

Maundy Thursday: Luke 22:14-30
Church of the Good Shepherd
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April 6, 2023

Remaking a Meal

There was a survey taken some years back that asked Americans what words they most wanted to hear. The first you can probably guess—"I love you." Number two was "I forgive you." Understandable. But the third choice might surprise you: "Supper's ready."

While I am pretty sure Jesus hadn't seen this survey, it's telling that on the night before he died, he sits down with his disciples to share in a meal that communicates the very things we so want to hear—words of love, of forgiveness, of welcome. But whereas those surveyed likely had in mind hearing those words from other people, in the meal Jesus celebrates, it is God who speaks those words.

In truth, Jesus didn't have to do much to bring God into this meal, as the dinner he shares with the disciples that night already carried a theological meaning. The meal Jesus celebrates on the night before he is handed over, his "Last Supper," was of course the Passover Meal, the *seder*, the traditional Jewish dinner that recalls the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery. Back a thousand or so years before Jesus, the people of Israel, the ancestors of those around the table with Jesus, were slaves in Egypt. But God heard their cries and brought them out of Egypt "with great power and with a mighty hand." According to the story told in the book of Exodus, Moses' confrontations with Pharaoh had come to a head and God told the Israelites to get ready because He was about to act. They were to get a lamb, kill it, and use the blood to mark the lintels of their houses, the beams over their front doors. Then they were to eat the lamb with some unleavened bread and bitter herbs, and do it with their "loins girded," as if ready to walk out the door at any minute, for God was about to deliver one final punishment upon stubborn Egypt. As it happened, that night God struck down the first-born son of every family in Egypt, save for those in the houses of the Israelites, whose doors were marked by the blood of the lamb. This is where we get the name "Passover" from—death "passed over" the houses of the Israelite. The Passover meal remembers this event, the pivotal event in the history of Israel, when God delivered his people from bondage. In time, it also came to symbolize the hope for that day when God would free his people from *all* suffering and oppression.

So the meal Jesus and his disciples shared already had a deep, rich meaning, a meaning the disciples knew and respected and identified with. But now on his last night, Jesus takes this meal and the tradition that was invested in it, and he changes it.

You see, in the usual Passover, after eating the lamb, the host would take some unleavened bread, bless it and break it, saying, "this is the body of the Passover." But here Jesus changes the ceremony and says not "this is the body of the Passover," but rather "this is *my body*."

This is *not* how you do Passover. What in God's name could Jesus be getting at here? What he is at is transforming the Passover meal, charging it with new meaning. Jesus redirects the meal

from the Passover commemoration to himself, in effect saying, “Everything the Passover means, *I* mean. The slain lamb, the blood, the meal, the cup of wine, the deliverance from bondage, the hope of God’s final act of liberation—all this finds its fulfillment *in me*.” Just as Israel celebrated the Passover meal on the eve of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, to mark that great act of liberation, so Jesus celebrates a *new* Passover meal, a meal that would mark God’s great and definitive act of liberation at Easter. It’s an astounding claim Jesus is making—that the whole history of Israel, all her longing, all her hopes, culminate in him, are realized in him.

You can imagine the disciples’ mouths just dopped and hung open as Jesus made this pronouncement over the meal. Did Jesus just do what I think he did?

But Jesus wasn’t finished with his remaking of the meal. Passover was one story in Scripture that Jesus pulls from for the Last Supper, but it wasn’t the only one. After dinner, Jesus holds up the cup and says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood.” There’s that word again that we’ve been looking at these past two months—“covenant.” We know about covenants, the solemn agreements God made with the Israelites, first with Adam and Eve after the fall, then with Noah and his sons after the flood, with Abraham and his descendants, with Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai, and then with King David and his royal house. We know how God initiated these agreements, setting out the guidelines for their special relationship with God, so that God would be their God and they would be his special, chosen people. We know too how those covenants were broken, not by God, but by God’s people, and yet how each time God forgave them and recommitted himself to his people by making another covenant with them. But there is one other covenant we didn’t talk about in our exploration of the Old Testament history. That’s because this covenant didn’t come into effect in the time of the Old Testament but was only foretold.

The promise of this covenant comes at a point in Israel’s history when things had gotten so bad, the covenants so thoroughly breached, the Israelites so utterly faithless, idolatrous and unjust, that God had given them over to their enemies to be punished. The Kingdom of Judah, where David’s descendants reigned, was conquered and the people were exiled from the Promised Land. It was during this time that a prophet named Jeremiah announced to the despairing Israelites that God’s anger would one day give way and God would renew the covenant He made to their ancestors. Only this time it will be a *new* covenant, not like the old one. Jeremiah describes it:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a *new covenant* with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them. This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time—I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

To those gathered with Jesus around the table that night, this would have been the “new covenant” that they had come to expect, a covenant defined by forgiveness and obedience and most of all commitment and love from God. But here Jesus stuns his followers by declaring this

“new covenant” Jeremiah foretold is being fulfilled in him, through his death. “This cup that is *poured out for you* is the new covenant *in my blood*.” His death, the pouring out of his blood will be the event that will usher in the “new covenant” that Jeremiah prophesied all those centuries ago, a covenant of forgiveness, obedience and love. With his death, Jesus would forever change the way God’s people would relate to him. What’s more, that new relationship will extend beyond those seated around the table that night, beyond even the people of Israel, to include everyone who eats of his body and drinks his blood, that is, all of us who have shared in the meal that Jesus gave us. We are all invited to take part in this new relationship with God, in this “new covenant.”

Why is this important? Why is it so important that this new relationship is defined as “a covenant”? It’s because when you have a covenant with God, you no longer have a remote, unapproachable Deity; you have a God you can count on. You know where you stand with this God. This is a God who’s committed himself to you, a God you can know, a God you can enjoy companionship with, that you can share dinner with, as the disciples were doing that very moment. That is the kind of God described in the covenants the Lord made with Israel and that is the kind of God revealed in the meal Jesus shares with his disciples, a God who wants to be close to his people, to share life with them.

By making these two allusions—to Passover and prophecy, Exodus and Jeremiah—Jesus has made his final meal into a meal unlike any other Passover meal before then, a meal that speaks not just of the past but of promise—a promise not just of liberation from slavery but liberation from enslavement to sin, a promise not just to be saved from death but saved from condemnation, a promise not to escape hardship but to share in Jesus’ suffering for the sake of the world.

What this means is we should no longer think we have to earn God’s love. No longer do we have to labor under the shadow of guilt and shame of not measuring up. No longer are we kept at a distance from God. In this meal, the meal Jesus left us, God speaks those beautiful words we so long to hear, “I love you. I forgive you.” And he invites us: “Come now, and sit down. Supper’s ready.” Amen.