

Message for March 21, 2021

Lent 5 - Risking Friendship

Luke 22.14-27

We are coming close to the end of our walk through Holy Week. On this fifth Sunday of Lent, we are now at Maundy Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin *mandatum*, or commandment. The mandate that we have been given: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” This is from the story of this day as written in the gospel of John. Today, we heard the parallel story in Luke. Where Jesus has one last meal with his friends. A meal full of symbols and meaning - bread and wine, betrayal, service.

This meal is a ceremony, a regular, predictable event in which roles and status are affirmed.¹ What happened at meals was so important that Luke makes note of whether one washes, who eats, what when and where, who is invited, where people sit and in what order they come to the table. All of this gives us a hint into the everyday life of the circle of folks that surrounded Jesus. Jesus often shocked people by practicing an inclusive table fellowship. In fact, he challenged common meal practice in a lot of ways throughout the gospels. But this night of the last supper, he dines with his closest friends. He has “eagerly desired” to eat with them. These folks are his chosen family. The people with which we gather around a table share our values, they are people we know well or want to know well. Even in the before times, eating together was a sign of intimacy.

Jesus takes intimacy seriously. He makes this meal that much more personal. You might even say he makes it weird. First he talks about how he’s giving up such ceremony “I tell you, I will not (eat it again nor) drink this wine from now on, until the reign of God is fulfilled.”

¹ Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Augsburg Fortress 2003) p. 382.

Then Jesus took bread and gave thanks for it, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which will be given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He did the same with the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood, which will be poured for you.

Can you imagine? It's thanksgiving or maybe some other celebration. You've had a good meal and conversation with your best people. In the case of the disciples, maybe recounting the events of the week. Everything that has happened. The stunts that you've pulled off - the parade, the scene in the temple, that woman with the perfume... Then the guest of honour gets intense, talking about more than giving up bread or wine, making deep eye contact, and saying that he is giving himself fully to this cause - body and blood. Awk-ward. But that's kind of the point, because as Amy-Jill Levine reminds us "if we take Communion as simply a form of dinner, then we miss the shock. Jesus is giving up his life, and he wants that to be remembered."²

After that, who could forget? Getting even more intense and awkward, he goes on to talk about being betrayed. By someone at the table. Like that classic movie trope "The murderer is someone in this room!" Except that it's not funny. This close knit group is about to be torn apart, this joyous occasion is about to be overshadowed. By suspicion and grief and guilt.

The disciples don't get it. We sometimes envy the disciples because they got to spend time with Jesus. They got to hear his voice and see his eyes. They watched his hands. They were right there. And they didn't get it.³ But maybe they didn't want to get it. After such a remarkable week, making waves, feeling like their movement was finally gaining some traction. After all that, to sit down to eat and drink together, reminiscing and rejoicing. After all that, who wants to be reminded that it is all so precarious? And who wants to be reminded of their own humanity - the ways that they doubted or fell short? Of *course* they change the subject. To a theoretical exercise in greatness.

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week* (Abingdon Press 2018) p.121.

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<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/rend-your-hearts-claiming-the-promise/maundy-thursday-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/maundy-thursday-year-b-preaching-notes>

Jesus brings them back to what matters. Their mandate. It wasn't supposed to be a once a year command. As the church, we've managed to turn both Maundy Thursday and Communion into quite the rituals over the years. But the Discipleship Ministries of the United Church of Christ, tell us, it was never supposed to be a ritual. It was supposed to be a way of life.

On Thursday, or Monday. Or any day. Being in relationship with others. Even when it's weird and awkward. Being willing to share a meal, a conversation, ourselves. Having hard conversations with people who have hurt us. Working to keep the focus on what matters. We do this in remembrance of Jesus. Every day. And we remember the good news that God loves us intimately and intensely. Always. Amen.