

West Van Baptist, March 29
Dinner with Jesus – Everyone Is Welcome
Matt 22, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 13

I. Another dinner with Jesus

We're part-way through a short sermon series to help us all prepare mentally and spiritually for Easter (which is coming next week!). As I went back through the Easter story in the gospels, I noticed that some of the most interesting, intimate events that happen right before and right after Jesus' death and resurrection take place during meals. So I've called this series "Dinner with Jesus," and each week we're working through one of those events.

Last week we considered the dinner at the house of Simon the Leper, where Jesus' friend Mary poured precious perfume over his body as an act of worship. This week we turn to the most famous of the 3 meals: Jesus' last Passover supper with the disciples.

This is a very familiar story. It's mentioned in all 4 of the gospels, and Paul discusses it in 1 Corinthians. I don't think any part of the Bible is read more often by more people than these passages, because we return to them every time we share Communion—the Lord's Supper—together in church. I'm sure everyone here can quote at least parts of the story. We've heard how Jesus took the bread and stated, "This is my body, broken for you," and then He held the cup and declared, "This is my blood which is poured out for you." At least that much of the dinner is very well-known.

But the story of the last supper is quite a bit longer than the part we read at Communion, and a lot of different things happen, especially if you read all four versions from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

By the way, this is something we almost never do. We never read the 4 accounts one after the other, which would take a while. And—at least in my experience—we almost never tell the story as it unfolds when you combine all 4 gospel accounts into 1 sequence. I've seen it done once or twice in seminary classes on the 4 gospels. But I've never heard anyone do it in church, and I've never done it in a sermon either—until today.

That's OK. Each gospel tells the story of Jesus in its own way, with its own special emphases. The gospels are a little like the 4 worship songs we sang this morning: they're all about the same topic (loving and worshipping God), but they speak to that topic in 4 different voices, and we are richer because we have 4 songs and not just 1. The gospels don't disagree with each other; they simply paint the picture from slightly different angles. It's good to read each as a unit, like we sing our worship songs individually. At the same time, there can be some value in comparing them and considering the more 3-dimensional message we get when we add the insights from all four.

That's what I'd like to do this morning. I want us to imagine ourselves joining Jesus and the disciples for that last dinner together, experiencing all the different things that they experienced as described by all four gospels. You may have noticed that we already started doing this in this morning's Scripture reading, which pulled together verses from Luke, John, and Mark. (If you were trying to following along in your own Bible, you will have found the reading very confusing! This is why.) I'm

not going to focus on the unique contributions of each book. Nor am I going to dig into the details of the story, which would get very long. Instead, I want us to think about a couple big ideas that surface when we scan over this supper, and then we'll consider how this might help us prepare for Easter.

II. Jesus' last dinner with the disciples

(1) Passover and preparations

The last supper was a Passover meal. Thousands and thousands of Jews gathered in Jerusalem for the feast, and those who could not come held their own celebrations wherever they lived. They ate, recited Scripture, sang, and conducted ceremonies to remember how God delivered Israel from Egypt and formed them into a nation. During the original Exodus, God's people sacrificed lambs, painted blood on the doors of their houses, and ate a special meal together. Ever since, a special meal would be the center of this feast.

So, Jesus sends several disciples into Jerusalem to get things ready. They meet a man who leads them to a house with a large upper room where the group can gather. Food is prepared and arrangements are made. (Mat 26, Mk 14 & Lk 22)

During the same week in another part of town, the Jewish leaders are also making preparations. They are gearing up for Passover, but also debating how to get rid of Jesus, since He is embarrassing them and threatening their control over the people. "We need to have him killed," they say. "But not during the feast—that would cause a riot." While they are still debating strategy, an opportunity presents itself. One of Jesus' 12 closest disciples, Judas, offers to help them find and arrest Jesus at a quiet, private location away from the crowds. He can make this happen earlier—for the right price. Having made this deal, he will join the rest of the disciples for Passover supper. (Mat, Mk, Lk)

(2) The supper begins

The sun slides low onto the horizon and evening comes. The disciples have gathered, and it's time for the meal to begin. Luke tells us,

Jesus and the apostles sat down together at the table. Jesus said, "I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. For I tell you now that I won't eat this meal again until its meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God (Lk 22:14-16).

John adds: Jesus knew that His hour had come to leave this world and return to His Father. He had loved His disciples during His ministry on earth, and now He loved them to the very end (Jn 13:1).

It is a very special meal. More than the usual Passover, this will be last precious opportunity to be together before Jesus' arrest, suffering, and death.

(3) The disciples fight and Jesus teaches them a lesson

How would you approach the most important dinner of the year, where Jesus shares His heart and tells you He is leaving? His disciples behave in a most disappointing way. *They began arguing among*

themselves about who would be the greatest (Lk 22:24). Who is most important? Who should serve the food, who should do the dishes, and who can just sit and enjoy? Who will sit closest to Jesus? Who will one day sit next to Him when He is crowned King?—which they think will happen soon, since He was so joyfully welcomed into Jerusalem earlier this week. Who will do the servants' work and wash everyone else's feet?

Jesus responds:

In this world the kinds and great men lord it over their people.... But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant.... I am among you as one who serves. (Lk 22:25-27)

John adds a dimension that we don't see in the other gospels. He says:

Jesus ... got up from the table, took of His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and poured water into a basin. Then He began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel He had around Him. (Jn 13:4-5)

No one will ever forget this lesson on humility from the Master.

(4) The food is passed around, with some bad news

Soon the foot-washing and correction are done and everyone goes back to the meal. *As they were at the table eating, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, one of you eating with me here will betray me" (Mk 14:18).* You can imagine that this creates quite a stir. Everyone is asking, "Who, Lord? Surely not me!" Even Judas, who must feel very awkward about this, manages to look offended, saying, "Surely it isn't me, Rabbi?!"

John tells us that the disciple sitting next to Jesus asked Him to point the culprit out. Jesus comments: "It's the person I dip and share bread with." Jesus offers a piece of bread to Judas, who takes it, excuses himself, and slips out into the night. (Jn 13)

(5) There is more bad news

We tend to think to ourselves, "Oh good! Judas the betrayer is gone; now dinner will go more smoothly." It doesn't. Jesus has more bad news during this supper event.

First, Jesus announces that He won't be staying with them. *"Dear children, I will be with you only a little longer. And as I told the Jewish leaders, you will search for me, but you can't come where I am going" (Jn 13:33).* So you're going to have to care for one another.

The news gets worse. Jesus adds: *"Tonight all of you will desert me. For the Scriptures say, 'God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'" (Mat 26:31).* Offended once again, the disciples all insist that they will stay faithful. Peter is especially adamant, claiming that he is willing to die for Jesus if necessary. To this Jesus replies: "I have prayed for you, and you will strengthen your brethren in the future, but tonight you will deny me 3 times before the cock crows at sunrise." (Mat, Mk, Lk, Jn)

(6) Still, Jesus shares that special supper

In spite of all the chaos, jealousy, and bad news, Jesus goes ahead with the Passover dinner. We assume He follows all the traditional readings, prayers, songs, and symbolic acts. The gospels focus on two central symbols: the unleavened bread which is broken and passed around, and the cup from which all will drink.

Jesus adds a new dimension to both the bread and the cup. For centuries the Jewish people looked backward as they took these elements, remembering how God had saved His people and established a covenant with them when He brought them out of Egypt. Now Jesus tells them that something new is happening. He breaks the bread and shares it, saying, *“This is my body, which is given for you”* (Lk 22:19). Then He lifts the cup of wine and says, *“This cup is the new covenant between God and His people—an agreement confirmed by my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you”* (Lk 22:20).

As Passover remembered God’s saving work for Israel, so now this supper will be a reminder that God brings salvation to the world through Jesus. As Passover involved the death of a lamb and the smearing of blood on the house, so now God confirms that He is making a new, life-giving arrangement with us, guaranteed by the shed blood of His Son. This is the last supper Jesus will share with His disciples before Easter; but it is also the first of many suppers that will remind Jesus’ followers of all He has done for us—and all that we will gain through Jesus in the future. Matthew and Mark add that Jesus pointed to a future hope: *“Mark my words—I will not drink wine again until the day I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom”* (Mat 26:29).

(7) They finish and leave for Gethsemane

After the supper and final song, Jesus and the disciples leave the house, exit the city of Jerusalem, and make their way along the road toward Bethany, stopping at the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus will share some more final instructions, then take time to pray. Then the events of Good Friday begin.

III. Two main features stand out

That’s the story of Jesus’ last supper with the disciples. Question: what do you notice about this event? Are there features that stand out? At Simon the Leper’s house, the outstanding moment came when Mary poured her precious perfume over the Lord. What is most unexpected in this dinner?

Well, certainly the disciples’ eyebrows must have gone up when Jesus said “This is My body” and “This is My blood.” These were new ideas with extraordinary implications. But they actually get very little time in the story. Two other, very different things catch my attention as I work through this narrative.

(1) First, Jesus can hardly wait to share this dinner with His friends. This is emphasized in Luke, where Jesus tells them: *“I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins”* (22:15). It is reinforced by John’s account: *He had loved His disciples during His ministry on earth, and now He loved them to the very end* (13:1). Note that “the end” in this verse is one of John’s many plays on words. It means both that Jesus loves them right through until the

finish—the end of His time with them—and also that He loves them to the extreme—the very farthest extent of what is possible.

Jesus cares deeply for His disciples, so He is glad to spend this time with them, even though it means His suffering and death will follow soon after.

That leads me to a second observation.

(2) All Jesus' guests at this supper are miserable failures.

We know Judas is a failure. He is the betrayer. He has made a deal with the Jewish leaders to give Jesus up for arrest. The truth is, Judas has no business sharing the Passover dinner with Jesus.

But in the gospel stories, not one of the disciples is worthy to be part of this most important, most special dinner. Not one! All of them are fighting about who is greatest and who should be treated as most important. And Jesus looks a few hours into the future and predicts that all of them will turn away and deny Him. None will stay faithful, not even Peter, no matter how loud he protests his faithfulness. He will deny the Lord 3 times with oaths and curses.

You see the point? This is the most special dinner Jesus will ever share with the disciples, at the most strategic time in His ministry. Nowhere will Jesus open His heart more to them. This meal is a special gift, offered by Jesus to those He loves. And He offers it because He loves them, not because any of them are worthy of it. Not a single one is worthy.

Jesus offers the disciples something they need. He extends His own friendship to them. More than that, this dinner is a symbol of a new friendship they can have with God because Jesus is willing to give His own life to purchase their forgiveness and healing and life.

This is something none of them deserve. None has the right to claim it. None can earn it.

Yet He gives it anyway, because He loves them so much. In His grace, every one of them is welcome.

IV. How does this help us prepare for Easter?

The Lord's Supper—Communion—is all about Easter. It is a regular reminder of Jesus' death for us, His broken body and shed blood—and the life they bring. You and I come to the Lord's Supper, and to the events of Easter, in the same way that the disciples came to that last supper so long ago.

Jesus offers us something we need. He extends His friendship to us. He wants us to know Him, to share a relationship together. More than that, He wants us to have a new, life-giving friendship with God, made possible because He gave His own life to purchase our forgiveness, and healing, and life, and because His resurrection opened the door to a new work of God's Spirit in us.

This is something we don't deserve.

We don't deserve what Jesus has done for us. We don't deserve His friendship. There is nothing we could ever possibly do to be worthy of His giving His very life for us. We could certainly never earn it. We're good at fighting with each other to see who is most important. We like to have someone

else serve us—washing our feet, meeting our needs. We're not so good at putting Jesus first, trusting Him, obeying Him, staying faithful to Him when things get difficult. We're all capable of running away, like the disciples ran away.

On our own, apart from the help of God's powerful Spirit, when it comes to living up to God's expectations we're all miserable failures. This is why Good Friday is a sad day. It's the day that reminds us of the awful price Jesus had to pay to cover for our failure. His body had to be broken, and His blood shed, for you and me.

But Jesus did it anyway, because He loves us. We can't earn what He offers, but we don't have to! None of us are worthy of Him, but we don't have to be to receive His gift! Everyone is welcome! Jesus offered Himself on our behalf, because, "Having loved His own ... He loved us to the very end." All the way, holding nothing back. Scripture teaches us that we need to learn to "walk worthy" of our calling, to live more and more like Jesus as we follow Him. But we do this *because* He has welcomed us, not as a way of earning it.

Good Friday is a hard day. But Easter is joyful. We remember that Jesus triumphed over death. And we remember that even His death was freely, joyfully offered for us because He is so gracious, and He loves us so much.

I can't think of a better way to prepare our hearts and minds for Easter than to reflect over this next week on that last supper Jesus shared with His disciples. He shared it eagerly with them. And He is eager to share the same relationship with us, if we will let Him. In Easter, and on every occasion when we remember Easter, once again ...

Jesus offers us what we need most
Even though it's something we don't deserve
Still He does it anyway, because He loves us.

May that truth ring in our ears, and fill our hearts as we prepare for Easter this week.