

“Bickering at the Thanksgiving Table”

Luke 22:14-16, 24-34

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Reign of Christ Sunday

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Jesus has been looking forward to this Passover meal. He’s planned it all out, found an AirBnB with the perfect upper room, told his disciples to take time to prepare it what will become the Eucharistic meal – that is the Thanksgiving meal – for the church. And maybe he’s excited because for the first time in the Gospels *Jesus gets to be the host*. In all those other stories, Jesus is the guest – he shows up at other people’s tables – a Pharisee here, a widow there, a tax collector, a scribe. But here Jesus is the host, which gives him a certain measure of control. Jesus gets to decide when to serve the hors d’oeuvres, when to pour the wine and make the toasts, who gets to sit where, and who will bless the meal. And like any host who’s invited the guests she wants to invite, Jesus has been looking forward to this meal which is exactly what he says to them.

“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover *with you* before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” It’s that eagerness that is especially surprising to me since Jesus knows exactly what’s about to happen. He says as much at the feast. One of you will betray me. And you, Peter, the rock on which the church is built, will deny me three times. As a southerner with a certain amount of sugary passive aggressiveness built into my DNA, part of me can’t help but read Jesus’ words in a more sarcastic tone. Welcome to my Thanksgiving meal, disciples. My *last* Thanksgiving meal. The one right before one of you betrays me – [cough] – Judas – [cough] – Peter - right before another one of you denies me. Right before all of you leave me hanging on a cross. Anyone else want to make a toast?

I retreat to a more cynical place, not just because of my cultural background, but because it’s impossible to square Jesus’ actual eagerness in spending time with the very people who are about to disappoint him in the most difficult and costly of ways. I don’t know anyone else like that. We all have our limits on what we can tolerate in our closest circles of friends. We all have limits on what we can tolerate in our extended families. We all have limits on what we can tolerate at our own Thanksgiving tables. We don’t eagerly await feasting with people we know are going to stab us in the back.

And yet there Jesus is dining with those obstinate disciples who still haven’t learned the most basic lessons that he’s already taught more than once. There he is with those disciples arguing again over who is the greatest while patiently trying to teach them a different kind of greatness that comes from serving others. There he is with one who is about to betray, another who is about to deny, most who are about to flee. There he is conferring on them a kingdom – what one scholar translates – *a power* – that they don’t deserve and might not even be able to manage on their own.

Why does Jesus stick with them? I’ve never understood Jesus on this point. It’s what drove me away from the church as a young person. *The hypocrisy. We say*

we believe in this, and yet we do this other thing. We say the last shall be first, but we encourage each other to get to the head of the line. We say there is enough to go around, but we fatten up our 401ks before we feed the hungry on the street. We sing that we Christians shall be known by our love, but in these days of so much division what we really seem to value is self-righteousness that lines up with our own preset political views.

Why does Jesus stick with them? It's an important question, but also reveals a bit of our own blind spot when it comes to our own self-understanding – namely that *it's easier to see the deficiencies in others than it is to see them in ourselves.* Blind spot is actually what psychologists call it – the bias blind spot - the scientifically proven fact that everybody knows that people are biased, but it's much easier to see the bias in other people than in oneself. It's easier to see the egregious way Judas betrays Jesus than to recognize the ways in which I betray him in my everyday living. It's easier to see Peter's egregious denial of Jesus and harder to see my own daily denials of his way in the world. It's easier to see the disciples flee, than it is to recognize the ways I run from the danger than living in his Way brings into my life.

In other words, if we're honest with our selves, then we are at least as broken, at least as limited, at least as weak as these disciples. We are at least as guilty, at least as failed, at least as egregious with our mistakes, our judgments, our bickering, our fears as are these disciples. We are no better, maybe a bit worse than these very disciples.

On my down days, it makes me wonder if that's reason enough to close up the church. I mean the whole worldwide thing. It takes a lot of energy to build a church as we all know. It takes a lot of money to keep the buildings from falling apart, the pay a staff, to run programs. We get no money from foundations or corporations. It all comes from our own wallets. Shouldn't we just give it away to a foundation or something? It takes a lot of time and energy to organize each other's time and energy, to respond to the needs of the world and of each other. Why not give that time to some good nonprofits, or to our kids' sports schedules that takes it anyway, or to any number of social groups alive and well in our city? But mostly it takes a lot of heart to abide with each other in a time when people in our country are having a harder and harder time sharing anything with each other in the most basic of ways.

On my down days, I imagine how freeing it would be to work a 9 to 5 job, worry about myself and not my neighbor, practice my own self improvement projects with books from the library or classes at the community college. Imagine that extra time that so many of you would have if you weren't meeting over the best way to change the difficult to reach light bulbs in this sanctuary, or baking casseroles for hungry people who you might not even meet, tutoring children whose education has been chronically underfunded for 40 years, or organizing our faith community to demand that our city and state budgets put the wellbeing of children at the front of the line. Imagine all that extra money some of the most generous among you would have to take more trips or save more for retirement, or enjoy more stuff, instead of sending Salvadoran kids to school or building relationships with Native American siblings in Christ, or seeing for yourself the hunger and injustice that our government keeps enacting on the Cuban people. On my down

days, when the church looks not very efficient, not very effective, not very different from the world, I wonder if we should just throw in the towel.

But, of course, that's because on my down days, I'm thinking too much about us; I'm thinking too much about myself. I am not thinking about *Jesus and the way the power of God actually finds its way into the world*. I'm not thinking about the way God chose Abram and Sarai in spite of all their problems. I'm not thinking about the way God chose Jacob and Rachel in spite of their terrible human foibles. I'm not thinking about the fact that in Moses, God chose a murderer with a speech impediment to be the spokesperson for the liberation of a people, or Rahab the prostitute to be the example of faithfulness for a people coming into their own land. I am not thinking about the way Jesus chooses fishermen instead of Pharisees, tax collectors instead of models of religious righteousness, women who have had five husbands instead of the ones who pass the religious purity tests set by the patriarchy. On my down days I'm thinking about all that disqualifies you and me from righteousness, all that disqualifies us from effectiveness. *I think about everything except the actual way the power of God finds its way into our lives, into the world.*

Which is what makes the power of God – that reign of Christ, the power of God that we celebrate today as the culmination of the Christian year - what has traditionally been called the kingdom of God – it's what makes that power so alien to everything that we know. Because that kind of power is not built on the unilateral kinds of power that we're all learning to see is bankrupt, that always leads to Mayors taking what doesn't belong to them, Presidents abusing power as if any human being is above the law, leaders of all kinds seeking to destroy their opposition instead of building a world of peace across division. Neither is it built on a purity of thought or a purity of deed that is beyond the capacity of any one of us to achieve. It is not built on ideologically pure platforms as if anyone of us was exempt from the bias blind spots that leave us able to pinpoint specs in each other's eyes while we miss the logs in our own.

No, *that power is built on the love of God*, our only hope for community, for abiding with each other. The love of God that we see most radically in the community that is made possible not by our perfection, not by getting the most seemingly perfect people in the same room, but through the radical forgiveness of God that is extended to the world not because any of us deserves it, but because God isn't through with us yet.

That's what Jesus says to Peter – did you see it? I've always focused on Jesus' words to Peter as exceptionally sad – you will deny me 3 times Peter – and as a judgment on Peter's character – Peter that sad hypocrite who says he is willing to follow Jesus to the end right before he denies him. "I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail," Jesus says and I always read that to mean I've prayed for you that you won't actually do this terrible thing, that you won't actually make this terrible mistake. But this time I saw that *Jesus has already accepted Peter's imperfections, Peter's mistakes*. "When once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" meaning *after you've made your big mistake – 3 times!, after you've turned back to me and reclaimed your place in my Way, then strengthen the others.*

The hard truth, the miraculous thing, the unbelievable thing is that Jesus believes that this group is the one that can change the world. These are the people who he believes can teach the world a love they don't fully live. These are the people he believes can teach the world a faith they don't fully trust. These are the people he believes bring about a justice they don't fully embody. These are the people he believes can live a way they don't fully embrace.

These are the people, not because they possess greater gifts, but because they know themselves to be claimed, loved, redeemed and strengthened by God. And if that is the true power of God then it is the very thing we must continue to announce, continue to receive, continue to steward in the church. That core belief that we have been called to this time in our city, to this time in your life, to this time in mine not because we believe that we are worthy or special ourselves, but because we see that *in spite of the facts, God believes in broken, limited, struggling human beings to be the vessels through which God's healing and help and justice find their way into the world.*

I saw it in a neighborhood bar on Friday night. I went there with a friend. It had been a wonderful week of pride in our church – so much love flowing in and through our church, from the strong Brown Memorial contingent that stood with BUILD and won commitments from our Mayor for millions of new dollars to fund education to watching the front steps get fixed by our Trustees who handle so much in the way of 150 old building, to the food I saw headed to people recovering from surgery or welcoming new life, or grieving fresh losses, some in the same family.

In the bar I overheard the young woman next to me talking about troubles with her girlfriend, surviving the murder of her brother, struggling to get a job that matched her sense of calling – some painful and important human stuff. And through it all, she kept talking about God. I couldn't let it lie. "You sound like someone formed in the faith," I said, inserting myself into the conversation. "O, hate churches," she said, without so much as a pause. "They're all judgy and hypocritical. They don't accept me and who I love. They say one thing, do another." "That's true," I said, "but there's also grace and forgiveness and compassion there at least some of the time." "Yeah," she said, "I did get Jesus there. I guess that's why I hate the church so much. We just can't ever love like he does. Why do you care? Are you religious or something?" "Not at all," I said, "I'm a Presbyterian pastor." "*Jesus,*" she said, downing a shot of something. "Most of the time, honestly," I told her, "I'm just as hungry for what you're talking about as everybody else."

I told her about our community, about the rainbow flag hanging over the door, about the work in the city to get to the root of our crime which is really about attacking the legacy of white supremacy with purpose and grit. I told her about the grace I had personally received in this place. I said, yeah we've got our hypocrisy. I've got my own. I'm know I'm not perfect. Neither is this community. She told me she was going to come visit one day. My first reflection was I was so glad to have a place like this to invite her, too.

But as I walked home that night through the streets of southwest Baltimore, past the scarred row homes that sometimes tell the story of our past, other times point us toward possibility, I realized *I was even more grateful that I have this place to come to.* This community struggling to hear Jesus' radical words, this place to

remind me that the fact that the power of God is always sneaking up on us, always working us over in the ways that we need together, in the ways that our city needs together, in the way that our nation needs together. This place where Jesus eagerly await to share this meal of liberation, this meal of thanksgiving with you and with me.