, listened to him teach and still came away with a concern for personal gain. That had to hurt as well.

Jesus tells them that whatever they're thinking, it's the opposite.

“The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.”

And then he goes a step further. **“I am among you as one who serves.”**

I am among you as one who serves.

Lee took Jesus at his word that day at our communion table. And he joined our Lord as one who served.

I told you I'd relate two stories that happened here.

We've always had communion on the first Sunday of each month. And early on, I realized that some of our homeless parishioners were holding back.

I talked it over with Alfred Johnson, who was my associate at the time. And Alfred said it was because those in active addiction felt they would be observing the Lord's Supper in what Paul called "an unworthy manner."

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul talked about abuses of the Lord's Supper as people took it "in an unworthy manner." Some of our parishioners interpreted that as they shouldn't come to the Lord's table with unconfessed sin.

That's not how I read that passage. I think Paul was telling the rich in the church not to eat everything before the poor and hungry could arrive. *That* was observing communion in "an unworthy manner."

And so when we served communion, I made it a point to welcome all comers. If sin prevented taking the Lord's Supper, I said, Alfred couldn't take it. And I sure couldn't take it.

All that is required is a belief in the Lordship of Jesus.

Well, at that time, we had a retired Presbyterian minister who worshiped with us. And one day he sent me an email.

"Why do you insist that people believe in Jesus to take communion?" he asked. "Don't you think you're being exclusive?"

I thought he was kidding. No. 1, why would you want to take communion if you didn't believe in Jesus?

No. 2, and more worrisome, me exclusive?

But he wasn't kidding. And when I read a book by Sara Miles called *Take This Bread*, I understood what he was saying.

Sara had been an atheist who lived in San Francisco. She began attending an Episcopal church that had a radical welcome that included a radically open communion table.

*Come and meet Jesus in the bread and wine, this church invited. We're not going to restrict who comes. We're not going to require baptism first. Because the communion table may be the place you meet Jesus for the **first** time.*

Sara was so taken by that welcome that she became a Christian. And I was so taken by that welcome that I wanted it for Triune, too.

That's why we practice a radically open communion table here. That's why we welcome everyone at our table, because it just might be the place you meet Jesus for the *first* time.

I don't want to stand before God some day and explain why I kept someone away.

Elaine Nocks gave me *Take This Bread* a long time ago, because Sara Miles then turned around and opened a food pantry on her church's communion table. That Episcopal church in San Francisco began operating much like Triune. And it all stemmed from their understanding of this Last Supper we read about in Luke.

This is my body, which is given for you.

This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

I am among you as one who serves.

This picture is all of a piece. A God on his way to the cross – willingly – to break that body, to pour that blood. A God who comes to the table not to be served but to serve.

I am among you as one who serves, said Jesus.

That's why it means so much to me that Pete and Vernelle and Susan will serve communion today.

That's why it means so much to me that Lee King once did, too.

Amen.