

## **“The Last Supper: A Feast of Love” Part 4: Holy Communion**

This is the fourth and final day we are meditating on the death and resurrection of Christ by sitting with Jesus and his disciples in that upper room the night before he was betrayed. Monday we prepared ourselves to enter into that Passover meal. Tuesday we watched Jesus stoop down and wash his disciples' feet. Yesterday we joined them in their Passover/Messianic banquet-to-be. And today we consider the meaning of Jesus' attitude and words to them as they communed with bread and cup.

[Read **Matthew 26:17-35**]

It is rather amazing that Jesus said what he said and did what he did, knowing this was a disappointing group of disciples. Every time I read this story, I wonder how Jesus did it. What I means is, Jesus knew that within this little group he had called and trained, there was a betrayer, a denier, and they all would scatter as soon as things started getting rough. We know this because he said it would happen. Before he took the bread and the cup, he announced that one of them would betray him. And afterwards he also let them know they would all leave him. Let's look at this a bit.

Matthew doesn't say much about the Passover ritual they all participated in. Perhaps this was unimportant because most of his readers would know already how it was done, being of Jewish heritage. So he gets right down to the conversation about betrayal. He reports that while they were eating the Passover meal, Jesus announces that one of them would betray him. When the disciples respond in disbelief, "*Surely not I, Lord,*" Jesus pushes even further. "*It will be one of you who has dipped his hand into the common bowl with me.*" Then Jesus comments that while his coming death is all part of God's larger plan, his betrayer will still be culpable. There will be none of this getting off the hook because the devil made him do it. He finally says it would have been better if the betrayer had not been born.

Then Judas Iscariot, the one we all know will betray him asks, "*Surely not I, Rabbi.*" Jesus replies, "*You have said so.*" Jesus knows exactly who will betray him. He's right there at the same table. It's member of Jesus' inner circle. We the readers know that Jesus knows. That's one reason why it's so amazing that Jesus broke bread with all them, including his betrayer. Would you be willing to offer table fellowship to a close friend whom you knew would so do something evil?

But second, after they finished their Passover meal, while they were on their way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus quotes a prophecy from Zechariah 13. He tells them that all of them will eventually desert him that very night. "As it is written, *'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'* And then he gives a final word of encouragement. "But don't worry, after I am raised from the dead, I'll meet up with you again in Galilee." Peter suddenly screws up his courage and says, "I for one will never forsake you, even if I have to go to my death." Jesus must have almost laughed out loud. "Peter, you'll be the worst one. Before morning, before the rooster crows at daybreak, you will have denied me three times." Peter is incredulous. "That will never happen," he says. And suddenly a loud chorus of disciples promises complete loyalty to the end.

So there you have it. What a disappointment! This little circle of twelve, who have been with Jesus throughout his ministry, will almost become his worst enemies, we might be inclined to say. A betrayer, a loud-mouth denier, and the rest scatterers. What a surprise when, in the very middle of the Passover meal, Jesus takes a loaf of bread, blesses it, breaks it and offers it to this motley crew. He simply says, "Take this bread; eat it, [all of you]. This is my body."

Then he takes a cup of wine, blesses it, and passes it around to everyone. "Drink from it, all of you; for this is the blood of my covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I won't drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Do you get the drift of his message? Quite an amazing statement, isn't it?

The kingdom of heaven must be a very inclusive place, don't you think? Jesus somehow is able to rise above disappointment. He is able to rise above feelings of betrayal and loneliness and keep his focus on the larger work of God. He holds nothing against them. As a matter of fact he is completely aware that this weak crucible of gathered humanity will be the very group who carry on God's work of salvation in the days and years ahead.

This gang is all he has. Yet he has confidence in them. In these intimate moments, he affirms them in their brokenness; he reassures them that his death is a part of God's larger purpose of redemption; and he gives them further instructions about meeting them back in Galilee so they can prepare to carry on this important work under the guidance of his Spirit. That's quite an incredible commissioning, wouldn't you say? We might say,

he didn't have a lot to work with, but what a powerhouse they all became when they teamed up with his Spirit.

I guess the church has been around long enough now that we surely know stories about the weakness of the church. There have been lots of incidents of betrayal in the 2000-plus years of our existence. There have been lots of deniers along the way when the going has gotten tough. And scattering always has been a problem, when the greatest need was for someone to stand up for Jesus. Yet, the people of the church, in all its diversity and all its problems, keep coming back to the Lord's table. In many ways, holy communion is what unifies us.

Now we don't all agree on what happens when the bread is broken and the cup is shared, and the words of institution are spoken. Some of us follow the doctrine of transubstantiation. Some of us focus on its symbolic meaning. And some of us speak of the "real presence" of Christ in the Lord's Supper. But no matter what we accept as our doctrinal statement, we find power and life in the Eucharistic moments together. Somehow, somehow, when we break bread and drink wine together in Christ's name, we are empowered to be the church, the Body of Christ in the world. Somehow we are able to move beyond our brokenness, our petty rivalries, our doctrinal differences, our conservative-liberal mind-sets, our ecclesiastical egos, our guilt, our shame, our powerlessness, and carry on the work of Jesus to redeem the world.

We may never be able to all sit down and welcome every Christian to the communion table, but God is still at work. Christ's Spirit continues to bring hope to the world, even through the broken vessel called the church. Wasn't it Bishop A.T. Robinson who defined Holy Communion as simply, "*making holy that which is common*"? Charles James Cook says, in this same vein, when talking about communion, "*We offer to God the totality our lives—the darkness and the light—and it is blessed, made holy and returned to us as the presence of the living Christ. We symbolize this in the gifts of bread and wine. Thus Christ it is working in us and through us that eventually makes reconciliation possible. What we were unable to accomplish before is now a possibility. We do not have to do this all on our own.*"<sup>i</sup>

Sounds like Good News to me.

I hope that you have an opportunity to once again join around the table of the Lord to receive the gift of bread and cup. We will not be sharing the communion elements today. We'll let you gather with your congregation

tonight, or sometime soon to celebrate this way of remembering Christ's death and resurrection.

I invite you to join me in a communion prayer written by John R. Killinger.

Communion Prayer by John R. Killinger

Love sets a table here, Lord, we know that. There is nowhere else in all the world where we feel it as surely as we feel it when we commune. The Lord of the universe says, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for the remission of your sins." We taste the bread, we drink the cup, we feel new life, *your* life, filling our own. The dark places of our souls are brought to light. The emptiness and the failures are dismissed. We eat and drink forgiveness. We are brought together in love and fellowship. Our sensibilities are renewed. Our hope is reborn. It is your table, Lord, and it is a table of love. Help us to eat and drink worthily, by acknowledging our unworthiness. And let the tokens of bread and wine be a feast to our souls, renewing, restoring, rebuilding, rekindling, remaking us in your image, in the image of love. You know we are thankful. You know we love you. You know everything. You *know* we love you. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Charles James Cook, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1*, p. 358.