

“Is It I, Lord?”

Matthew 26:17-30

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This last week was picture week at the preschool where Evelyne works, always a big deal for the children. It's an organizational feat to get all the two and three-year-olds where they need to stand up straight and keep still for the photo. The photographer was used to working with kids, and he tried to get them smiling so they wouldn't be nervous or cry. As he put each child in place, he would say, "What's your name—is it Barney?" The kid would laugh and say "No! I'm not Barney, my name is Jason!" or whatever. The photographer would say to the next, "Is your name Dora?" And that kid would laugh and say, "No! My name is Morgan," or whatever. Last of all the photographer went to a little guy and said "Is your name Bear?" And the kid said, "NO! My name isn't Bear! You got it all wrong! You got *all* the names wrong!"

Well the story for today is about one person who got it all wrong, because he didn't see Jesus for who he really was.

Our passage today tells how Jesus prepared for his own death on Thursday of Holy Week, the evening of his arrest and trial, and the day before his execution on a cross. He prepared for his death by celebrating the Passover, also called the "feast of Unleavened Bread, and in celebrating, he changed and fulfilled its meaning. It would be a Passover unlike any other his disciples had ever known. Jesus had very important things, critical things, he wanted to teach his disciples through it. He was teaching about his death, and what it meant for human salvation.

The feast was one of the three major feasts of Israel, and anyone who could went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It looked back to the defining moment in their nation's history, its deliverance from slavery. But a greater deliverance than that was about to take place on the hill of Calvary when Jesus was sacrificed, the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. The cross of Jesus was the purpose of his whole life and ministry. And it was going to take place only a few hours away.

The feast was a memorial, a way for God's people to remember their identity and what God had done for them. Maybe he set it up ahead of time, and let his disciples know when the time was right. He sent them to Jerusalem, and they went to get everything in order: to sacrifice and prepare a lamb for the meal, to get the other things needed according to Scripture, wine, spices, and bread. The Old Testament tells us that when God sent judgment on Egypt and freed his people from slavery, God gave these instructions:

"Eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast...it is the LORD's Passover." (Exodus 12:8, 11c)

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."

"This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD -a lasting ordinance." (Exodus: 12-14)

We got to hear last Sunday from Sergio, our friend from Jews for Jesus, about the presentation of the Passover:

It opened with a cup of wine mixed with water.

Next came a ceremonial cleansing that represented the importance of holiness when coming into the presence of God.

Then came the bitter herbs, symbolic of the bitter bondage in Egypt, and unleavened bread and sauce made for the Passover, into which the bread and herbs were dipped.

Next came the second cup of wine. The head of the table would take the second cup and explain the meaning of the Passover feast. A cup, a washing, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and a second cup.

The group celebrating would join in singing from a section of the psalms called the Hallel, the word that is the root of the word "hallelujah," or "praise." The Hallel is the group of psalms 113 through 118. After some moments of singing, it was time for the lamb, the main part of the meal. The leader would wash his hands a second time, take the bread, bless it, break it, and give it to be eaten with the lamb.

That's the context of this crucial Passover, this meal that serves as an interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' death. I want to simply take us through a few observations of the text.

First, one of Jesus' own will betray him (vv. 20-21).

While the first part of the meal was still underway, Jesus told the disciples a shocking piece of news. He begins with the very serious phrase, "truly I tell you." Then he tells them one of them would betray him.

But Jesus is no mere victim. He says, "The Son of Man"—that's the way Jesus refers to himself—"goes as it is written of him." That is, this is not some tragic mistake, but exactly what God had planned and foretold through the prophets. It was an unfolding of the plan of God from all eternity. Like John wrote in the book of Revelation, "He is the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world." Or as Peter later announced on Pentecost,

"Jesus of Nazareth who was slain is slain not only by your wicked hands, but by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" *(Acts 2:23).

God planned the events unfolding on the night Jesus was betrayed. That means that Judas was responsible for his actions, that he *chose* to refuse the friendship and grace that Jesus offered him. But at the same time, it was nevertheless God's plan in order to achieve his purpose for human salvation. God's will does not override human responsibility and will. Mysteriously, he works in and through the margin of freedom he gives to human beings. And notice that Jesus doesn't name his betrayer in front of the other disciples. I imagine they would have done anything to stop Judas from carrying out his plan. I think Jesus' frightening words, that it would be better for the betrayer not to have been born, were a warning to Judas, an appeal for him to turn away from evil.

But John's gospel tells us it was at that moment that Satan entered into Judas. That's a scary thing. At some point when we participate with evil, that does override our will and trap us in it. Our heart is hardened, and we pass the point of no return.

And this supper was the great turning point, the straw that broke the camel's back of history. Passover was the most ancient Jewish tradition. The Jews had celebrated it for 1500 years, even before the Law of Moses or the priesthood of Aaron. God gave it to be practiced every year, but all that was about to change. And the instrument of change was the tragedy of a friend's betrayal.

The worst sin you can commit is to kill the Son of God. Jesus says it would be better not to exist than to exist badly. That's hard to get your head around. Jesus intends it as a warning, as a chance to turn back. Life isn't worth much if we throw it away with sin. So the betrayal of a friend is a warning to us, an opportunity to overcome our resistance and turn toward Jesus.

Second, disciples of Jesus ask themselves hard questions (v. 22).

The disciples are dismayed at Jesus' announcement, and they all ask the same question: "Is it I, Lord?" That's a good posture to take. It shows that they trust Jesus' words more than they trust their own consciences. It's a question of self-examination. The question is really, "It isn't me, is it?" The question expects the answer to be no, but they ask it all the same. And I think that whenever we approach communion, we do well to examine ourselves as well. The sincere follower of Jesus is well aware of our own capacity for sin and our need for grace.

Paul says the same thing when he gives instructions about celebrating the Lord's Supper when he writes,

"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Corinthians 11:27-29)

So when we celebrate communion, we don't just come to the table. We have to come to the Lord himself in a posture of prayer. It's a question of attitude, and that leads to the next point.

Third, the true follower of Jesus doesn't just come to him as teacher, but as Lord (v. 25).

Judas asks the same question, but with one important difference. When the other disciples ask the question, they say "Is it I, *Lord*?" When Judas asks the question, he says, "Is it I, *Rabbi*," or "teacher." That's a critical difference.

In the gospel of Matthew, whenever a believer, a true follower of Jesus addresses him, it's with the title "Lord." Yes, Jesus is the teacher of God's truth. But everything turns on what you do with that truth. Is it just inspirational fodder? Or do you align your life with it? Is he simply an example—say, when that fits into your larger plans—or is he the master of your life?

Fourth, Lord Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives us (v. 26).

And now as they just begin to eat the full meal of the lamb, it was the custom of the head of the feast, the father or in this case Christ, to pick up the bread, break it, eat it along with the lamb and that began the feast. "Jesus took bread and gave thanks." He thanked God for the provision of bread. And we get the word Eucharist from that word, "to give thanks, or bless." Then he gave it to his disciples and told them to eat. In the same way he gave thanks for the cup and told them to drink. The apostle Paul referred to it as the cup of blessing when he gave his directions for celebrating the Lord's Supper

"Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

This was in line with the Jewish tradition of Passover. Then, Jesus said something completely unexpected, something radical. He said, "This is my body." From this point on, when his followers celebrate the Passover, it no longer simply means God's deliverance from Egypt. It means God's leading us out of the slavery of sin and into new life. That happens through the sacrifice of Jesus, his body given over for us.

I've emphasized through our study of Matthew the themes of authority and surprise. Jesus is absolutely authoritative, the sovereign king. When he tells us to do something, we must obey. When he describes reality, that's really how reality is structure. And here, he takes what God has instituted, what cannot be changed by any human authority, and he changes it. No one has the right to do that, but he isn't just another mortal. He is God in human flesh, and he has the authority to set the rules. He's doing a new thing, and he says "this bread is a representation of my body."

He goes on to say, "This is the blood of the covenant." In the Old Testament whenever God made a covenant with his people, there was a shedding of the blood of sacrifice. The book of Hebrews states,

"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Hebrews 9:22).

For God to put this covenant into place, it meant that he would have to deal with sin. The cost of our salvation would be the blood of sacrifice, the perfect sacrifice of God's sinless Son. That is the meaning of the cross. When he died at the time of the Passover sacrifices, he was offering himself for our sins, to reconcile us to God. The cup at the table was no longer to remember the blood of the slain lamb, but of Jesus' sacrifice, his life poured out for us.

As I close, look once more at the verbs Matthew uses to describe what Jesus does. He "takes," "blesses," "breaks," and "gives" the bread. I think it's what he does to us: he takes, blesses, breaks, and gives us away in service.

Jesus Takes Us: He chooses each one who belongs to him. the Christian life begins not with an affirmation that we're okay just the way we are. It is not essentially affirmation, but regeneration, conversion, transformation. Jesus Nicodemus "You must be born again." As Paul writes in Ephesians,

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace that you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4)

Jesus Blesses Us:

“His mercies are new every morning.” That’s an expression of God’s providential care, that is he provides everything we need and he upholds us moment by moment. Like the old song goes, “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.”

Jesus Breaks Us:

Not that God breaks our spirits, but he breaks our will, that is, our desire to hold the reigns of our own life, to be in charge, to be our own little god. Sometimes he breaks our hearts with the things that break his. He so cares for us that everything he allows into our lives will work for our ultimate good, for our salvation. As James writes,

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4)

Jesus Gives Us:

Just as Jesus told his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you that you should bear much fruit.” (John 15:16). Again, Paul expresses it,

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:9)

The purpose of our election is not simply that we might enjoy fellowship with God, but that we might share the knowledge of his love in Christ with others.

That is his offer to you today. The Passover meal tells us the meaning of the life and death of Jesus. It tells us the meaning of our own life, too. Come to him, let him have his way with you, with your family, with your church, and he will bring new life. He bought that life at the cost of his own.