

Communion Meditation: “Our Best Life”

Mark 8:34-38

Home Moravian Church, July 6, 2025 (Jan Hus Communion)

What a time this world in! A time of hostile, even fratricidal politics, in an often “threatening and uncertain world when famine, plague, war and rioting” might “suddenly cause loss of life and property.”¹ A time of rapid social and economic change, with cities riven by social unrest.

I speak, of course, of the Kingdom of Bohemia in the late 14th century. I’m sure you recognized it from my description, most of which I have cribbed from the writing of my colleague, Craig Atwood, in his book on the theology of the Czech Brethren.

It is a time when governance across a continent is disrupted by a disputed election: the papal election of 1378, when the College of Cardinals elected one pope, then de-elected and replaced him, except the one who was de-elected has refused to step down, leaving one pope in Italy and another in France, each shepherd excommunicating the sheep of the other. All of Europe is traumatized. The church was supposed to unite them; now it’s breaking apart. The pope was supposed to be the one true vicar of Christ on earth; now there are two of them, and soon there would be three. What else might not be true?

The continent smolders with anxiety, fierce debate, cries for radical reform. It is an era of institutional and theological foment. It feels, to some, like the collapse of everything. It feels, to

¹ Craig Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009),

some, like the possible beginning of something. As Craig writes: “All that was needed to push reform into revolution was a charismatic leader and a unifying symbol. Jan Hus was both.”²

Born in Bohemia around 1370, Jan Hus grew up in the middle of it all. As a young man, he studied for the priesthood. His intention, at first, was simply to find a good living and settle into a respectable place in society. But contact with the ideas of radical reformers transformed his intention into a “pursuit of truth and service to Christ.”³ In 1402 he was made rector of the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, where his preaching became wildly popular. The chapel held some 3,000 people; he packed it with everyone from merchants and tradesmen to the queen of Bohemia. Three thousand people—who, historians tell us, not only hung on his words but gave them back in robust hymn-singing! Imagine the sound. Imagine the excitement. *Jan Hus was a sensation*—a preacher surely living his best life!

On July 6, 1415, Jan Hus would surrender that life: condemned by the Council of Constance for alleged heresy against the scriptures he loved, executed by the church he loved, for preaching the truth of the Savior he loved. As he ascended to the stake where he would be burned to death, he held to the promise of Jesus that we heard in today’s gospel text: “Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it [Mk 8:35].”

Jesus spoke these words to warn his would-be followers that they were not on an easy path. “If any wish to come after me,” he said, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” These words were also a personal correction to his dear friend Peter, who had just “rebuked” Jesus for speaking of his approaching arrest, torture, and death.

In Mark’s telling, we don’t hear the words of Peter’s so-called “rebuke”; but we can imagine. Think about how much Peter loved Jesus. Think about how wonderful—literally, full of

² Atwood, 48.

³ Atwood, 50.

wonders—it must have been to be part of the community of disciples. Maybe Peter said something like, “Jesus, we’ve got a great life here! Look at the amazing community we’ve built! This is your legacy! Think of what you’re risking by confronting the authorities! Can’t we back off a little and just enjoy what we’ve got? We’re living our best life, right here and now.”

But for Jesus, and so for those who would follow him, it is an article of faith that the best life is the life most closely aligned with the will of God. Discerning that will to the best of our ability, through prayer and study and prayer again, is the work of every Christian. And we might find help in a sort of formula developed by Jan Hus: *Seek the truth, listen to the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, speak the truth, adhere to truth, and defend truth to the death.*

Hus’s defense of the truth did indeed end in his death; but not in the death of truth. In the decades that followed, those inspired by Hus would press for reform, sometimes fighting the hierarchy of the church and sometimes, in the manner of these things, fighting each other. Famously, the Hussites fought for “communion in both kinds,” demanding that the clergy allow the laity to drink from the communion cup, a grace reserved, at that time, for the priests.

Today we take communion in both kinds, bread and cup, because Hussites fought and died for that recognition of spiritual equality. And we take these elements as a part of Christ’s body called the Moravian Church because in the mid-fifteenth century, a group of reformers inspired by Hus established a religious community called the Unity of the Brethren, who pledged to be governed by the Law of Christ. “Before all things,” they wrote, “we have first agreed that we will care for one another together in the faith of the Lord Jesus, be established in the righteousness which comes from God, and, abiding in love, have hope in the living God.” Moravians gather today as the spiritual descendants of the Unity of the Brethren, holding to the graces they named as the essentials of Christianity: faith, love, and hope.

What if, back in the days of his preaching at Bethlehem chapel, Hus's followers had rebuked him? What if, knowing that his challenge to the institutional church could bring arrest, torture, and death, his friends had said: "Jan, maybe don't be so challenging. Don't risk what you've got! You're top of the charts! You're living your best life now."

Maybe they *did* say that. But if they did, Hus didn't listen; because to lessen his risk, he'd have to stop telling the truth. All he wanted was to tell the truth. A line from one of his letters—"Truth conquers all things"—became the motto of the Czech Reformation.

When we consider what happened to Hus, his confidence in the power of truth can seem awfully naïve. He really believed that if he spoke the truth often enough, clearly enough, biblically enough, the authorities would concede the point, and reform would result. Preparing to stand before the council of bishops that would decide his fate, he poured the truth into a sermon, which he planned to preach to the council—a plan that one biographer called "an astonishing excess of optimism."⁴ Another word for optimism might be *hope*—the kind of hope that is born of faith and nourished by love. If there is anything that this world, in all its excess, might actually need, it's an astonishing excess of hope.

What a time this world is in! If it feels like the collapse of everything, then God might be calling us to discern the beginning of something. Therefore, let us come to the table with an astonishing excess of hope, and a commitment to *seek the truth, listen to the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, speak the truth, adhere to truth, and defend truth to death*. For the truth is that life without truth is no life at all; but a life surrendered for the sake of the gospel is the truest, and the best. Amen.

⁴ Quoted by Atwood, 70.