

“Night of Contrasts”

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Communion is not the point; Jesus is the point.

Matthew 26:17-30

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My body, my blood

The words “This is my body” and “This is my blood” may have been uttered by Christians more often than any other words in the New Testament. This includes “For God so loved the world,” “All things work together for good” and “The greatest of these is love.” Across the twenty-plus centuries of the church across its Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant branches, these words have united us in common confession. The same words have provoked violent conflict among Christians.

There is substantial contrast between the emphasis Christians and churches have placed on these words and the emphasis placed on them in the New Testament. The Bible repeats these words surprisingly infrequently. Explicit teaching on the sacrament of Holy Communion is rare in the New Testament.

The first three Gospels offer similar accounts of Jesus and his disciples sharing a Passover meal the night before his death. The fourth gospel needs five chapters to relate what happened in the Upper Room, but John never mentions Jesus breaking bread and pouring wine. Acts mentions a few times that the early church gathered to “break bread,” but if that’s a reference to communion it’s vague. After that we have twenty-one letters, including Revelation, in our New Testament, and only one of them (1 Corinthians) offers direct guidance about communion. After the Gospels there is also no repetition of the connection between the Lord’s Supper and the Jewish Passover.

The contrast between emphasis in the New Testament and in the church regarding communion is noteworthy. In Matthew 26 I see a series of contrasts.

Contrasts

First and last. Matthew begins by saying this meal takes place on “the first day of unleavened bread” (17) and yet we call it “the last supper,” because it is the last time Jesus will eat with his disciples before his passion. The disciples ask Jesus, “Where do you want us to make preparations for the Passover?” (17). There’s some debate about the specifics of all these details. Exodus 12 is where you find the Bible’s first overview of the Jewish Passover week. Over the years the word “Passover” referred to the first meal in the weeklong “Feast of Unleavened Bread.”

Planned and spontaneous. Several words and phrases in this passage indicate that everything has been set up in advance. Jesus sends his disciples to find “a certain man” (18) who will host the meal. This isn’t a random person. Jesus has made dinner reservations, has informed “a certain man” that he is to be ready when the time is right. The disciples are to tell him that Jesus has said, “My appointed time is near” (18). It’s all been planned. The response of the disciples is spontaneous. They “did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover” (19).

This same contrast continues through the passage. Jesus predicts a betrayal, meaning that’s part of the plan as well. There’s a spontaneous reaction as one disciple after another says, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” (22). I don’t think they’re wondering, “Did someone bribe me and I didn’t realize it?” They don’t know what Judas has done. It’s been a week of rising tensions with the religious leaders, and they have been deliberately in public and in hiding. The eleven are horrified at the thought that one of them might have said something to someone to the wrong person or been followed to the Upper Room.

God and man. The subject comes up every single time we talk about Judas – ad nauseam, in my view. Who’s responsible here? God or man? Is Judas really responsible for his actions if this was all part of God’s plan? Of course he is. There is a consistent biblical tension about the responsibility of humans for their choices, but no human choice will ever thwart God’s intentions.

Jesus says what is going to happen to him “will go just as it is written,” but Judas had already gone to the chief priests for reasons that have been much theorized but nobody knows for sure. He had to be considering all along the implications of what he had done, and Matthew (alone) tells us in chapter 27 that he went back to those chief priests early the next morning and declared “I have sinned and betrayed innocent blood.” Here at this dinner there was an awkward moment of silence when perhaps it became clear that Judas was the only one who had said nothing, he uttered, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?”

God is always in control of the bigger picture. This had to happen, Jesus says, but it would still have been better for Judas if he hadn’t been born.

Joy and sadness. The emotional roller coast of this night is evident the way Matthew tells the story. Jews throughout the years before and after this night refer to “celebrating” the Passover (18). Passover recalled a night of deliverance from slavery, a night where every Israelite family was spared the judgment that fell on every Egyptian household. Passover is a party night then and now. There’s no reason to believe there wasn’t a party atmosphere when Jesus himself had given instructions to “a certain man” to set this up. There was food in abundance. Four cups of wine. A meal like this causes you to block out everything else that’s been happening and enjoy the festivities with your closest friends.

The joyful mood nosedives when Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me” (21). The *New International Version* says “They were very sad.” That’s an understatement of epic proportions. The Greek word translated “sad” implies deep, intense, severe emotional pain. It implies distress and grief. To enter into their state of mind I need you to go for a moment to the worst news you’ve ever had. I’ve been in a hospital or a home when a family got news that their child or loved one had without warning been taken from this life. That’s distress. As if that’s not enough, Matthew adds an adverb. They were “exceedingly grieved,” “extremely distressed,” or “greatly distraught.” That’s a contrast with their “celebration.”

Humility and pride. This same part of the story highlights the contrast between the Eleven and Judas when confronted with the imminent betrayal. There are four words in each reply, and the first three in Greek are the same – literally, “Not-I-is-it?” The Eleven follow that with “Lord,” and Judas, notably, calls him “Rabbi” – the only time in the Gospels that one of the disciples calls him by that name. There’s a great contrast between Jesus as “Lord” and Jesus as “Rabbi.” There seems to be soul-searching humility from the stunned Eleven, who are aghast at even the thought that they might have inadvertently turned him over. “Oh, Lord! Could it be that I did it!” The one who had and knew it smirks nervously: “You don’t suppose it was me, Rabbi?”

Old and new. The fact that these thirteen men are separated from their biological families (with the exception of two, maybe three, pairs of brothers) stands out in this Passover meal. There is to be a new family that sometimes (though not always) replaces the old attachments. There is also to be a new ceremony that reinforces this new family, although it will take some time for these disciples to realize how the new replaces the old. Christians love to make all sorts of connections between the Passover and the Last Supper, and many of them do add meaning. But the New Testament actually does very little of that.

What’s most important about Communion is not its connection to the old thing God did but its significance of the new thing God is doing. And so, for example, many have pointed out that there is no lamb mentioned in any of the accounts of the Last Supper in the Gospels, so the obvious point is that Jesus is the Lamb. That’s a beautiful point, and it’s a beautiful truth – but it’s not one the New Testament itself makes

explicitly. The only reference to Jesus as “the Passover Lamb” is in 1 Corinthians 5:7, where Paul uses both unblemished Lamb and unleavened bread to describe the kind of pure lives Christians should live in “sincerity and truth” (8). It’s not about communion.

In Jeremiah the Lord had said of his people in Israel, “I will make a new covenant with” them. “It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.” They broke that covenant. It didn’t change them. In the new covenant, God says, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.... They will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

What strikes me about those words is the clear implication that they will still be wicked, will still be sinful. This is not about creating a perfect people. This is about creating a way for God to treat them as if they were perfect. This is what Jesus is declaring is the meaning of his broken body and poured out blood. It destroys the barrier between God and sinners. It pays the price. This is the contrast of the Old and New Covenant. In the old covenant you had to pay for your sin, one way or the other. In the new covenant it’s all been done for you.

Present and future. In the moment as Jesus is with his disciples there is this range of emotions and responses as well as what’s going on visibly and behind the scenes. But all of that is in the present, and the present is to become even darker in the hours to come as Jesus is arrested, tried, abused, mocked, and crucified. As Matthew wraps up his account of that night, he skips over all that to the future. Jesus says, “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” This night will be their Last Supper together on earth, but the wedding supper of the Lamb is yet to come.

It is perhaps for that reason they can sing a hymn. It was and is a traditional part of the Passover feast to sing Psalms 113-118 in the evening, and this is Matthew’s most direct reference to the liturgy that had developed over time. Psalm 118 was even then considered a Messianic psalm, which is why some of its words were sung as Jesus had ridden in to Jerusalem the Sunday before. It is also a psalm with personal meaning for Jesus that night – “The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? The LORD is with me; he is my helper. I look in triumph on my enemies.” The present would look like defeat. Triumph was just around the corner.

Grace and response. One of the ways that communion has been misunderstood and misapplied through the years is as a tool of exclusion. This is in part based on 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul says we eat and drink judgment on ourselves if we take communion unworthily. But Paul does not go on to say that the church or its leaders are responsible for seeing to it that no one takes communion inappropriately. He says that believers should “examine *themselves*” before they take communion.

Among those who receive the bread and cup from Jesus are Judas, who would betray him, Peter, who would deny three times that he even knew Jesus, Thomas, who would say doubt his resurrection, and all the rest, who would join these in deserting him. They were at different places in their hearts, but all were at the table and he said, “Drink from it, all of you” as he held out the cup. Passover cups were usually personal. Every individual had his own. Jesus’ offering a common cup was a supreme act of grace.

Yet here’s another clear contrast. Grace makes demands. Grace demands self-examination: “Is it I?” Grace demands recognition: “Lord.” Grace demands repentance: “I have sinned.” Grace demands acceptance: “Drink from it.” Grace, properly understood, will never, ever leave you where it found you. This was a night of deep grace, but not cheap grace. This grace would cost everything for Jesus and he deserves nothing less than everything in response.

Broken and poured

When I was a kid, and even into my college years, Interstate 95 was a well-traveled highway for our family. I’m old enough even to remember traveling Highway 301 through North and South Carolina before there was an Interstate 95.

For what seemed like a thousand miles before and after the border between North and South Carolina, it seemed like there were a thousand billboards in both directions advertising “South of the Border,” a roadside attraction with a motel and restaurant and gas station and souvenir shop. I remember thinking it would be so much fun to stop into a place that advertised itself with such creativity. Except when we did.

South of the Border puts more emphasis on billboards than benefit, more on directions than destination, more on signs than substance. To offer a different parallel, consider my wedding ring as a symbol. Suppose I said to my wife, “We can’t go on a date tonight; I need to spend time polishing my ring.” Or if she said, “I have a weekend away planned for us,” and I responded, “I’d rather spend the time with ‘My Precious’ (the ring).”

In the New Testament, there’s far more emphasis on substance than sign. That’s a contrast with how Christians have often acted. Communion is a sign. It’s not the substance. If you invest yourself in arguments about elements and frequency and liturgies, you missed the point. In the one extended passage about communion after the gospels, the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that their self-absorption when they take communion means that their meetings “do more harm than good.”

Jesus spent his whole public ministry clarifying that a checklist of outward observances is not a substitute for the heart. We’ve come back to this again and again in Matthew’s gospel. Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day thought Sabbath-keeping and avoiding the wrong food or the wrong people made you right with God.

Christians have often turned communion into a similar idol. The biggest problem with communion may be not so much when you do it wrong as when you think you do it right. If you think you're good with God because you ate the bread and drank the cup, you have missed the substance for the sign.

The reason the New Testament doesn't emphasize this as a rite is because the rite is not the point. Jesus is the point. The New Testament places repeated emphasis on him – on his life, death, resurrection, and return. It places emphasis on the implications of his sacrifice for our lives – our obedience to him, our witness to the world in word and deed, our togetherness. There are dozens of "one another" commands compared to a few verses about how to do communion.

If you're here today to take communion and you don't know Jesus, haven't repented of your sins and trusted him, have deliberately distanced yourself from other believers or refused to love a hurting world with his kind of love – and you think eating a cracker and sipping a little grape juice makes it all OK, you have missed what Matthew wants you to see and hear on that night of contrasts.

Jesus' emphasis is on self-denial and self-sacrifice. This was essential for him to pay for our sin. "This is my body," he says, "broken for you." The body of Christ requires that same response in order for us to be one in him. One of my concerns about the pandemic is the level of division and resentment and condescension it has created – not just in our church but in The Church. We will have to learn brokenness in order to find reconciliation.

When Jesus says, "This is my blood, poured out for you," he expresses the heart of what was happening on that night of contrasts. Isaiah had used this same language of the Suffering Servant: "he poured out his life unto death...for he bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:12). That's the point, that's the substance, that's where Jesus directs the attention of his disciples in the Upper Room. Thanks be to God. Amen.