

# **Where Do We Look When We Come To The Table?**

**Matthew 26:17-30**

**Trey Davis**

**Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**October 2, 2022**

The past several weeks, I've asked us to contemplate different items that frequently exist in the middle of the Baptist sanctuary: baptistery, pulpit, cross, and Bible. Today we land on the fifth and final thing in the center of the sanctuary, the table. Tables show up throughout our scripture, and they almost always represent hospitality. We come to tables for common meals and for holiday celebrations. We use tables to dine together, to work together, and to play together. The table makes sense as a centerpiece of our sanctuary because it is so central to nearly every aspect of our lives.

The scripture reading this morning is one of the most familiar stories—featuring one of the most familiar tables—in our Bible. At this church, we undertake the ritual of communion about six times a year; many churches partake in the bread and the cup monthly. Some congregations make the elements part of their weekly or even daily routine. Frequently, when we come to the table, the story we read today precedes the act of communion...and even when it doesn't, it's on our minds. We come to the table and remember the night that Jesus shared a final meal with his disciples. Remembering is why we participate in this ritual in the first place.

Because this story is so common, it can be tricky to find new truths within it...but, as I preached last week, one of the beauties of our Bible is that it is constantly revealing new truths to us. Reading the story and preparing for today, I saw something that I hadn't seen or read before...maybe you learned and wizened souls have already thought about this, but it's new to me (and, finally, perhaps I should offer a word of caution, because often epiphanies like these are the ones I want to renege on later).

The interpretation I wandered across today came about because of a question one of my youth asked me when we were talking about communion. She said that she had a hard time finding meaning in the ritual because she wasn't sure where to look. Basically, her uncomfortableness came from the fact that eating and drinking with people is an inherently vulnerable act. Sitting in a room this large and everyone chewing and then imbibing, all at the same time, made her feel instantly awkward, and the awkwardness won out over the spiritual nature of the ritual. Eventually, the discomfort grew Pavlovian, and the table itself instigated unease.

What she was asking, essentially, was "Where should I look during communion so it won't feel awkward?" And I think the answers to her question are in today's scripture.

Working backwards through these verses: the last place the disciples look is the first place that we might typically turn our gaze during communion: toward Jesus. The scene depicted in the Upper Room has Jesus front and center, continuing to teach and to explain things to his disciples, continuing to seek blessings for them, continuing to provide for them. As a result, the disciples are drinking in what Jesus has to say, gathered closely around him and listening intently. It's even possible for us to imagine ourselves sneaking into that room and peering over Philip's or Andrew's shoulder.

In this moment, every eye in the room is fixed like a tractor beam on Jesus. There may be some discomfort, but it would be the discomfort of recognizing that you are living through an intense moment, not the discomfort of awkwardness. In my head, Jesus seizes the moment so grippingly, so captivatingly, that any human stumbling slips into the shadows and dissipates.

In part, this is what we hope for when we come to the table. We hope to look at Jesus and to find our human stumbling wiped away. We most frequently express this idea by saying (or singing) simply that we remember Jesus when we come to the table, but remembering and focusing, fixating, are different things. If our remembrance is true, it means turning our eyes upon Jesus and looking full in his face, in a way that lays us vulnerable and bare, in a way that may be uncomfortably intense but that is not self-consciously awkward.

\* \* \*

Of course, before the disciples look at Jesus, they are looking at each other...and, like my former youth mentioned, it is uncomfortable. For the disciples, it's uncomfortable because they're trying to figure out which one among them is a rat, not just because they're watching each other chew. They are looking at each other suspiciously, incredulously, uncertainly. But they are also, as they look at each other, seeing the faces of brothers, of family. The three years the disciples spent together would have pushed them closer to each other than we as people typically get with other people. They would have worked and sweated, cried and bled, laughed and shared together. There are only a few times in my life where I lived so closely with people who weren't family, and then only for a few weeks or months. I can only imagine how bonded these disciples would have been after three years.

There is a union, a trust, in the connected gazes shared by these disciples. There is doubt and fear as well, but only because there has been trust in the first place. These are men who have been vulnerable with each other...and that is why they are uncomfortable.

The truth is, we maybe ought to feel a little uncomfortable—and certainly ought to feel a little bit vulnerable—in faith, in worship. Much of the time, when we come to a room this large and sit in seats mostly facing the same direction, it's because we're attending a performance of some kind. We come to be entertained. But worship is different...we are not here to be entertained; we're here to make a statement of belief, to set ourselves before the God we choose to worship, to lift our (often untrained) voices together in praise and prayer, and to bare ourselves in ways that we do not at a concert or a basketball game.

Despite the uncomfortable vulnerability, we worship together because there is such tremendous value in the community we worship with. Like the disciples, we celebrate with one another, weep with one another, and work with one another. And like the disciples, these are only successful endeavors if we are able to pursue them surrounded by a deep and abiding trust...a vulnerable trust.

When we come to the table, we look not only to Jesus but also to each other. We remember not only Jesus but also those whom we trust, those with whom we share communion.

\* \* \*

As the disciples are looking around at each other, they are not asking “is the one who will betray you that guy?” but rather “surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” So while they may be looking at each other, trying to figure out what exactly is going on here, wondering about whether someone else has broken their trust...they are also looking at their own hearts. I imagine them, hoping their conscience is clear but not entirely sure that it is, believing that they would never betray the man they have followed but aware of their own sin and shortcoming.

It is, again, something we all do when we come to worship. We plumb the depths of our hearts and put forth the questions of God that we cannot answer on our own. We assert adamantly our commitment to faith while also, just a wee bit, doubting that we are as confident about that commitment as we ought to be.

My most meaningful times taking communion are the ones where I have approached a rail at the front of the church and knelt down before the baptistery, the pulpit, the Bible, the cross. A minister offered me bread and cup, which I took but did not consume immediately. I closed my eyes and uttered a prayer, usually a precise and specific prayer, something particular to my life at that moment, something where I definitely did not have all the answers. Only after offering that prayer, finding comfort and security that I had propelled it heavenward, did I eat the bread and drink from the cup.

When we come to the table, before we look at the community surrounding us and at Jesus himself, we have the opportunity to look into our own hearts, to strip away the facades and veils that we might be tempted to employ, and open our souls wide in the vulnerability inherent in the act of communion.

\* \* \*

It would be so tidy to end things here, for the message of this scripture and the answer to this sermon’s question to be “look at self, look at community, look at Jesus.” But there is one more significant element to the scripture reading this morning, something that precedes the scene in the Upper Room. As the disciples are beginning to prepare for the meal, Jesus tells them to go into the city and to speak with an unnamed, unknown man. Again, in my head, the disciples are a little bit confused by this directive—it would be like someone telling us to knock on a random door in six weeks and to say, “About twenty of us would like to have Thanksgiving here in a few days, thanks.” But the disciples also seem used to Jesus telling them to do odd things, and they readily comply. The stranger also acquiesces, and he readies his house for a large group of outsiders to come celebrate a holiday meal.

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day of the year that we set aside not only to remember that we in this room are part of a sacred community but also to remember that a vast array of strangers are part of that community as well. They worship in rooms that look nothing like this. They speak different languages. They espouse different doctrinal and denominational beliefs. Most of them, we will never meet. In nearly every sense of the word, they are strangers...and yet, they are also part of the body of Christ.

In the story of the Last Supper, there is a critical, essential role filled by a man who starts and ends a stranger.

When we come to the table, we are tempted to turn our eyes—our minds, our hearts—to the familiar: to self, to community, to Jesus. But before doing this, the scripture tells us to turn our eyes outward. To look at the stranger. To recognize that there are people we have never met and will never meet who are critical players in the work of Christ.

In a moment, in our own way, we will come to the table. If you are still contemplating my youth, it might feel a little uncomfortable. If it does, for any of us, maybe we would be wise to close our eyes and shed the human awkwardness, to contemplate the strangers beyond this room who might help us to live out the instructions of Jesus, to search out our hearts in the way that his disciples did years ago, to recognize gratefully the value of worshipfully eating in community, and to focus on Jesus himself...and to remember.