

**Becoming the Body of Christ
Mark 14:10-26**

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April 3, 2011—The Fourth Sunday of Lent—4:00 Worship
Fourth Presbyterian Church**

I wonder how Jesus' closest followers—those friends of his that were with him at this final meal—I wonder how they remembered this night in the days, weeks, months, and years that followed, after the events that were about to transpire in Jerusalem. What we have recorded here in the Gospel of Mark was written perhaps thirty-five years or more after that night. About fifteen years before that, still twenty years or so after the fact, the apostle Paul talks about this meal as the beginning of a tradition in which bread and wine are consumed in remembrance of Jesus. In fact, Paul passes on the words of Jesus that we still use today: "This is my body. This cup is the new covenant in my blood."¹

But I wonder how this meal was remembered in the intervening years between Jesus and Paul, by the people that were actually there. Was it a night of joy? Was it a night of fear? Was it a Passover meal like the many others they had experienced in their lives? Did they know right away that it would be a meal like none other they had ever known? Could they have predicted that two thousand years later people would still be talking about it, still commemorating it as we do each week in this place?

Did the people that were actually there remember it, as Paul and Mark characterize it, primarily as a night of betrayal? Did they remember it as the night on which one of their friends turned on Jesus and handed him over to the authorities? Did they remember Jesus' ominous

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

words, uttered before this all went down, that one of them would betray him? Did they remember their own self-doubts, their inner fears that any one of them could be the betrayer?

In some ways, I feel that betrayal or self-doubt seem like odd themes to remember as the central dynamic of this memorable meal on this memorable night. How much of their memory was colored and shaped by their hatred for Judas? In many respects, they too were betrayed by him. Or were they so relieved that they themselves turned out not to be the betrayers that they remembered this night as a night of betrayal precisely to remember who the betrayer really was? Did they need assurance for themselves that they remained loyal to their beloved rabbi, even though they had feared they might not—even though they feared that they still might betray them now that he was gone?

In those earliest years of the church, how many of Jesus' followers do you think remembered that night as an unthinkable tragedy that came out of nowhere and completely devastated their hopes and dreams for what Jesus would represent? How many of them found their deepest longings dashed to pieces when Jesus died on the cross, a catastrophe set into motion at this auspicious dinner? When they later told this story around dinner tables, were they still grasping for meaning? How could this have happened? Did it truly serve a greater purpose? Were Jesus' cryptic words about his body and blood at that final meal the key to understanding what this mystery means?

No doubt some of them had already begun to piece this together with some of Jesus' more difficult teachings, the ones in which he seemed to predict this entire scenario. Could he have really known all along that this terrible thing was going to happen? Was he simply a perceptive realist that knew his radical words and actions could lead only to death at the hands

of the powers that be, or was this actually part of the plan all along? Was God behind all this? When Jesus so calmly proclaimed that someone would betray him, did he do so with the willing resolve of someone who knew exactly what was about to unfold?

In hindsight, some of them began to connect Jesus' bloody death to the fact that this final meal was a Passover meal. On that day, a lamb was sacrificed. Its blood represented the salvation of ancient Hebrews from the plague of death in Egypt. When Jesus drew attention his body and blood and gave us visual symbols of what was about to happen to them, was he consciously making a connection to the sacrifice of the Passover lamb? How long did it take for his followers to begin to think of Jesus himself as the lamb of God?

At some point, when the living memory of those who were there gave way to the ritualized memory of a growing community, the followers of Jesus who regularly gathered to break bread and share wine began to theologize about what they were doing. So persistent were they in preserving Jesus' odd words—"this is my body...this is my blood"—that their Roman critics began to think that they were cannibals, gathering to actually eat the body and blood of a human being. Though that perception was not their intent, some of them eventually began to believe that the bread and wine consecrated by Jesus' words did in fact become his body and blood in some real, metaphysical way. Later on, some theologians began to question this belief and argued that the meal and the words are symbolic, though even then insisting that God does something unique and special when we say those words, break bread, and share the fruit of the vine. What began as a final meal among friends became a meal of remembrance, and eventually this meal of remembrance became understood as a sacrament of

God's grace. When we break this bread and share this cup, God touches us in some remarkable way.

But before this theological language, there was simply a story—a story told around dinner tables. A story told around campfires on chilly nights. A story told while walking up the road on a trip to a neighboring town. A story told each year when the Passover meal was celebrated. Perhaps a story told *every* time that the community sat down to share food and drink together.

It is a story that resists explanation. It is a ritual act that is first and foremost an *experience*, not a theory. Even centuries later, the founder of our Presbyterian stream of Christianity, John Calvin, who was never short on words or explanations, confessed that it was his *experience* of the meal that made him certain that God was doing something special in it.

Now if anyone asks me how, I will not be ashamed to admit that the mystery is too sublime for my intelligence to grasp or my words to declare: to speak more plainly, I experience rather than understand it. Here, then, without any arguing, I embrace the truth of God in which I may safely rest content. Christ proclaims that his flesh is the food, his blood the drink, of my soul. I offer him my soul to be fed with such food. In his sacred supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine: I have no doubt that he truly proffers them and that I receive them.²

Calvin argued with Luther, who believed that Christ was somehow physically present in the communion elements; and he argued with Zwingli, who thought that the elements were only symbolic of some spiritual mystery. For Calvin, in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we achieve some kind of *mystical union* with Christ. We become one with Christ.

² John Calvin, 1543 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, quoted by B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 174.

But for what purpose? To achieve spiritual bliss, enlightenment, or nirvana? No, these are all too individualistic. The Lord's Supper is by nature a *communal* event. It draws us out of ourselves and into community. This is not a single serving meal on an airplane or a drive through meal to be eaten alone in your car. It is a community gathering that reminds us of who we are and to whom we are responsible as followers of Christ.

It is common in our communion liturgies to pray that the bread and the cup may be for us the body and blood of Christ so that we may be the body of Christ in the world. It seems to me that this is the essence of this sacred and mysterious meal.

After all they had been through together, Jesus' final meal with his friends wasn't just a going away party. It wasn't a walk down memory lane. It wasn't about blame and fear. It wasn't about shame or self doubt. It was *preparation* for something else. It was preparation for what was to come.

Way back when, at a place called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples who they believed he was. When they correctly answered that he was the messiah, he began to teach them that his understanding of this, his way of living this out, was not what they had been taught to expect. In fact, he tells them that his messianic path will lead to his death. From that moment on, right up until the moment of the story we find ourselves in now, Jesus was preparing them for his death and departure. The kingdom of God was emerging all around them. But it was not bound by Jesus' physical presence with them. He must go, and they must carry on in his absence.

"This is my body. This is my blood."

"Eat this. Drink this"

“You are my body. You are my blood.”

We come to this table, like the many who came to Jesus’ table: the lost, the lonely, the outcasts, the sinners; those with respect, and those with none; those with much, and those with little; those with great faith, and those with great doubt; those who understood, and those who didn’t have a clue; those who others loved, and those who others hated. Jesus loved them all. Jesus welcomed them all. And Jesus changed them.

“Now is the time!” Jesus says. “Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”³

Change your hearts and lives, and go out into the world to be Christ’s disciples. Be the body of Christ for the world. Be the person God welcomes to this table. Be the person God calls you to be at this table. See others as God sees them. And love them as God’s children, for that is who they are. That is who you are.

“This is my body. This is my blood.”

Amen.

³ Mark 1:15.