

Today in our Lenten sermon series on entering the Passion of Jesus, we're on Thursday of Holy Week- Maundy or Holy Thursday, which is why we waited until today to celebrate communion. I was reminded while reading Jewish NT scholar, A.J. Levine, that every time we read scripture, including these Passion narratives, "we become musicians ourselves, for we will always hear the text in a new key. Each time we read the text together, we bring our own new selves to it- experiences, emotions, expectations" (Levine, *Entering The Passion of Jesus*). So as we continue to travel to the cross with Jesus in this last week- holy week- Passion week- remember that just entering the Passion means risk-taking; it means facing our fears, failures, and faults, and addressing them. Entering the Passion means asking questions rather than settling for what we have always been taught. It also means taking seriously, really seriously, what it means to be in Communion with one another (Levine). Today's biblical story is Luke's version of the Last Supper. First a little context or background. When it comes to the story of the Last Supper, there are five variations- one from each of the four gospels and one from Paul writing to the church in Corinth. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul all show Jesus doing pretty much the same thing during the supper. But only Luke and Paul mention the 'new covenant,' and only Luke places the dispute about greatness among the disciples at the Last Supper. For Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Last Supper takes place on the first night of the Passover holiday. Paul doesn't give a date, but he does use Passover imagery. In John's version Jesus does not speak of the bread and wine as his body and blood. He already did that in Chapter 6 in the story of the feeding of the five thousand. Again, rather than rush to conflate these five variations into one story, we really need to savor each one individually. So for today, let's look at Luke's version of the Last Supper.

At the beginning of chapter 22 in Luke's Gospel, we're told that Passover was near and the chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to plot Jesus' death because they were afraid of Jesus' followers. Then Satan entered Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, and he went away to collude with those in power, the chief priests and the temple police, to pay him to betray Jesus. Then the day of Passover Jesus sent Peter and John to go and prepare the sacrificial lamb and the Passover meal that they were to eat later that evening, as a new day for Jews began at sundown (vv. 1-9). They asked Jesus where they were to prepare the Passover meal, and Jesus told Peter and John to look for a man carrying a jar of water who crosses their path and follow him into the house he enters and say to the owner of that house, "The teacher asks you, 'Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" Jesus then tells them that the owner will show them a large, furnished room upstairs, and they are to prepare for the meal there (vv.10-13). Here is where we enter today's reading but before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

A friend tells the story that one day while taking communion to someone who was sick, his grandson was there with him. This five year-old was very curious as my friend set the table with bread and grape juice. He asked, "What's that bread for?" And after many questions, he said, "Oh grandpa, that is medicine." Let me start out by saying that whether as followers of Christ we participate in communion daily, weekly, monthly, four times a year, whether with wafers or homemade bread, whether with wine or grape juice, the details, including the theology, differ from congregation to congregation. Yet, all these meals go back

to this Last Supper. As they sit down for the meal, Jesus makes a statement that is easy to miss but perhaps it most accurately describes how Jesus was able to bear up under the threat of the agonies he was about to suffer. He says, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer” (v. 15). This word “desire” in Greek describes a powerful and overriding passion. This Last Holy Supper together with his disciples was most likely the thing that Jesus wanted more than anything else that week. Jesus was looking forward to it because this meal represented everything he was about to suffer for; it represented everything Christ was about to do for them! As one scholar put it, “See the love Jesus had for his disciples. He was about to leave them, but was very desirous to have this Passover with them before he suffered, as if the comfort of that would carry him through his sufferings” (Matthew Henry (1994)). Can’t you see the delight Jesus had in his disciples taking that supper with him?

Jesus’ Passover meal with his disciples sets the stage for the events that are about to unfold. On Passover “Jews celebrate with a meal called a seder, which commemorates the exodus from Egypt. Remember in Exodus we learn about that first night of Passover when the angel of death ‘passed over’ the houses of the Israelites that were marked with blood of the sacrificed lamb on the doorposts but killed the firstborn of all the Egyptians” (Levine). Today when Jewish people celebrate Passover, they gather with friends and family and retell the story of Exodus, as they eat special foods such as matzo to remember of the unleavened bread the Israelite slaves ate in haste, bitter herbs such as horseradish to remind them of the bitterness of slavery, dipped parsley or lettuce in salt water to remind them of the tears of the slaves. And then there are four cups of wine, each with

its own symbolic value. Some of these traditions, such as the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs, go back to the time of Jesus. Nonetheless, most of the words cited at today's seder were added after the destruction of the Temple. Therefore, the Passover seder today is not the same as what Jesus and his followers would have done. AJ Levine notes, "just to clear up potential misunderstanding we Jews do not sacrifice animals, as that stopped when the Temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago, and we do not put blood on our doorposts at Passover time." Today we also do not resonate with this sacrificial language because we don't live in a culture where "sacrifice" like what was done in Jesus' day is practiced. But at the time of Jesus, "everyone, whether Jewish or Samaritan or Gentile, understood the practice of, and the efficacy of, sacrifice" (Levine). When you gave an animal to the priest to prepare it for sacrifice, you ate part of the meat and it was understood as the worshiper symbolically sharing a meal with God.

At the table, as Jesus recalls God's liberation of Israel and the covenant made at Sinai, he anticipates the fulfillment of the Passover in God's kingdom. His words point forward both to the heavenly feast and to his presence among the community when they break bread together after his resurrection. He gives thanks and breaks bread, saying, 'This is my body, which is being given for you. Keep doing this in my remembrance.' And he did the same with the cup talking about his blood as a new covenant. It is crucial to hear that shock of the language here. "If we take communion for granted, if we take the Eucharist as simply a form of dinner, then we miss the shock. Jesus is giving up his life, and he wants that to be remembered. And the invitation to the table should come with a warning label: Am I reconciled to others in my world, if not, dare I approach?"

Participation in this meal- whether you call it the Lord's Supper, Communion or the Eucharist- this Last Supper is a joy, a blessing, a sign of life abundant...and a risk" (Levine).

What risks are associated in coming to Christ's table? Maybe you don't like the little plastic cups we use and would prefer glass ones so you use that as your excuse to not partake? Or maybe you feel unworthy and feel you need to wait until one day you become worthy before you come to Christ's table? Or perhaps you would prefer to drink wine and not grape juice and that is why you don't want to receive communion? Or maybe you aren't baptized and you've heard somewhere that you need to be in order to take communion? Or maybe it's that you don't like so and so and don't think they should be allowed to come to the table? All of these excuses we give not to come to the Table are real, and they involve some risk on our part. However, above all of these risks, I wonder if the biggest risk is community and who's in and who's out when it comes to communion. I remember visiting Scotland in my early 20s, and I went to visit St. Giles Cathedral, a Protestant not Catholic Church. I was about ten minutes late, as I had walked a few miles in the pouring rain from my hostel. As I approached the church, the usher shut the door in my face. Worship had already begun, and I wasn't allowed in, as they were serving communion. I knew that I wasn't allowed to take communion in a Catholic church but this church wasn't Catholic. I was hurt and confused.

Before this Scotland church disappointment, I was already asking lots of questions about the church as well as about table fellowship, specifically who is welcome to

Christ's table and who is not? As pastor Nadia Bolz Weber notes, "Jesus ate supper with more types of people than I myself would feel comfortable with. Sinners, tax collectors, soldiers, sex workers, fisherfolk, and even lawyers. And his LAST supper was the worst. He broke bread with his friends who were just about to abandon, deny and betray him. And yet, he took bread, blessed it, broke and gave it to these total screw-ups and said, 'This is my body, given for you, whenever you eat of it, do this in remembrance of me.' He instituted the Eucharist by giving bread and wine to all the people who were just about to totally screw him over" ([Nadia Bolz Weber](#)). "Even as Jesus pours himself out for them, the disciples fail to live in Jesus' way. At the table with him reclines one who will reward Jesus' giving by giving him over to the religious authorities, who will then bring him before Pilate, who will then give him over to be crucified" (Judith Jones, [workingpreacher.org](#)).

Notice the last verse in today's story. "Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this" (v. 23). It is very telling that when Jesus told his disciples that one of them was about to betray him, no one suspected Judas. Even though we're told earlier from Luke that Judas is possessed by Satan, the disciples don't know. It's as if everyone recognizes that they, too, were capable of betraying Christ. Aren't we all? "At some point in our lives we will all most likely be at table- anywhere- with someone who has betrayed us, or perhaps whom we have betrayed, we need to remember not only the anointing woman who took risks, but we also need to remember Judas. In all four Gospels, Judas shares in the Last Supper. He is present when Jesus speaks of his body and his blood, distributes the bread and the cup, and then announces that he will be

betrayed. Is Judas part of the group, or not? Has he a chance of being redeemed? Can he be saved? The answer is yes. Yes, for Judas, too, is created in the image and likeness of God. He is not a demon; he is a human being, and we cannot afford to demonize human beings” (Levine). When we participate in communion, everyone who is at that meal is at the same table with you. Yes, on any given Sunday we may spot a person or two who have wronged or hurt us, people whose politics, theology, or personalities drive us crazy. “The Church is positively crawling with people who don’t deserve to be here...beginning with me. But at the table, the Holy Spirit can transform even our enemies into companions. At Christ’s table, we are reminded that, as brothers and sisters adopted into God’s family and invited to God’s banquet, we’re stuck with each other; we’re family. We might as well make peace. The Table teaches us that, ultimately, faith isn’t about being right or good or in agreement. Faith is about feeding and being fed ([Rachel Held Evans](#)).

When it boils down to it, for me the question is are we trusting in our own “worthiness” in this meal, or are we trusting in the worthiness of Christ? Another way to say this is “It’s not about what we’ve done; it’s about what God has done through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit for, in, and to us.” In eating bread and drinking from the cup we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, are reconciled to Christ and to one another. We are reminded that we’re ONE body of Christ and we remember God’s covenant promise and renew our promise to follow and obey. Yes, “the risks of sharing Christ’s bread and cup are high. We give up personal authority; we serve others, we are to free others” (Levine). I don’t know about you but when it comes to Christ’s table, I often don’t have the

words but Christ does. All I know is that Jesus shows up and it's a mystery; it's strange, and it's God. I do believe though that God wants a crowded table. And "if we are to be judged for having gotten this wrong, let it be that we sat more at the table than fewer. Because it's not our table. It's God's" (Weber). Thanks be to God! Amen.