

Holy Thursday

Matthew 26:17-30

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat Passover?" He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" So the disciples did as Jesus directed them and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed and began to say to one another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into with me will betray me. The son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to the one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would be better for that one not to have been born." Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink from the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Let us pray: Lord, we cannot believe you are talking about us. We would never betray you. We would never deny you. We would never desert you. Or would we? Or have we? Or will we? Help us watch and pray because the Devil wants to sift us like wheat. Amen.

"Surely It is not I?"

Surely it is not I? This was the question on the lips of all the disciples that last night with Jesus in the upper room. Someone is going to deny Jesus. All were not sure. Could they do it? Would they do it? Should they do it? Surely not!

Today we remember when Jesus instituted the Eucharistic sacrament. A ritual derived from the Passover ritual of Israel. A sacrament Jesus shared with all of his disciples not just some, not just the loyal, not just the faithful, not just the holy, but all of them. This is why we as a church do not close the table of the Lord to anyone, no matter their age or gender, no matter their sin, no matter their lifestyle, no matter what they believe. Jesus served all who were there, and so shall we. It is not about us and our worthiness to receive the sacrament. None are worthy. This sacrament is about the God who welcomes all of us, knowing full well who we are, what we have done, and who we shall become. At Christ's table all are welcome.

In my home there is a painting that is very important to me. It is a picture of Christ at the supper. The twelve are there, so are their wives and children, and other family members. This was a picture of Passover, a very important communal and family event, It would be unthinkable that children were not present, for who would ask the question about why this meal was so important and who would seek for the hidden matza? Women would be there, not only because they would have cooked and served the meal, but also because the home was their domain and

they always held an honored place at the table. When I saw this picture, my heart leapt for joy, and I had to buy it and frame it. It spoke the truth of inclusion to me.

At this celebration, Jesus bluntly told those gathered in the room, one of you will betray me. That was a stunner. They all love Jesus. They all followed Jesus. He was their teacher. He was their way, their truth and their life. How could any of them betray him?

Judas, is the one who went to the leaders of Israel and promised to lead them to Jesus so that he could be arrested. Yes, Judas betrayed Jesus. Yes, the devil inspired him to act. And yes, it was all according to God's plan of salvation. Jesus knew he was going to the cross. Jesus knew that this would be a crushing burden for Judas to bear. Jesus had to be betrayed, it was woven into the plan of God's love. Jesus' body would be broken and Jesus blood would flow and forgiveness for us all would be provided.

Was Simon Peter worse than Judas? His betrayal was to swear to God that he never, ever, even knew Christ, not just once, but three times. Peter had allowed his pride to get the better of him. He believed that others might fall away, but he would never do it. He would willingly give his life for Christ. He could not live up to his boast, and ended up crushed and crying in the early morning light.

The other guys did not do much better. We do not know the particulars about their stories. What we do know is that when push came to shove, they all deserted Christ and the next time we see them they are hiding out on Easter morning greeting news of the resurrection from the women, which they would not believe. Did they not betray the trust Christ had placed in them? Didn't they add to Christ's sorrow when they ran and hid?

How about us? We too are disciples of Jesus Christ, "Surely not I?" No one wants to betray Christ, but we all do and there is no greater sorrow than when we realize it. Like disciples of the past, we love Christ and we desire to serve him with all our heart, mind and strength. We will at times still betray, deny and desert Christ. "Surely not I, Rabbi?"

I betray Christ any time I choose not to forgive others. Jesus died to bring forgiveness into the world through sacrifice. Jesus showed us the way. When I refuse to sacrifice and forgive my enemies, I betray Christ. When I refuse to sacrifice and forgive those who speak all manner of evil against me, I betray Christ. When I am not willing to forgive those who persecute me, those in the process of crucifying on the cross, I betray Christ. To choose not to forgive anyone is to betray Christ and his mission in the world.

I deny I know Christ, every time I choose to ignore those in need. Christ has told me that whatever I do for the least of these around me, I have done for him. When I do not say hello to a stranger, I have denied that I know them as Christ. When I ignore the needs of others, I deny that I know them as Christ.

In my life was a homeless gentleman for over twenty years. Over these years, I learned to see Christ in him, whether it was caring for his maggot infested feet, or picking him up during a hurricane to bring him to shelter. I tried to care for the Christ in him. We once were able to get him off the street and into an apartment. He lasted for one month before he chose to return to the streets of Baltimore in the dead of winter. I talked him into going back. He lasted another month. I talked him into going back. When he left this safe warm home for the last time, I tried to get him committed. I was through. I was angry. And I at times denied knowing the Christ in him. But Christ was in him, and so our life continued, with him sleeping in my warm office every Sunday morning.

And what can I say about how we desert Christ and leave him to fend off evil all alone.

For me these are the times when I am afraid to rock the boat, so I stay silent and allow evil to happen without saying a word to stop it. These are times when someone, Christ, needs a friend and I make myself scarce. Choosing to befriend the unpopular person, who actually is the unpopular Christ is hard, because then you may lose your own social standing in the pecking order of life. These other disciples did not even have to say a word to betray Christ, they just faded into the wood work and could not be found. They wanted to be safe. Like the many times I have wanted to be safe, so I kept my distance and kept silent and hidden.

Jesus deserves better. "Is it I?" Sure it is. As we have sung together for years: "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee? Alas my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee! 'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee."

Jesus has always known this about us, yet he invites us to his table and feeds us his own body and his own blood and forgives us. Jesus forgives each betrayal. Jesus forgives every denial. Jesus forgives us for being afraid to stand with him, every time we run and hide. Jesus loves us, just as Jesus loved Judas, and Peter, and those that hid themselves away. And Jesus loves you and will always love you, and forgive you, and pick you up and ask you, "Do you love me?" And we will say with tears in our eyes and joy in our hearts, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

Let us pray: As we silently imagine the upper room and Christ before us. In our hearts let us receive the bread from his hand, knowing that it is his body given for us. In our hearts let us receive the cup from his hand and take a sip, knowing that this is his blood poured out for us and we know we are forgiven. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.