

"The Holy Grail"

I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Maundy Thursday, April 2, 2026

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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This holy night when we remember Jesus gathering at the table with his disciples calls to mind the historic and mythic quest to find "The Holy Grail," the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper. There is no specific mention in scripture of the cup being special, although students of the Passover will know it is the "cup of Elijah," the greatest of the Old Testament prophets.

Yet the allure of relics persists, even among Protestants. The concept of the Grail as a holy object developed in the 12th century, and medieval romance literature specifically linked it to Joseph of Arimathea, who was purported to have collected some of Christ's shed blood which gave the Grail mythical powers of healing and grace. The quest to find the Holy Grail became a central theme in the King Arthur stories of the 15th century, representing a spiritual quest for divine perfection.

In our time, one of the best depictions of this is in the 1989 movie *"Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade."* Before I have Mark Riefenhauser play a five-minute clip, let me tell you what you will see for those unfamiliar with the movie. Let me warn you first that one portion is graphic in its depictions of a sudden death.

Indiana Jones and his father are on an archeological quest to find the Grail, which promises eternal life. On the same quest are Nazi operatives. At some point, Indiana's father is wounded in combat and can only be healed by the healing powers of the Grail, so the pursuit for it is urgent. As the clip begins, Indiana meets a knight who has succeeded in the quest but remains in the cave where there are MANY vessels that could be the right Grail. Only one is. As Indiana hesitates the Nazis appear, one with firearm in hand, and take over the act of choosing the Grail. The knight reminds them that they must "choose wisely."

From there the video explains itself. Let's watch it now.

How might this inform our understanding of Maundy Thursday?

First, like the knight, we are chosen. Unlike the knight in the movie, we may not be, as he says of himself, the bravest or the most worthy; but part of being a disciple of Christ is being chosen. We have a special calling.

Are some chosen and others not? Not according to scripture. The story is told of a depiction of Heaven's gate with an arch bearing inscriptions on both sides. Looking from Heaven to Earth, the inscription declares "The Chosen of God." Those approaching and looking from Earth to Heaven see the inscription from Revelation 22:17: "*Whosoever will may come.*" We are chosen and part of the Christian journey is to respond.

Second, we are chosen for a purpose. We are to "*choose wisely.*" The knight warns that "*the true grail brings life, the false grail takes it from you.*" What purpose are we pursuing? The great sins are obvious, and in the movie the thirst for power and control results in death. For most of us it is not the great sins but the little sins that become the slippery slope. I mentioned Alan Alda's graduation speech in my Palm Sunday sermon: "*How much will you take to put a little poison in the reservoir?*" It's only a few drops, and the reservoir has billions of gallons. Will we choose wisely, or poorly?

Third, we follow the King of Kings. Singers and non-singers alike can hear the triumphant strains of G.F. Handel's "Hallelujah!" chorus as I use that phrase. We follow the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But what kind of king is he? The Nazi chooses a bejeweled chalice, "*more beautiful than [he] imagined,*" and says, "*This certainly is the cup of the king of kings.*" Yet Jesus' kingdom is "*not of this world*" he elsewhere reminds us, demonstrating it sharply in washing the feet of his disciples. He took on a servant's role and reminded them that his example is to be replicated by them. And when Peter objects, Jesus does not hold back: "*Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.*" Whether Jesus means to wash us clean of sin or allow him to model servant leadership, the end result is clear: if we do not accept his teaching, his leadership, his servant discipleship, we cannot follow him.

Last, Indiana drinks from the true Grail because he identifies it as "*the cup of a carpenter.*" Unpretentious. Unadorned. Simple. It is that to which Christ calls us. Henry David Thoreau wrote Walden; or, Life in the Woods about his two-year living experiment in a self-built cabin on Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. He notes, "*Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify.*"

But how does one do that in our complex, fast-paced, social-media and 24-hour news cycle world? Even Indiana wasn't sure. So he took the

cup he thought was a carpenter's and said, "*There's only one way to find out.*" Christians call it "faith." We place our trust not in a relic or a myth but in a person, Jesus Christ, who showed us the way to life: who came among us as one who serves, who gives his life as a ransom for many.

We heard the words from Philippians last Sunday; did we, as the young people say, "get it?:"

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...and...humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Philippians 2:5-8, NRSV

The redeeming power of Holy Communion and the reminder of the call to serve transforms us as it did the earliest disciples. Not that we would know it by what happened from the Gospel accounts of this night, with one disciple betraying him, another denying him, and all fleeing. But this night is not the end of the story. The disciples who knew Jesus, who loved him and who, in his darkest hour, abandoned him, were still the band he had to work with. It's the same today. You and I, at our best and worst, are whom God in Christ has chosen for this work of service.

You and I are chosen. Chosen for a purpose. Chosen to follow the King of Kings, who humbled himself to service and expects us to do that same. Let us live our faith in this Redeemer and receive this Sacrament "*in remembrance of Him.*" Amen.