

March 21, 2021 sermon

"THE LAST WEEK: THURSDAY--PART ONE"

Mark 14:12-25

March 21, 2021

York Center Church of the Brethren

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Thursday was a very long day for Jesus. It covers sixty-one verses in chapter fourteen of Mark's Gospel. So much is happening it will take us two Sundays to unpack it all.

We have been on this Lenten journey with Jesus through the last week of his life for five weeks now. Lent is the season in the church year that leads us to Holy Week and Easter. It is an important time for us to reflect upon who Jesus was, what he came to do, and how we will respond to him.

Understanding this time near the end of his life is crucial to our faith as Christians. Unfortunately, these last days often get lost in the shuffle between Palm Sunday and Easter. What happened Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday led directly to the horrific events of Friday. And of course, the crucifixion of Friday leads us to the celebration of resurrection on Easter Sunday.

The details of that last week are too important to lose so we are looking closely at Jesus's activities and encounters during his final week in Jerusalem. Our guide for this Lenten journey, along with the Gospel of Mark, is the book, *THE LAST WEEK: THE DAY-BY-DAY ACCOUNT OF JESUS'S FINAL WEEK IN JERUSALEM* by the late Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crosson.

The first Sunday in Lent we heard about Jesus's procession into the holy city on the back of a borrowed colt. What we call "Palm Sunday" was actually a symbolic attack on the domination system put into place by the collaboration between the Jewish religious leaders

and their Roman oppressors. Borg and Crosson define this corrupt system as *"The political and economic domination of the many by a few and the use of religion to justify it."*

On the second Sunday in Lent, Monday, Jesus raised a ruckus on the Temple grounds, overturning the tables of the merchants that represented the corruption of the religious leaders and the cheating of the poor.

On the third Sunday in Lent, Tuesday, Jesus bested the religious leaders in a battle of wits and wisdom which, of course, only increased their fury against him. Last Sunday, the fourth Sunday in Lent, Wednesday, we met the woman who anointed Jesus with oil in the home of Simon the leper. That act of devotion was tempered by the reality of Judas selling Jesus out for the promise of money.

Today, the fifth Sunday in Lent, we begin our exploration of what happened on Thursday. Every year Jews from all over the world crowded into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. It was a time of great joy for the Jews as they gave thanks to God for liberating their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. It was a time of remembrance for what has already happened and a time of anticipation for the freedom that has been promised in the future.

As you can guess, it was a time of great anxiety for the Roman leaders. They were the "new Egypt" after all, and they knew it. Although the Jews did not live in slavery under the heel of Rome, they were oppressed with unfair taxes, brutality, and fear. The religious celebration of Passover was a time ripe for rebellion against Rome, so the politicians put tremendous pressure on the Jewish leaders to keep the peace. And since it was in their best interest to keep the Romans happy, the temple leaders began plotting the death of the one who put their comfortable positions at risk- Jesus of Nazareth.

As Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm writes, *"Although time slows down in the final chapters of Mark's Gospel, events race toward their inevitable conclusion."* (1)

By tomorrow night of this last week, Jesus will be dead.

Thursday morning Jesus sends two disciples into the city with explicit instructions- similar to the instructions he gave to procure the colt he rode on Palm Sunday. They are told to find a man carrying a jar of water, follow him to a home, then ask the homeowner for the location of the Teacher's room. Several oddities pique our curiosity. It was unusual to see a man carrying a water jar. In those days, women carried water in jars and men carried water in leather flasks. The room the disciples were shown is already "furnished" for the meal, just as Jesus said. Mark is letting us know that plans have already been made for what is to come.

Thursday evening Jesus and the Twelve gather in the prepared room for the traditional Passover meal. The ritual meal reminds us of the true "Jewishness" of Jesus. He is celebrating his tradition, his religion.

As the disciples are eating the meal Jesus drops a bombshell. *"One of you will betray me."*

I am sure more than one of them choked on his food. Instead of defending themselves, they each asked, *"It isn't me, is it?"* Isn't that an odd response? Don't you think you would have said, *"No way, Jesus! It isn't me! It can't be me! I would never betray you!"* Instead, each one voices their own self-doubt by asking, *"It isn't me, is it?"* It makes me wonder what doubts were already taking root and growing in the disciples. Jesus doesn't reassure them, instead he reinforces just how close his betrayer is to them.

"It is one of my closest friends. It is one of you in this room."

Jesus does not name Judas, but he does emphasize his own vulnerability. *"It is one who shares, not only this table, but also shares this very bowl with me."* You can't get much closer, much more intimate than that. This proximity increases the danger to Jesus and it increases the pain of the betrayal. From this moment on Jesus will experience growing abandonment and isolation.

In a nod to the Hebrew scriptures, he seems to be quoting from Psalm 41: *"Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me."*

Mark warned his readers about Judas way back in chapter three when he introduced him by saying, *"... and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him."* Even though the other eleven are confused and have no idea what Jesus is talking about, Judas knows. The tension mounts as we wait for him to make his move.

Borg and Crosson suggest that the central focus of this portion of Mark's Gospel is "failed discipleship." Over half of the events of Thursday, thirty-three of sixty-one verses, are devoted to the ways in which the disciples, the chosen Twelve, have failed Jesus by betrayal, denial, and falling away.

Even after making this terrible announcement, though, Jesus doesn't end the meal, in fact, he enhances it. Eating with his disciples was nothing new for Jesus. Much of his ministry took place around tables and meals.

It was one of the strongest criticisms voiced against him by his enemies. *"He eats with sinners and tax collectors. This guy will eat with anyone!"*

His ministry around meals had both religious and political significance. Religious because it was done in the name of God and political because it affirmed a different vision of society. Jesus broke just about every social convention and religious expectation when it came to food. He modeled radical inclusion in a society with very sharply drawn social walls and boundaries. At that time there were two central survival issues for the poor- food and debt. Feeding people, was, for Jesus, a sign of God's justice. It was also a very visible form of criticism against the institutions hell-bent on keeping the poor hungry. For Jesus, almost every meal was an act of civil and religious disobedience.

So, with the betrayer in their midst, the meal continued. It moved from profound betrayal to profound intimacy. And the betrayer sat right there, included in every aspect of it.

"While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, offered the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them saying, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them and ALL of them drank from it. Then he said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.'" (Mark 14: 22-25)

Mark's language is familiar from the story of the feeding of the five thousand. In a situation of perceived scarcity when Jesus told his disciples to feed the multitudes of people and they argued that they couldn't afford to buy supper for thousands- Jesus took, blessed, broke, gave- and two fish and five loaves of bread became a feast for thousands, with leftovers besides.

In that story and in this one- Jesus doesn't rain down manna from heaven to meet the need. He takes what is already there, limited though it may be, and when it passes through his hands, it becomes limitless. The point of the story of feeding the five thousand isn't about multiplication, it is about distribution. It is about God's divine justice.

In that upper room Jesus again takes what is already there- ordinary, familiar bread and wine on the supper table- and he increases its meaning until the room can hardly contain the significance.

Some of us have heard these words so many times we probably don't really even hear them anymore. *"Jesus took a loaf of bread. Jesus took a cup."* To us they mean Holy Communion but to the disciples they meant Passover. Jesus took something that was rich with traditional significance to his Jewish disciples and he created something new.

Whatever the bread and the wine meant in the Passover ritual was now enhanced with Jesus's reinterpretation. " *This is my body. This is my blood.*"

In that simple and profound act, Israel's past and future are now bound together in light of what is about to happen to Jesus, God's Messiah. Jesus reimagines God's covenant with all of God's people through his own life and death.

Jesus ends this strange and beautiful ritual by making a promise about the future. "Truly, I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day I drink it new in the reign of God."

What is happening that night and what will happen the next day is not an ending, although it will certainly feel that way. What is happening is but a prelude to an unbelievable and exhilarating new beginning.

Borg and Crossan write, "*The Last Supper is about bread for the world, God's justice against human injustice, a New Passover from bondage to liberation, and participation in the path that leads through death to new life.*" (3)

Jesus is also calling them to solidarity with his impending new life through the resurrection; a new life that will be theirs as well. What we call the "Last Supper," was actually the "First Supper" of God's amazing future. And it was revolutionary. No wonder the powers that be were trembling with fury and fear. God is on the loose in the world.

And it was morning and it was evening, the fifth day.

It was on the Thursday

That he threw a dinner party.

A rather odd time, perhaps,

with the authorities breathing down his neck,

and his disciples starting to waver.

And one,
who had already sold him
to the highest bidder.

He fed them
and he told them the truth.

And then he gave them bread and a cup
And he said, "This is me."
"Don't forget."

They sat there at his table,
The food forming lumps in their stomachs.
Worried. Afraid. Doubting. Betraying.

It was on the Thursday
That he threw a dinner party.

Amen.

(Ted & Co. video- "The Last Supper")

END NOTES:

- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MARK: PROCLAIMING THE POWER OF GOD, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm. Westminster John Knox Press. 2008. P. 231.*
- *THE LAST WEEK: A DAY-BY-DAY ACCOUNT OF JESUS'S FINAL WEEK IN JERUSALEM, March Borg & John Dominic Crossan. Harper San Francisco. 2006. P. 120.*