

Bread, Blood & Beyond
Luke 22:7-20
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In the fall of 2001, I spent three months traveling alone through Europe. I flew to London and spent a few days there with family and friends, and then I flew to Lisbon to start the solitary part of my trip. I'm relatively introverted and independent, I was excited about seeing parts of the world I'd never seen before, and I'd done my research about how to make this trip a good one.

Despite being comfortable on my own, I also looked forward to meeting new people. Backpackers had told me stories about connecting with other travelers in hostels—eating meals together, making day trips, and keeping in touch with friends long after. The connections all seemed to happen in those hostels, the cheap lodging attracting students and recent graduates who only needed a bed. I landed in Lisbon and went up to the desk in the airport where you could find lodging. I asked the lady there for a hostel, and she informed me—hostilely—that they were all booked. Every single hostel in the entire city of Lisbon, booked. She told me brusquely that there was a cheap hotel that would work, booked me, put me on a bus, and all of the confidence and excitement that had built up over the past several months of planning immediately drained out of me. I spent the rest of the day cowering in my hotel room alone, reading and writing and fairly certain that I had made a huge mistake trying to travel through this foreign continent by myself.

In retrospect, Lisbon was a tough place to start. The city has come a long way since 2001, but at the time, it was not very accessible to a dumb American kid. Many shop owners and restaurateurs were insulted if you spoke English, but they really got irritated if you spoke Spanish, and I knew not a lick of Portuguese. I would learn of this attitude over my next few days there, but somehow the guarded aura of the city reached me even just on my initial encounters at the airport, the bus station, and the hotel lobby, and as a result on my first day I never left that isolated hotel room. Day one of my grand traveling experience basically stretched no further than the elevator.

I (eventually) saw a lot in Europe, but I remember that boring, plain hotel room in Lisbon particularly well. Light blue walls with no artwork hanging on them. One small window with no view. No TV, no clock radio. Smaller than a typical hotel room. It was a safe place to eat alone, to read, and to sleep, nothing more.

When Jesus gathers with his disciples, he sends them to a different plain upper room. It is a place to gather safely and quietly. Luke depicts the Last Supper as an intimate affair. Jesus sends Peter & John, two of his most inner circle, to find the room and make the preparations. The group chooses a room that is somewhat secluded—the guest room or upper room was a place for introspection, hospitality, mourning, and prayer.¹ This is a place where Jesus goes to be with his own thoughts and prayers and to be with those who truly love and know him.

The difference between the disciples' upper room and my Portuguese hotel room (one of many differences) is that my room was designed to be solitary and the disciples' room was not. When Jesus goes to the upper room with his disciples, he gathers those closest to him, those who

¹ <https://upperroommedia.org/blog/2019/07/16/the-significance-of-the-upper-room-to-the-early-church>

have traveled and taught and worked alongside him. He tells them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you.” Make no mistake: this meal is an act of deep community. There is a reason why we call it “communion.”

We frequently eat to form community. Eating is at the heart of our holidays, our first dates, our celebrations, our funerals. It is an act reserved to be shared with those we love and trust...or, at the very least, with those we hope to love and trust. Typically our eating is about solidarity, not solitude.

Jesus & his disciples are celebrating the Passover meal. This is a uniquely Jewish custom, one that traces its history to a night when the Israelites were spared and others were not. It is a sacred meal eaten by those who remember their shared heritage, their shared struggles, and their shared encounter of grace. To outsiders, it could appear odd and unsatisfying. To outsiders, it might even be uncomfortable, like a foreigner traveling in a strange land.

My first day in Lisbon was a Saturday. The next morning, I forced myself out of the room and went to the hotel desk, and I asked them to direct me to the nearest church. The concierge’s confusion suggested that this is apparently not what most 22-year-olds requested, but they sent me to a cathedral nearby. I sat and listened to the words spoken—I assume in Portuguese, although it could have been Latin. I stood when everyone else stood, sat when everyone else sat, kneeled when everyone else kneeled. The highlight may have been the Eucharist: I didn’t have to understand the language to be moved by the sight of the priest raising the chalice in the air or the line of parishioners approaching the altar with heads bowed in prayer. I didn’t even go forward and take communion in Lisbon, because I knew that the ritual was closed in many Catholic churches, but I still recognized and found solace in the ritual. The morning set me right, and I spent the next couple of days exploring Lisbon before moving on to Madrid and eventually much of the rest of Europe.

In every country I visited, if it was a Sunday, I went to worship. In some stops, I found Protestant churches where I could take communion without worrying that I would offend someone. In those settings, the impact was even greater: I did not understand most of the words that were spoken, but I did understand completely the ritual of communion. The act of eating the bread and drinking from the cup transcended every worship style and every language.

Jesus takes the Passover meal and extends it beyond the walls of the upper room, beyond his inner circle. He emphasizes the elements of the meal that are nearly universal—bread and cup, not bitter herbs and dried fruit paste. The Last Supper is a meal that is intended for all, for anyone who wants to come to this table and partake of these elements. In that sense, every celebration of the Eucharist is a World Communion.

The upper room is not a place where we expect Jesus to speak to the whole world...and yet, through scripture, it is. The meal they eat is not a meal that we expect to be shared with the whole world...and yet, through scripture, it is. Jesus is establishing a new covenant, one that stretches beyond the Passover of Israel and one that is intended for all of the world. He is creating solidarity, love and trust with all of humanity.

The new covenant stretches far and wide for the same reason that Jesus himself eats this meal. When he tells his disciples “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you,” he concludes the sentence “before I suffer.” He knows that he is about to experience an incredible challenge. The food shared is a reminder of God’s providence, particularly in times of difficulty. God

provided for the Israelites in Egypt, God is providing for Jesus in his darkest hour, and God provides for all of us when we face times of fear, sorrow, loneliness, or pain.

Those are universal experiences. There is not a soul on our planet who has not struggled with distress and insecurity, who has not grieved the loss of someone close, who has not felt abandoned or forsaken, who has not hurt. We all encounter this kind of emptiness. We all need a God who offers to fill the emptiness. Fortunately, we worship a God who makes that promise, the bread and the cup for the entire world.

Moments of challenge are both wholly universal and deeply personal. We all experience them, but we all experience them uniquely. From those moments comes a widespread yearning for and experience of the qualities that Jesus embodies—faith, hope, and love—qualities that are also wholly universal and deeply personal.

At that church in Lisbon, where I began to find calm and to realize that I was not as alone as I had felt, I understood only one word of the service: *esperança*. It means hope. The act of coming to this table is an act that unites, that binds together in times of trial, and that offers hope. When we eat at this table, our next step is to go forward and share that hope with those beyond these walls, with the world. It is what we strive to do always, and especially on World Communion Sunday.