

Maundy Thursday, March 28, 2024
Mark 14:12-28

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I'm trying something a little different this year with our Maundy Thursday Gospel reading. Ever since the advent of the red hymnal back in 2006 the lectionary assigns the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet from John's Gospel every year for this night. That was a change from the previous lectionary, which gave us a different reading in each of the three years of the lectionary cycle relating to Jesus' celebrating the Last Supper with the disciples. So having preached on the foot-washing text for the past 18 years – I don't think I have yet to miss preaching on Maundy Thursday – tonight I'm going to change things up. But it's not really about the change per se. It's because one of the people in my weekly Zoom text study is a Latvian pastor in the Cleveland area, and they use that older lectionary. And as we were talking about Mark's account of the Last Supper, I thought, "wow, there's some good stuff here that I'd like to explore in a sermon." So even though you will be hearing the entirety of tonight's Gospel reading again tomorrow night in the Passion reading from Mark, I want to zoom in on this part of the story tonight to help us explore and take to heart Mark's overall message as it plays out here, to connect to the fuller passion account, and finally to connect into our lives of faith, as I always try to do.

There are three things I want us to notice in Mark's account of the Last Supper. First, there is a traitor at the table with Jesus and nobody at the table knows who it is. The reader or listener to Mark's Gospel knows because just before this reading we learn of Judas's plans to hand Jesus over. But the other disciples don't know. And that's different from Matthew and John, where Jesus makes known that it is Judas. But here in Mark, each of disciples wonder if it could be them. Because it could be. You see, there's nothing special about Judas. He's just like everyone else. As I mentioned recently, the community that Mark was writing to, the Christians at Rome, were a persecuted community, forced into hiding. And persecuted communities know well that anyone at any moment might be pushed to their limit. It could be any one of them that ended up betraying Jesus, given the right conditions. Jesus knows this too. He knows that one of them will be betray him, another will deny him, and the rest will abandon him. All of those gathered with him in this intimate setting, his closest friends – all of them will end up failing him. And yet he kicks no one out of the meal. He excludes no one from communion with him. And this was a lesson for Mark's community and it's a lesson for our ours. The quickest way to break up a community is to start suspecting your fellow community members of betraying the group, to start searching for enemies within. It's a strategy that has been working well in our political context to destroy our common identity as American citizens. But it's something that the church throughout its history knows all too well. Purges and heresy hunts have always been and will always be destructive of authentic Christian community. And that's because they obscure the fundamental reality that all of us come up short in our allegiance to our Lord. None of us is certified to throw the first stone. All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You witnessed firsthand just a few minutes ago the one thing that binds all of us here together as a community of faith, the one thing we all have in common: namely that we are sinners who are loved and forgiven by Jesus. None of us has a claim on purity. All of us have a claim on Jesus.

And that claim is because of the second thing I want us to notice here, and that is the new covenant Jesus is bringing about through his suffering and death. We need a *new* covenant because the old one didn't work, as witnessed by the state of the disciples themselves. The old covenant says, I'll make you my people, and you make me your God. I'll do my part, you do

yours. It takes two to tango. Keep up! But since we fail out of dancing with the Star in the first round, we need a new deal. And the new deal is this: you get my body and blood, says Jesus, (and blood for ancient people was life) – you get my life, says Jesus, and I'll take your death. You get my righteousness, my right relationship with God, humankind, and the whole creation, and I will take your sin and your enmity with God and suffer its consequences. Because you can't. Those consequences will utterly destroy you. They will destroy me too, says Jesus, but not utterly. Because my life will not end on the cross. New life is around the corner for me. So if you have my life, the life I am giving to you, you have life that will go through death like the Israelites went through the sea, and emerged on the other side in a new liberated reality.

And that takes us to the third thing to notice here and in the passion reading tomorrow. Jesus says here at this meal, "I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." We have tended to think that Jesus means here that when he drinks again it will be after his resurrection, or even after his ascension. But pay attention tomorrow night when we read through the entire passion according to Mark. Jesus will be offered wine mixed with myrrh and he will refuse it. But then a little later, just before he breathes his last breath, he is given sour wine in a sponge on a stick to drink. Mark does not say that he refused again. And when John later wrote his Gospel, likely with Mark's Gospel in mind, he concludes that Jesus does indeed drink. And that's because this is how the Kingdom of God becomes a reality in Mark. This is Jesus, to use John's word, being "lifted up," elevated to the throne as I talked about recently. The cross in Mark is where Jesus is revealed as the Messiah, the king, the Son of God, and the cross is where rules, conquering sin, death, and evil for us and for our salvation.

That's a lot of good news packed into those few verses in Mark. And there is a lot of good news packed into the meal that we will now share. So as we come forward in a few minutes to partake again in the new covenant of Christ's body and blood, may we do so confident in our Lord's and mercy, clinging to the life he gives us in this meal, and ruled by his sacrificial, life-transforming love poured out into the world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.