

Pastor Courtney Steitz

Maundy Thursday Sermon

4.1.2021

Luke 22:1-27

I have always loved a good story. I got in trouble more than once in elementary school because I was reading a book under my desk instead of paying attention in class. Stories are powerful, they capture our attention far more than a class or a lecture. Even in seminary, during preaching courses, as much emphasis was placed on the illustrations to use in a sermon as on the theological content. I think that is why Jesus uses parables so much—stories can convey the point even more clearly than a seminary class. So when it mattered most that Jesus' disciples understand what was about to happen, when it matters most that we understand what Jesus is all about, he invites us to enter into a story. We don't just hear the story, but we get to participate in it. Every time we take communion together we are participating in this story of God's love and grace.

The past months, as we have read the previous chapters of Luke, we have seen and heard as Jesus multiple times try to explain to the disciples who he is as the messiah. A messiah that comes to bring wholeness, justice, and love. Jesus as messiah won't accomplish these things through military force and might, but through service to others, extending invitation to those on the margin, and even through his own suffering and death. But because the disciples are expecting such a different kind of messiah, they just don't seem to understand what Jesus is saying. The disciples don't get it, so Jesus shows them the evidence of God's love and mercy through a story, through a meal.

The earlier chapters of Luke seem to fly by. Scholars think that Jesus' ministry was about three years, so all of the previous stories happen quickly and there is a lot we don't get to hear. When the narrative enters Jerusalem though, the story seems to slow down. Almost in slow motion, Luke recounts Jesus and the disciples' activities and preparation for Passover. Even if we didn't know that Jerusalem, the cross, and the resurrection are the center of the story, the change of pace in Luke's Gospel highlights the centrality of the next days in Jerusalem. Luke knows that all that takes place in Jerusalem, including this meal, are important to understanding Jesus and all that he accomplishes. So when he gets to the actual celebration of the Passover he slows the narrative way down and gives us lots of detail about the preparation and the meal itself.

This final meal with his disciples actually seems like kind of a basic meal—bread and wine, two things that would have been eaten at nearly every meal in Jesus' time. But it's not actually a basic meal at all, because in this bread and wine, God shows up. We hear Jesus' words every time we gather around the altar "This is my body, this my blood, given for you."

Jesus knew that his disciples still didn't really understand everything that was about to happen in the next days, so he tries to teach them by inviting them into a meal. This is Jesus given for them, given for us.

In Martin Luther's small catechism, Luther urges us to remember that when Jesus says this his body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus means it. As Lutherans we believe that God is actually present in the bread that we eat and the wine that we drink. This more than just a symbol, or remembering the last supper, when we eat that bread and drink the wine we are truly receiving God. There is grace in this meal too. Luther writes, "in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us...for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." That is a pretty powerful meal!

During this pandemic, one of the things I have missed the most is taking communion together. For me, there is something so powerful in receiving the bread and the wine and knowing that I am receiving God's self. I miss hearing the promise week after week that this bread and wine is given "for you," and for me. I am in continual need of the grace and love of God that is extended to us again and again as we celebrate communion. Every time we gather together for this meal—whether at the altar at Holy Shepherd or together on Zoom—we are remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are participating in that story, and we are actually receiving God's very self. That's is a lot that goes into simple bread and wine.

What kind of God shows up in bread and wine? What kind of God chooses to live in human form for the sake of human beings? What kind of God chooses a cross, suffering, and death to proclaim God's love and grace for all of creation? The answer to all of these questions gets summed up in Jesus's question at the close of our reading today: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." After participating in this meal, the disciples still don't seem to get how God's love is at work in the world through Jesus. So Jesus needs to remind them one more time—God loves God's creation and is willing to come as a human, as a servant, for the sake of all. This love, goodness, and grace of God are revealed in this meal that we partake in together.

And so as we gather together around the communion table, I invite us to hear Jesus' words anew: this is my body, this is my blood, given *for you*. As we continue our journey to the cross this Holy Week, let us be reminded of God's act of love and mercy for each of us. As we receive the bread and the wine again, may we, like the disciples be drawn further into this story of love, grace, and resurrection.