

Maundy Thursday communion meditation, 2025

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Last night we read the account of the last meal that Jesus shared with the disciples. Parts of the story are very familiar in American culture. Millions of people who never attend church are familiar with the Last Supper because of Renaissance paintings depicting the scene, especially the one by Leonardo. Those paintings give people the mistaken idea that the disciples all sat on one side of the table, when in fact they would have been reclining around the table, but whenever we see a picture of 13 people in robes sitting on the same side of the table, we assume it is a Last Supper scene.

One of my favorite Last Supper paintings is a fresco in the sanctuary of an Episcopal church in Glendale Springs. You may have seen it. Local people served as models for the disciples to highlight the fact that the disciples were ordinary people and that we can all be disciples. It is quite moving to celebrate Holy Communion in that church in front of that fresco, which includes an open seat at the table for us all. The artist included an unusual detail of a woman and child helping to serve the meal. Most paintings only have the twelve disciples, but there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that only men were at the Last Supper. The Passover meal was for families and close friends. It would have included women, so I think we can be fairly sure that Mary Magdalene, Martha, Mary of Bethany, and Mary the mother of Jesus were also at that Last Supper. But only men have speaking parts in the narrative.

The Last Supper is the basis for the oldest and most wide-spread Christian ritual, which is called by different names: the Lord's Supper, the mass, the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. The earliest records we have of Christian worship describe this sacred meal. Unlike many churches, Moravians do not give dogmatic explanations of the meaning of communion and insist that people believe specific things about the bread and grape juice. We respect the mystery of the ritual.

For centuries have simply recited the words of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: “the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, ‘this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” This is one of the few places in Paul’s letters that are almost word for word in the gospels. They are similar to what we read last night in our Holy Week readings.

It is fascinating that Paul begins his description of Holy Communion with a reminder that it was on the night that Jesus was **betrayed** that he that he took bread. He doesn’t say the night Jesus was arrested. Nor the night that Jesus shared the Passover seder. Paul didn’t even say it was the night before the crucifixion. Those would all be true statements, but Paul wanted to focus our attention on the fact that it was the night he was betrayed that Jesus took bread and wine, saying that they are his body and blood.

The night he was betrayed. We just heard the story of Judas’s betrayal. Judas had walked with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, had seen the resurrection of Lazarus, talked to people that Jesus had healed in body and mind, but he betrayed. Judas had heard Jesus’ teaching, had let Jesus wash his feet, and shared the last supper, but he went to the chief priests to inform on Jesus. The last kiss Jesus received was from a man who betrayed him and delivered him to the police. Judas later regretted his treachery and hanged himself, but he could not undo his betrayal.

Through the centuries people have speculated on why Judas did this. Andrew Lloyd Weber proposed that Judas was angry that Jesus did not start a rebellion against Rome. But the only explanations we have in the gospels are that Judas loved money more than God – and that Satan had entered into him. Satan in the Bible means “the adversary.” Satan always tries to prevent Jesus from fulfilling his mission. Satan tries to maintain the unjust and cruel power structures that humans create. Satan entered into Judas to persuade him to stop Jesus’ preaching and healing, to keep Jesus from bringing in the Kingdom of God. Satan entered into Judas so that violence, hatred, and greed would continue to rule.

What was Jesus doing while Judas was meeting with the priests, collecting his thirty pieces of silver, and plotting to identify Jesus with a kiss? Did he not try to stop Judas? Did he provide weapons for his followers so they could defend him to the death? Did he hide or flee to Galilee?

No, Ginny just read to us what Jesus did. He took three of his most trusted disciples, the disciples who had seen him transfigured on the mountain, and led them to a garden named Gethsemane. Among the olive trees, Jesus prayed. Jesus told his friends that he was deeply grieved, but that phrase hardly captures the depth of his turmoil. That's problem with the written word. We cannot see the fear in Jesus eyes or here his sobs or feel the anguish in his soul. The Gospel of Luke includes a strange detail that Jesus' sweat was like drops of blood or in some versions his sweat was blood. This was to press home the point that this was not an ordinary time of prayer and he was not play acting for the benefit of his audience.

I sure that some of us here tonight have at times experienced the kind of mental anguish that Jesus experienced in Gethsemane. Those times when the pain is so great you cannot stand upright. You are doubled over or lying on the ground weeping and wailing. Times when you can barely breathe because each breathe hurts and your heart is pounding. Times when you cannot see because of tears but also because you cannot bear to look at the world. Time when it feels like you have lost everyone you've ever loved, everything you ever believed in; times when you feel the full horror of isolation and alienation and you don't know if you want to live through the night because you fear the morning sun will bring new grief.

The older version of our Moravian Easter Dawn liturgy said that there are times that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with "groanings that cannot be uttered." The modern version says with "sighs too deep for words," which seems to me too mild and refined for what the Bible is talking about. During our worst torment, during our existential crises, there are no words powerful enough to communicate our grief and fear. There is just raw emotion. It is in those times when we feel completely alone before the vast uncaring universe that the Holy

Spirit in with us and prays with us and through us with groans that cannot be uttered, and our sobs are our prayers. This is what Jesus was going through after that Last Supper.

During our Holy Week readings, we stood at the point in the story when Jesus sweat was like drops of blood because this is in many ways climax of the gospel. This was the moment when Jesus could have turned his back on those who had failed him – on Judas, the three sleeping disciples, the women who followed him, Jerusalem, and yes, even us. He could have avoided his suffering, humiliation, and his death, but instead he prayed to his heavenly Father for strength to carry on for one more day. The physical pain of the scourging and the cross were easier to endure than this internal agony, this struggle of faith.

In the garden on the night he was betrayed, Jesus lay on the ground broken in spirit before his body was broken on the cross. The three chosen disciples, Peter, James, and John could not help him. They were asleep during this ordeal. Later that evening, his disciples would desert him. Peter later denied that he even knew Jesus. The third time the cock crowed, Peter saw Jesus looking at him. That would be the last time he saw Jesus before the resurrection. That was when Peter's spirit was broken. His redemption would come much later.

My friends, we have gathered here to partake of this sacred meal on this Holy Thursday not because we are righteous or pious or even good. We come to this table because we, like Jesus, experience our own Gethsemane. We come to this table because Christ shares our sorrows and grief. We come because the Holy Spirit intercedes with us with groans of pain, pain that we cannot even share with our loved ones. We come to this table not as benefactors, but as beggars at the wedding feast. We come to this table because we are sinners saved by grace alone. We eat this bread and drink this cup not because we are perfect, but because we are loved with an infinite love. We are loved by the one who endures all things with us and for us. We eat and drink because we have been redeemed from isolation and despair. We share this

meal with each other and with our Savior so that our wounds may be healed and our hearts softened. We this bread and drink this cup to proclaim the Lord's life, death, and resurrection until he calls us home.