

## **“The Last Supper: A Feast of Love” Part 1: Preparation**

Holy Week has come once again. The last week of Lent constitutes the high, holy days on the Christian calendar. This is a most sacred time for Christians around the world. It’s a time to ponder the meaning of Jesus’ death and his subsequent resurrection on Easter morning. We have a long-standing tradition in Hagerstown for the churches to come together for worship and meditation on the final days of the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I don’t know how many years this event has been going on, but I am grateful to be a part of it. I’m glad to be invited to share what I hope will be some helpful thoughts on the meaning of our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection, and our continuing part in that powerful story.

Growing up as I did in the tradition of the Church of the Brethren, my early memories of Holy Week are rather slim. As you may know, the Brethren are not the most liturgical of the Protestant bodies. I remember no special Holy Week services. There were not even Good Friday services. I do remember some inspiring early outdoor Easter Sunrise services. But the Brethren have been slow to join the larger Christian community in commemorating Holy Week. Evidently we wanted to do things differently. We were nonconformists, not only in our opposition to war, but also in celebrating special seasons in the life of Christ, like Advent, Christmas, and Lent.

But there is one very special exception to this practice – the one liturgical practice that the Brethren hold on to dearly—the annual Love Feast service. You see, growing up I never had the bread and cup communion on Sunday morning worship. But we did have communion as a part of the commemoration of the Last Supper. Sometime in the spring, not even during Holy Week, the church came together on a Saturday night to remember the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. We would reenact what happened in the Upper Room the night before Christ’s death. Long before kid’s transformer toys were invented, the sanctuary was transformed into a banquet room. The pews were turned into tables and benches faced each other. Men sat on one side of the room, and women on the other. Not only was there a meal served by the deacons, but there was foot-washing as well. And then bread was broken and the cup shared around the tables. This is how Brethren for many, many years remembered Holy Week.

It was through this simple feast of love that I learned to meditate on Jesus' death and resurrection. It was through this lens that I came to understand the significance of Jesus' life and death and the part that the church plays in continuing that story.

I would like to propose that for the next four days, we look at the Last Supper as the context for Jesus' death and resurrection. What he said and did with his disciples around that table will become the framework for our thoughts about the cross and the empty tomb. And I'd like to use the four parts of this Feast of Love as our outline: preparation, footwashing, agape meal, and holy communion.

I hope you won't assume that by using the Brethren form of Love Feast as my outline that I think that the way the Brethren do communion is in any way superior to the practices of other denominations. It is simply the tradition out of which I come and have the most experience. We are enriched by the diversity of our many traditions within Christendom. Hopefully we can learn from one another, thereby deepening our own faith journeys.

So we begin by turning to Mark 14 and reading about how preparations were made for the Last Supper.

[Read **Mark 14:12-25**]

It was all carefully planned out. The Passover meal with Jesus and his twelve disciples was not a hap-hazard affair, thrown together at the last minute. We don't know how it quite came together that the disciples found a man in the city of Jerusalem carrying a water jar. And they followed him to a house where the owner showed them an upstairs room that was already furnished and ready. But they did. It was much like the story of the disciples being told by Jesus to find a donkey for Jesus to ride on as they entered in Jerusalem just a couple days before. We don't know how it was that it all came to pass just as Jesus said. It was a mystery. But it was as if it was all meant to be this last supper together.

So a place was ready for them to meet together. The other part was that the disciples spent the day getting the Passover meal ready. This was no small matter. Everybody in the city was busy. There were certain foods that had to be prepared. They had to make unleavened bread – symbolic of the bread eaten in haste during the Hebrew escape from slavery in Egypt. And there were certain things to put on the table:

- A bowl of salt water – symbolic of the tears shed in Egypt and the salty waters of the Red Sea.

- Bitter herbs –symbolic of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt.
- Charosheth—a mixture of fruits and nuts – to remind them of the bricks made in Egypt.
- And four cups of wine—to remind them of God’s 4 promises before they left Egypt.

But the biggest task was the preparation of the Passover lamb. They had to go to the Temple where unblemished lambs were ritually slaughtered by the priests. Then they had to roast the lamb whole on a spit. All this was to help them remember and commemorate that great day when God liberated the Hebrew nation from slavery to become a chosen people, so that they could be a light to the nations.

It took a lot of work to put this Passover meal together. Elaborate preparations were required. But at the same time we read in Mark’s gospel that preparations were also being made for Jesus’ death. At the beginning of that 14<sup>th</sup> chapter, we discover that the chief priests and the scribes are conspiring to find a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. And a few verses later, we read that Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests and offered his services. He would find a way to secretly get Jesus arrested. And also, lodged between these two stories is the account of the woman with the alabaster jar of costly oil. She poured this expensive oil on Jesus’ head. Remember the story? When the disciples complained how extravagant this was, Jesus scolded them. He told them she has anointed his body beforehand for its burial.

Jesus’ death, like the Passover meal, is not a haphazard kind of thing. Plans are made, and we are told of them well in advance of the event. There is a certain purposefulness in Jesus being in Jerusalem at this moment of time. Jesus’ death didn’t just happen by happenstance. All this makes Jesus time with his disciples in the upper room, especially significant. For we learn that this Passover meal is the last meal that Jesus will eat with his disciples before his death. What happens in this room at this time will be remembered by those who have gathered around the table—for generations to come.

So today when the love feast is held, the service begins with a Time of Preparation. There’s no jumping into the meal, or even washing feet yet. They have to pause and think together about what this Last Supper is all about. There is the need for the preparation of the heart.

Often the minister in charge quotes that scripture passage from 1 Corinthians 11. It’s the Apostle Paul’s admonition to his Corinthian friends, that before they eat the Lord’s Supper together, they need to examine

themselves first. He tells them it is very possible that you can eat the bread and drink the cup in an unworthy manner. Evidently the way the Corinthians celebrated the Lord's Supper some twenty years after Christ was to have a pot luck meal. Everybody brought food from home—except that they didn't share with one another. The well-to-do members had their own food and they shared among themselves. And the poor and humble folks who came with very little to share were off to the side somewhere. Paul says, "When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one gets hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?"

The meditation that follows invites the brothers and sisters to examine themselves and discern the meaning of being the body of Christ. And so our invitation today is for us to examine ourselves, individually, and as the Christian churches of Hagerstown. How are we doing spiritually as we come together in Holy Week? Are we preparing ourselves before partaking of the bread and cup? Or is this just another season to get through so we can get on with whatever it is that we really want to do?

There is brokenness in the body of Christ, no doubt. All these denominations. All these independent churches. The recent death of Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church reminds us of our brokenness. People who look from the outside at the church must sometimes shake their heads and wonder what this is all about. Everybody doing their own thing. Every conceivable way to worship. Everybody's got a slightly different belief. And some churches don't want to have anything to do with other churches. Just the same way some people of one social class, or race, don't want to have anything to do with someone else. We are a motley bunch, aren't we? So many differences. And we often think our particular branch of Christians is the best.

But there are break-throughs. There are times when we find common ground in our mission and service. Things in our local community, like HARC, REACH Cold Weather Shelter, Micah's Backpack, HUB Network, Habitat for Humanity, CROP Walk, Interfaith Coalition—just to name a few. We're working at it, little by little. And we can celebrate these small victories and feel good about them. But we've got a long way to go, don't we?

So we come to Holy Week, recognizing that there's a lot of brokenness – within our own lives, in our community, and in the body of Christ. Our

humanness keeps us from soaring like eagles. Our own selfish and self-centered ways rob us of much joy in the Kingdom of God.

And so it is important that we make preparations before we come to the Lord's table. It's like Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: do something about that broken relationship. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:23-24). Do what you have the power to do to get along with one another. Examine your life. Confess your sins. Live in peace and harmony with your brothers and sisters in faith.

As we mediate on the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, let us prepare our hearts, our minds, and our lives to be present, to open ourselves to what God has for us, and to humbly seek God's ways through Jesus Christ.

Prayer of Confession<sup>i</sup> Ever gracious God, we remember when Jesus gathered with his friends in an upper room long ago. We come bearing the marks of a bitter and broken world. We come from anonymous places, with dry and thirsty spirits. Remind us in the breaking of the bread of our own need and your sufficiency. Refresh us and make us whole with the cup of forgiveness. Draw us nearer to each other in mutual service and closer to you in the covenant of faithfulness and thanksgiving. Deepen in us a sense of your steadfast love for us in Jesus Christ, our friend and redeemer. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Written by Allen P. Happe, from the *Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers*, p. 236.