



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1275

Mark 14:12–25

Mark Mitchell

June 6, 2004

Table Talk

Special Occasion: COMMUNION

As you can see, we've arranged ourselves differently this morning to focus our attention on the Lord's Supper. In my early years in ministry, I worked under a pastor who insisted that on Communion Sunday he not preach because, as he put it, he was going to "let the Table do the preaching." That's what we are trying to do this morning. We're gathered before the Table because we want to let the Table preach to us. I am going to help a little bit, though. Our text this morning is Mark 14 where Jesus and the Twelve gather around the Table in what we call the Last Supper.

Like many of you, I grew up in the Catholic Church taking Communion every Sunday. We were taught that the bread and wine actually became the body of Christ. The priest was the only one worthy enough to handle the elements. We'd kneel before him and he'd dip the wafer in the cup and say, "the body of Christ," before he placed it on our quivering tongue. We'd return to our seats, hands clasped, as the wafer melted in our mouth. For better or for worse, the focus of the Table was on what was happening with those sacred elements.

Later I came into a relationship with Jesus Christ and I entered an evangelical church like ours where Communion was viewed differently. We didn't do it as often. The bread and wine were viewed, not as Christ himself, but as important symbols of Christ, which helped us remember him. We got to hold those symbols in our own hands. We were taught to examine ourselves and confess our sins before we took the elements. The focus of the Table was not so much on the elements but on the condition of our own hearts.

The one thing these two traditions had in common was that Communion was viewed as a time where we somehow thought about the death of Jesus Christ. When you think about that, that's a strange thing to do. Some might even accuse us of being rather morbid. Are we just into death? Why are we so preoccupied with this bloody body? Why didn't Jesus tell us to remember far happier things like his miracles or his resurrection? Easter only comes around once a year, but this Communion business is something we do all year long. Why didn't he tell us to pass out Easter eggs once a month instead of these symbols of death?

I think it all depends on how you view that death. Many people view the death of Christ as a great evil done to a good man. They view what we call the Passion of Christ as a kind of ancient tragedy which Christ himself had no control over. Jesus is viewed as someone to be pitied. For example, Albert Schweitzer wrote a famous book called, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, where he voiced this opinion:

"There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries, 'Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him...The wheel roles onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still."

According to Schweitzer and many people today, Jesus just overplayed his hand and as a result he got caught in the merciless gears of history where he still flops around as a helpless victim. At best, he is a good example of a brave man willing to die for his convictions, misguided as they might have been. If this is true, then we should take this table and clear it now. If this is true, this table has nothing to say to us. But I say to you this morning, it's NOT true. And I want us to take a fresh and new look at why his death is something worth remembering.

I. PREPARING FOR THE PASSOVER

As we come to Mark 14:12 we see that it's Thursday. That evening, after sunset, the Passover meal would be eaten throughout the swollen streets and homes of Jerusalem. Jesus has it in his mind to spend these final hours of his life with his twelve closest friends. Starting in v. 12, Mark says,

"On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, 'Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?' And He sent two of His disciples

and said to them, 'Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher says, 'Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'" And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there.' The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover" (vv. 12-16).

These events leading up to the death of Christ took place at Passover. The Passover meal was a bit like our Thanksgiving meal where we celebrate the origins of our nation. In this meal, Jews recalled how God miraculously intervened to deliver their forefathers from slavery in Egypt. This was celebration of freedom! As they came out of Egypt, God said, **"this night is for the Lord, to be observed by all the sons of Israel throughout their generations"** (Ex. 12:42).

So you can understand why the disciples are anxious about where they will celebrate the Passover. Jesus responds by pulling two of them aside and sending them into Jerusalem with careful instructions. Notice the detail. They would be greeted by a man carrying a water pot. This would be an unusual sight because only women carried water pots. This would be like seeing a man carrying a purse! The two disciples are to follow that man into a home and tell the owner that the Teacher wants to know where HIS guest room is in which he can eat the Passover. Jesus says the man will show them *"a large upper room, furnished and ready."* The two disciples go and find things *"just as he told them."*

It's very clear that Jesus is in complete control of even the details of that evening. Some say Jesus had made prior arrangements for all of this with friends in Jerusalem and that's how he knew precisely what to tell his disciples would happen. It's possible, but that's not how Mark paints this scene. Mark carefully paints a picture here of our Lord's foreknowledge and authority. We see his authority as he says to the owner of the house, *"where is MY guest room?"* We see his foreknowledge as he says the room will be *"furnished and ready."* We stand in amazement as Mark says they found things *"just as he told them."* Does this look to you like a man who is being crushed in the gears of history? It looks to me like he's the one turning the wheels!

Usually when we think of death we think of

events beyond our control. When someone is taken from us suddenly we realize how NOT in control we are. A few weeks ago Lynn and I drove to Pleasanton to attend a memorial service for a friend who was a part of the church I worked in years ago. He wasn't all that much older than us, but for the past year or so he's been dying of heart failure. At the end of his life he knew his time was coming and he had to give up control. This is how we confront death—not in control. But not Jesus. Jesus was in control. And the fact that he was in control in his darkest hour can sustain us in our darkest hour. If Jesus was in control when the foundations of his own existence appeared to be crumbling, we can trust him to sustain us when our life appears to be crumbling. We're not in control, but he is, and we belong to him!

At this point, someone might ask the question, "If Jesus was so in control, what about human freedom? What about the people who drove the nails into his wrists. Did he control them? Does he even control evil? What about Judas? We know Judas has already snuck off to the High Priest's home and struck a deal to let them know of an opportune time to lay hold of Jesus. Did God plan that? A few hours later, after the two disciples have prepared the Passover lamb and Jesus is sitting down at the meal with the Twelve, this issue comes up.

II. PREDICTING THE BETRAYAL

Mark says in v. 18 that **"they were reclining at the table and eating."** It's a bit different, isn't it, from Leonardo de Vinci's famous painting. The way he painted it, you would think Jesus had them all line up on one side of the table for a picture! But that's not the way it was. It was customary back then to "recline" on your left elbow and eat the meal with your right hand from a common plate. The thirteen of them lay in a circle with the table in the middle.

Jesus acted as host of the meal and would have started by blessing the whole festival. Then he took the wine and drank the first cup. Then he recited the story of the exodus and led them in a hymn from one of the Psalms. He then directed the drinking of the second cup. After this he blessed and broke the bread and dipped it into the bitter herbs and stewed fruit. The bitter herbs reminded them of their bitter slavery and the stewed fruit of the mud their forefathers used to make bricks. It was at this point in the meal that Jesus dropped a grenade.

"As they were reclining at the table and eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me—one who is eating with Me.' They began to be grieved and to say to Him one by one, 'Surely not I?' And He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who dips with Me in the bowl'" (vv. 18-20).

Have you ever been sitting around enjoying a meal when someone you love drops one of these bombshells? The whole meal stops and everyone stares in disbelief at the dispenser of the shocking news. The most shocking thing about what Jesus said was that it was one of them; one of his most intimate friends. Twice he says it's "one who is eating with me," and then, after the disciples react, he says, "one who dips with me in the bowl." In eastern culture to break bread with a person was like saying, "I am your friend and I would never do anything to hurt you." I tried to think of a modern equivalent, and the best thing I came up with is sitting in a hot tub. When you get into a hot tub with people generally you are saying, "I trust you." That's why I always feel weird in those public hot tubs at hotels. I'm thinking, "How can I get into this hot tub with people I don't even know?" This is what it was like to eat with someone in Jesus' day. No wonder the disciples react with disbelief, "Surely not I?" One by one they said it: Peter, James, John - "Surely not I?" Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew - "Surely not I?" Thomas, James the Less, Thaddeus, Simon the Zealot - "Surely not I?" And finally Judas, cool as a cucumber, "Surely not I?"

In Mark's gospel, Jesus does nothing to reveal the identity of the betrayer, but he issues a solemn warning. Look at v. 21. **"For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."** Here we have one of the great mysteries of history. The ancient Scripture predicted this betrayal like it was a script written beforehand by the hand of God, but Jesus says, "Woe to the man who plays the villain!" We have bundled up here in one verse the absolute sovereignty of God over history along with the terrible freedom and culpability of man. Judas did what he did out of the twistedness of his own nature, and he'd be held responsible for it, but little did he know that he was fulfilling the predetermined plan of God.

A little boy was turning the pages of a book on religious art. He came to a gruesome picture of the crucifixion, he stared at it a long time, and he got a very sad look on his face. Then he said to his mother, "If God had been there, he wouldn't have let them do that." But he was there. The amazing thing we read in Scripture is not only was God there, but God planned it. In Peter's very first sermon, recorded in the second chapter of the book of Acts, he says that Jesus was **"delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God"** (Acts 2:23). Did you hear that? GOD PLANNED HIS SON'S DEATH! And Jesus, the God-man, knew all about it. Is he out of control? Is he a helpless victim? Did he get caught in the wheels of an evil man's greed and treachery? Not on your life! The tragic figure of this story is NOT Jesus, the great tragic figure is Judas. Better for him if he had

never been born! Oh what a tragic thing to say about a person. And Jesus said it with a broken heart because he loved Judas. He had washed Judas' feet. We know from other gospels he had given him a seat of honor at his right. John tells us he even dipped a piece of bread and gave it to him; that was considered a gesture of friendship in those days. Jesus gave him so many opportunities to repent, but he didn't.

But we have to ask the question: Why would God plan such a thing? Why was the death of Christ so necessary? Why is it something we commemorate over and over again? The answer comes in the next thing Jesus does.

III. PARTAKING OF THE MEAL

At this point in the Passover ritual, Jesus would have been expected to sit up from his reclining position, take a piece of unleavened bread, pronounce a blessing, break the bread and distribute it in silence. But during this silence, Jesus shatters custom and says in v. 22, **"Take it, this is my body."** I don't think the disciples had a clue what he meant, but they ate. After they had eaten, Jesus would have pronounced another blessing, and with his right hand he would have taken the third cup of red wine and passed it around. Again, he breaks the silence in vv. 24-25.

"And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'"

What's this all about? It's clear that Jesus is at least predicting his own death here. His body will be broken; his blood will be poured out. That's not surprising us because he's predicted his death several times in this gospel already. There's something more here. The clue is in what he says about the cup: *"This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many."* That was language a Jew understood.

They would have thought back to Exodus 24. God made a covenant, a sacred agreement, with the people of Israel. He gave them his law written on stone tablets. Moses took some blood from the sacrifices and sprinkled it on the people and said, *"Behold, the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you..."* It was like God signing his name on the dotted line in blood. But another image would have come to mind, one that reached back

even further in their history. They would have recalled the first Passover, and how God was coming in judgment upon the Egyptians by killing their firstborn sons. And God warned them that he would even come in judgment upon their own homes if they didn't follow some crucial instructions. They had to slaughter a lamb and spread the blood over their doorpost to keep God from killing their own firstborn. Sitting there that night, it would have just begun to dawn on those twelve men that somehow the blood of Jesus would save them from God's judgment.

This is why the death of Christ is something we remember over and over again. Because his death saves us from God's judgment. The old covenant didn't work. We couldn't keep God's law and each one of us in our naked selves stands under the judgment of God. All of us at times fear some great calamity coming upon us - cancer, violent crime, natural disaster. These are scary things. But the worst conceivable calamity you could ever experience is to be exposed naked before the wrath of God. The Bible says we are "by nature children of wrath." Have you ever watched the Discovery Channel and seen a lion hunting down an antelope? Those films show the natural hostility between certain animals. What's the natural enemy of mankind? According to the Bible, the most natural enemy we have in our fallen state is God. Why? Because to a sinful being nothing is more odious than holiness, and to a holy being nothing is more odious than sinfulness.

Since God is a God of justice and goodness he can't allow one single sin to go unjudged; not one unkind word; not one unclean thought. God stood in the halls of heaven and said, "My justice must be satisfied." Then the Son looked at the Father and said, "Where's the lamb?" And the Father looked at the Son and said, "You're the lamb." And the Son looked at the Father and said, "I'd rather not drink that cup, but I will if you insist." And the Father looked at the Son and said, "I insist." And so, here, at this Table, Jesus looks at us and says, "Here is my broken body and my shed blood. This is God's own provision for your rescue from my Father's judgment."

Let me put it this way: it is through the death of Christ that *GOD SAVES US FROM GOD*. It's through the *LAMB OF GOD THAT WE ARE SET FREE FROM THE WRATH OF GOD*. In our naked selves, our greatest enemy is God, but God loves his enemies and out of that love he provided a lamb. We eat from this table because it symbolizes our conviction that God's lamb is God's way of saving us from God's wrath. It is an act of faith. There is nothing we can do but receive and eat until that final day when we will feast with Christ in his kingdom. You don't earn a place at this table. You don't bring anything to this table. This is not a potluck. You don't bring the bread; you don't bring the wine. God provides the elements. Our job is to receive them into ourselves and let God save us from God.

CONCLUSION

The geographical center of the city of London is a place called Charing Cross. A little boy was lost in the city of London. A young man came along and wiped away his tears. When he had finally got him settled down, he said, "Can I take you home, son?" The boy replied, "Oh no, sir, take me to the cross, and I'll find my way home."

That's why we keep doing this month after month until the day comes when we feast with him in his kingdom. Because through the cross we find our way home with him. That's what we hear when we let the Table preach. The cross wasn't a mistake. It wasn't a tragedy. It was the predetermined plan of God to provide a lamb. Judas didn't plan it. The Pharisees didn't plan it. The Romans didn't plan it. God planned it. And he planned it to satisfy his justice. And he planned it because in his great love for you he wanted you home with him.

© 2004 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA