

Entering the Passion of Jesus

“The Last Supper: Risking Loss of Friends”

[Luke 22:14-27](#)

Almost two weeks have passed since the shelter in place order was issued for the surrounding counties of the Bay Area, including Santa Clara County, to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. The order has brought different challenges to different people.

I’ve heard from some parents how wonderful yet exhausting it is to have their young children at home 24/7, while also trying to work from home. One mom told me about her new daily routine of fixing three meals for her family. She said it has been both a blessing and a challenge. I heard a joke that reflects the current situation many young families are in: “If the scientists do not find a vaccine to the novel coronavirus, certainly, the parents will.”

But, for those who live alone, like me, one of the things that we miss doing in this time of sheltering in place is eating food with someone else. Since I stay at home alone most of the time, I am used to eating meals by myself. But, normally, I take a break from my routine once a week when I go over to my daughter’s home to see my grand-kids. It is such a joy to eat with them. And of course, I get to eat with others whenever I have meetings over a meal.

The first week of the shelter in place order was okay. But, now, nearing the end of its second week, I find myself craving the opportunity to share a meal with someone else. I know that many medical experts and scientists are predicting that we are far away from the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. But, I already long for the day when the shelter in place order is lifted, and we all come back to worship together in this sanctuary and have Coffee Hour afterwards!

Indeed, sitting together with others at the table for a meal is an important human experience for us all, and so was it for Jesus. According to the Gospels, sharing meals was one of the most important ministries of Jesus. In John, the first miracle Jesus performs is turning water into wine, and it’s done at a wedding (John 2:1-11). In the Gospel of Luke alone, there are 10 stories of Jesus eating with various people, both his followers and his opponents (5:27-32, 7:36-50, 9:10-17, 10:38-42, 11:37-53 14:1-24, 19:1-10, 22:14-38, 24:28-32, and 24:36-43). Often, Jesus’ teaching is done over a meal; Banquets appear as a backdrop in his parables; and he is criticized by his opponents, who ask, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 11:19, Mark 2:16, Luke 7:34). And today’s scripture reading is one of those stories of Jesus sitting around a table, dining with others.

Since Jesus and his 12 disciples traveled together, we can assume that they usually ate together; and their final week was not any different. Even on the night of his arrest by the Roman authorities, Jesus took the time to eat with his disciples. The story of Jesus' last supper is recorded in all 4 Gospels. And the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, place it on the first night of the Passover, one of the major Jewish holidays. That means, the last meal Jesus and his disciples had together was not an ordinary one. It was a very special meal called the Passover *seder*, which commemorated the Exodus event of their ancestors — God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.

The tradition of celebrating the Passover meal has changed over the years and has developed into an elaborate affair. But, in Jesus' time, a typical *seder* in a Jewish home would have been simple and included just a few items: *matzo*, which is thin, crisp unleavened bread, serving as a reminder of the unleavened bread the Israelites ate in haste before their escape, bitter herbs, which was a reminder of the bitterness of their slavery, the Passover lamb, which would have been sacrificed in the Temple earlier that day, and 4 cups of wine. In the symbolic and liturgical meal, sharing this special food and wine, the Jews would remember the story of God's deliverance of their ancestors from captivity at the hands of Egypt, and they would celebrate God's steadfast love and faithfulness shown to them.

So the fact that Jesus had arranged for a Passover *seder* would not have come as a surprise to his disciples. However, during the course of their Passover meal, something totally unexpected and shocking happened. The Gospel of Mark states that "While they were eating, he [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take: this is my body.' Then, he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many...'"

We need to look into the ancient practice of sacrifice that Jesus is using here as a backdrop to better understand the words he spoke, which are now called the Words of Institution for the Holy Communion.

New Testament scholar and author Amy Jill Levine explains it this way in her book, "Entering the Passion of Jesus":

Sacrifice was a way of sharing a meal with God, or if one were a pagan, the gods. It was a mechanism that bound families and communities together. And, it had many functions, because there were many types of sacrifices: thanksgiving offerings, freewill offerings, dedicatory offerings, festal offerings, and yes sin offerings. One could offer oil or grain or other agricultural produce or an animal. Unless the sacrifice was what was called a "whole burnt offering," the worshiper would give the animal to the priest, and the priest would butcher it, drain the blood,

burn parts of the offering on the altar, and give other parts back to the worshiper. In eating the meal, the worshiper would be, symbolically, sharing a meal with God. (p. 120)

So, here Jesus is making a radical paradigm shift for his disciples. He is telling them that they no longer have to sacrifice animals to participate in the divine banquet, to share a meal with God, because Jesus himself would become the sacrifice. The lamb which was sacrificed at Passover stood as the symbol of God's favor for God's people, reminding them of how they were redeemed by the blood of the lamb marking their doors in Egypt. Now, Jesus was reshaping the old ritual and establishing a new ceremony for his disciples by becoming the paschal lamb. And he tells them, "Do this in remembrance of me." Commenting on this, Levine says, "Jesus is giving up his life, and he wants that to be remembered. He is allowing his body to be broken, and he wants that to be remembered" (p.121).

This embodiment of love that Jesus displays, laying one's life down for the sake of another, is a difficult lesson for us to learn — as it was for Jesus' disciples who were gathered around the table at the Passover *Seder*. Immediately after Jesus presided over the first Holy Communion, the disciples begin to bicker and argue with each other, fighting over which one of them is the greatest.

So, it is with us and our world. We have all been disappointed and angry to see the scenes of selfish behavior on display during the pandemic. But perhaps some of this disappointment and anger that is directed outwards toward the scapegoats is a projection of how we feel about ourselves, knowing that we too have been self-centered and focused more on our own comfort than the needs of others. Perhaps our desire to shame those who are hoarding essential items or breaking the shelter in place rules is a way for us to mask the discomfort we feel about the wealth we have accumulated for ourselves or how we use our power and privilege for our own advantage.

But, Jesus points us to another way. It is a way that will require us to risk ourselves, to give up the comforts we hold onto, the privileges we enjoy. It is a way that asks us to let go of what we have and share our lives. And even to lay it down...

Some of you may have heard of the story of how an elderly Catholic priest who contracted the new coronavirus died after he gave up his ventilator, so a younger patient could have it. Don Giuseppe Berardelli, who was 72, died two weeks ago at a hospital in Italy after declining to use the medical equipment that his parishioners were said to have bought for him. In a local newspaper, people remembered Berardelli as a beloved figure, well known for helping those with financial problems. He made the ultimate sacrifice in remembrance of Jesus.

Friends, Sisters and Brothers in Jesus Christ, we, too, are called to remember. And we are called to "Do." "*Do* this in remembrance of me," Jesus commands. Letting go of our lives and answering the call to follow Jesus will not be easy. It will require us to leave the familiar behind. It will require us to surrender our desire to be served rather than to serve. It will require us even to risk losing our friends, the ones who are still gripped by the passions of the world.

But, we do not walk alone. We walk with the communion of saints who have gone before us, fellow disciples of Christ like Father Berardelli, who by the grace of God, were able to boldly "do" as Jesus did. And most importantly, we walk in communion and fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in whom we find everlasting friendship.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.