

“ON THE NIGHT WHEN HE WAS BETRAYED”

1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 22:1-23

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It was on a Sunday in late August four years ago, and I had just returned home from a lengthy sojourn in England. My daughter Kate and her husband Dylan treated me to an early birthday lunch at a seafood restaurant up in Thomaston. It was a special meal for no other reason than that, or so I thought. But Kate and Dylan used that occasion to give me the best surprise birthday present I could ever receive. As we were finishing our entrées and waiting for dessert, they announced to me that they were expecting a child, which meant that I was going to be a grandfather! A meal that was memorable for one reason became memorable for another reason.

Notice: we see this same thing happening in Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples. They are in Jerusalem a few days after Jesus’ triumphal entry into the Holy City. They are gathered in an Upper Room to share the Passover meal – the greatest festival of the year for observant Jews, a celebration of Israel’s deliverance from bondage in Egypt. It promises to be a memorable meal, but it’s really nothing for the disciples to write home about. Passover is an annual event that follows a prescribed menu and format, as predictable as a Methodist order of worship on any given Sunday. So at one level, Passover is a special occasion; but at another level, it is business as usual. Everyone there knows exactly what is going to be eaten and done and said.

However, toward the end of this familiar meal, Jesus makes a surprise announcement. He takes two common elements of the Paschal feast, bread and wine, and gives them an entirely new meaning. He declares that they represent his body and blood; they are signs of his sacrificial death, which is now about to take place. The disciples have heard Jesus talk about his death before and have always dismissed it as unthinkable, but now they can literally see and taste his death. It is right there in front of them in a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. In the twinkling of an eye, they realize that this is not just an ordinary Passover meal; it is their final meal together.

This is one surprise that Jesus reveals in his Last Supper with the disciples, but it is not the only one. As the meal continues, he makes another surprise announcement: one of the twelve will betray him into the hands of his enemies and actually expedite his death. According to Luke’s account, when Jesus sits at the table he knows that the arrangements for his arrest have already been made; he even knows who has made them; so in the midst of the supper he simply unveils the secret plot that is presently hidden. A Passover meal that is supposed to be a love feast is poisoned by betrayal – and there is more betrayal to come after the meal is finished.

According to the dictionary, the word “betray” has two meanings which apply in this context. To betray is (1) “to deliver someone to an enemy by treachery”; or (2) “to fail or desert someone especially in a time of need.”

The action of Judas Iscariot meets the first definition of betrayal. Judas is one of Jesus' loyal lieutenants, accorded the honor and responsibility of being the treasurer of the disciple band. So it's both appalling and fitting that when he turns on his Master, his betrayal involves a financial transaction. Always out to make a buck, Judas serves up Jesus to the Roman authorities for thirty pieces of silver. And to add insult to injury, he commits his act of betrayal in a paradoxical way – with a sign of affection. In case you've forgotten, Judas' ironic act is the source of our expression "kiss of death."

At the Last Supper, the rest of the disciples are incredulous that anything like this could ever happen and are quick to proclaim their innocence and loyalty. But they, too, will betray Jesus by the second definition of this word – "to fail or desert someone especially in a time of need." They will sleep through his night of agony in Gethsemane, and will later deny that they ever knew him. And so, the entire Passion story is marked by a series of betrayals, and the chain reaction begins in the most unlikely of places – at a routine Passover meal that doesn't go according to script.

Now, you and I should remember that the word "betrayal" refers not just to an action on the part of the betrayer, but also to a feeling experienced by the one who is betrayed. I dare say some of you know how it feels to be betrayed – to count on someone's loyalty and support, and then be let down, sabotaged, or abandoned. A betrayal is a breach of trust by another person that leaves you feeling damaged or diminished. There is nothing so devastating as the discovery that a co-worker has stabbed you in the back, or that a family member has been siphoning off money for selfish pursuits, or that a lover has been unfaithful. The pain we feel when we are betrayed is very much like the pain we feel when we lose a loved one to death, because betrayal itself is a form of death. It involves the death of an illusion and a dream, the death of faith and hope in another person whose allegiance we've taken for granted.

What this means for our present purposes is this: we know that the disciples betray Jesus; we can also assume that Jesus feels betrayed. Because he is fully human, he is bound to be as disappointed, disillusioned, and devastated by his friends' infidelity as any of us would be. He is likely to feel hurt; he may even feel enraged; and you and I wouldn't be surprised if he acts on these feelings with a vengeance.

But this brings us to the third surprise in the story of the Passover feast. The first surprise is that the bread and wine now signify something different than they have before; they are signs of Jesus' sacrificial death. The second surprise is that Jesus' death is being orchestrated by one of his own disciples in a shocking act of betrayal, and that the other disciples will manage to get in their licks as well. But the third surprise is the biggest surprise of all: regardless of how Jesus feels about being betrayed, he responds to his betrayers with acts of love.

The apostle Paul tells us this, albeit it indirectly, when he recounts the institution of the Lord's Supper in the 11th chapter of 1 Corinthians. "For I have received from the Lord what I also handed down to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup after

supper saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

I’ve recited these words hundreds of times while serving Holy Communion to congregations and homebound church members. I have the words memorized so that they roll easily from my lips – so easily that I pass right over a phrase that should arrest my attention. I wonder if you have paused to ponder this phrase any more than I have. We all know what Jesus does in the Upper Room, but have any of us ever noticed when he does it, aside from the fact that it is Passover? When does Jesus break the bread, pour out the wine, and share them with his disciples as signs of his love? On the night when he and the twelve are feeling close and cozy? No. On the night when he and they are all in full agreement, pulling in the same direction on their kingdom mission? No. On the night when the disciples are unswervingly loyal and devoted to Jesus? No.

For the life of me, I don’t know how I’ve missed this detail: Jesus breaks the bread, pours out the wine, and gives them to his disciples “on the night when he was betrayed” – when he knows full well that one of the twelve is about to do him in directly and that the other eleven will also turn on him in their own cowardly ways. We wouldn’t be surprised to see Jesus overthrow the tables in the Upper Room as he does the tables in the temple. We wouldn’t be surprised to hear Jesus condemn the disciples for being traitors and wash his hands of them once and for all. But instead, he washes their feet; he offers them his body and blood – first, in a ritual meal, then on a Roman cross. In my view this is the biggest surprise at the Passover meal: Jesus responds to acts of treachery with acts of love. The disciples abandon Jesus, but he never abandons them – not even “on the night when he was betrayed.”

I remarked earlier that some of you know how it feels to be betrayed. But do you also know how it feels to be a betrayer? Have you ever forsaken a person, a group, or a cause – either to promote your own selfish ends or to save your own skin? And, have you been consumed with remorse about what you have done or left undone – weeping inconsolably like Simon Peter or wanting to end it all like Judas Iscariot? I certainly have. At times in my life I’ve kept silent about Jesus when I should have borne witness to him; I’ve abandoned worthy causes to which I was not fully committed; I’ve turned my back on people who looked to me for love and support – and, in each instance, I tasted the bitter dregs of regret.

Friends, when will we ever learn? At the very time we are least deserving of forgiveness and least expecting forgiveness, Jesus offers forgiveness. This is the biggest surprise of all on Maundy Thursday. This is what truly makes this night a night to remember: Jesus gives us his body and his blood “on the night when he was betrayed.”