

April 21, 2011
Maundy Thursday
Matthew 26:17-30

“Much More Than a Ritual”

People like rituals. We all have them in some way shape or form. Athletes have pre-game routines. At Easter, Christmas and Thanksgiving many families have rituals they do—special procedures for finding the eggs or opening the gifts that are used year after year after year. And of course, our worship here at Grace is loaded with ritual.

So what happens if you break the ritual? People freak out! If my mother served ham instead of turkey for Thanksgiving, it really threw my festive equilibrium off. Can you imagine what would happen if I came in one Sunday and pitched the chanting parts of the service and had us doing it according to rap music instead? As soon as I turned my back I’d probably get hit in the back of the head with a hymnal! Radical change of a ritual causes big trouble.

So when you read one of the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, you have to take into account how upsetting and mind blowing the whole thing had to be to the disciples. Remember, this was not just the group sitting down for an everyday dinner. This was the Passover meal. It was a highly ritualized celebration of the greatest event in Israel’s history, God’s deliverance of His chosen people from slavery in Egypt. The order, the prayers, the hymns had likely all been done the same way for many years with little divergence. The disciples had been through a lot following Jesus around for three years and were probably looking forward to the stability and normalcy of this familiar celebration.

But this is not a normal Passover. The first clue is Jesus’ phrase, “*The Teacher says, My time is at hand.*” This is not just a Passover for Jesus. This is the **last** Passover for Jesus. The disciples probably were clueless as usual about what Jesus meant by “My time.” But we know that Jesus is leaving this meal and then heading to Gethsemane where He will be arrested and begin His torturous journey to the cross.

By all indications, this Passover meal began as usual. The disciples were probably feeling quite happy, maybe even festive as the familiar ritual began. They probably were feeling somewhat of a brotherly bond, all celebrating the Passover together with their very special rabbi. They were probably feeling blessed, maybe somewhat special, perhaps even righteous.

But then Jesus drops a bomb. “*Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.*” Any peace and happiness in the meal is shattered. The disciples are filled with sorrow. They thought the enemies of Jesus were the Pharisees and leaders of the Jews. But the evil opposed to Jesus is close at hand among them. And perhaps you can make an argument that each one of them felt their own lack of faith, their unrighteousness, the stain of their own sin when Jesus said this. Note that none of them in this or the other Gospel accounts, not even brash and loud-mouthed Peter, deny they could be the betrayer of Christ. They instead ask, “Is it I, Lord?”

Somehow the supper survives this devastating break from the ritual and continues. But then Jesus breaks away from the liturgy of the meal again. “*Take, eat; this is my body. Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*”

What is this? The disciples had to be shocked and confused. Eating somebody’s flesh is abhorrent to almost every culture and drinking blood is especially repulsive to Jews. The Torah specifically forbids consuming blood! But it’s bread and wine, not flesh and blood, right? But Jesus is saying it’s body and blood. What is up here? How is this possible?

Not fully comprehending, the disciples ate and drank anyway. Why? *“Poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”* Perhaps, after feeling their own guilt after Jesus’ betrayal comment, the disciples knew that whatever it was that was going on, it was for the forgiveness of sins and they needed that forgiveness. So they ate and they drank. And thus began a new thing in Christ; a new and greater ritual—a new covenant unlike the old which was made with the blood of animals. This new covenant of forgiveness is made by the blood of God Himself, the very blood soon to be poured out on the cross for the sins of all mankind.

And in this new covenant of blood is also a great promise. *“I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”* This holy meal is leading somewhere! It points to a much greater feast in paradise! And Jesus says He will drink it **with you!** In their confusion and sorrow and upset of the Passover ritual I bet the disciples missed a lot of this. They really wouldn’t understand it until after Sunday, maybe not until after Pentecost.

You and I, we understand; well, as much as we need to understand. How is this Christ’s body and blood while it is still bread and wine? That’s a mystery. We just know it’s true because Jesus says so. But as for what this does—no question; it forgives sins. It is the body and blood of the sinless Jesus Christ; His essence, His righteousness, His rightness with God given to us.

And we need it. We need it desperately. We don’t have to ask, “Is it I, Lord?” We all know that we are no better than Judas. We daily betray our Savior and turn to the sinful ways of the world. This is why we need Jesus and this is why He offers Himself up on the cross and gives Himself to us in, with and under the bread and the wine. No sin of yours is too great for this gift to forgive. I find it interesting that even Judas Himself may have been included in this offer of this meal. None of the Gospels exclude his presence. Even for him Christ’s forgiveness was there if only he would have received it.

None of this should be new to us. The forgiveness of sins is made very clear in our ritual surrounding the Holy Supper. Whoever repents and believes the good news of Jesus is going to find their way to the altar where this meal is served to receive Christ’s gift of forgiveness in this way that it can be touched, tasted and swallowed.

But what may be new, or perhaps just faded or forgotten in the Lord’s Supper is the destination, or maybe better understood as the link between this meal and the next. Jesus words, *“I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom”* are not part of our usual liturgy of the Sacrament. But Jesus said them as He instituted this meal. He says this meal, this drinking of the fruit of the vine, looks forward to a day when we will drink it with Him in paradise, in perfection, in freedom from this world of sin.

This meal is not mere ritual. This meal is no more mere ritual than was the nation of Israel escaping from Egypt by the hand of God holding back the waters of the Red Sea and then drowning the pursuing army of Pharaoh behind them. This meal is salvation; the very body and blood of the risen Christ given you for the forgiveness of sins. It is a rescue from sin, Satan and death. It is God’s gift, guide and strength for the journey to the Promised Land.

Remember this when you come weary to the table. The burdens and pain of the world, the guilt of your own sins and betrayals of Christ, perhaps fatigued from struggling to remain faithful in a faithless culture. This is not just a ritual. This bread and wine that is body and blood is a foretaste of the fulfilled promise of the person and the feast in paradise. You receive this meal as a forgiven, invited guest at the banquet. Taste this guarantee of salvation and be strengthened in your walk toward the completion of all things when we shall drink the fruit of the vine with Jesus in our Father’s eternal kingdom.

Amen.