

Matthew 26: 26-29 “Drinking with the Saints” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/6/22

You would be surprised at how many misconceptions there are about the Last Supper and its implementation. I think I shared with you about five years ago and am hoping that you, like me, have a certain expiration date regarding how long you retain a story you are told. Mine is probably a lot shorter than yours. Anyway, so the story goes that a 10 year old boy was visiting his grandparents in a different town. They took him to church with them for a few Sundays, and like our church, every Sunday they had communion. Finally, after a couple weeks of going, he got the courage up to ask what this communion was all about? His granddad replied, “That was Jesus’ last supper.” The boy replied, “Seriously? They sure didn’t give him much did they?” A more recent story comes out of a Worship Committee meeting, not ours thankfully, who was meeting to discuss a transition from using glass communion cups to plastic. In light of COVID and considering the rapid spread of illness, several were advocating for the change to plastic so that they could be just tossed after worship. Others were concerned about the increased cost as well as environmental effect of using plastic throw-aways every Sunday. So the question was posed regarding the exact process that went into sanitizing the cups each week. One member spoke up saying, “Wait, you mean we aren’t supposed to take them home with us? We always take ours home and use them for shot glasses.”

You just never know what folks take home from the significance of this table. There is no simple way to speak of the story of the Last Supper. The Gospels and Letters contain three slightly different versions of this pivotal meal: Mark and Matthew are basically identical, then you have Luke’s version and Paul’s out of First Corinthians. Whereas Mark believed that the end of the present age and that much-awaited transformation into the realm of God was imminent, Matthew’s community had found itself in a delay. Retention of the story had become an issue and the community to which Matthew wrote, around 80-90 Common Era, was in a chaotic situation. Some folks were deeply suffering because of their commitment to God’s realm. Others were in danger of drifting away as time moved on with no change in their circumstances. Maybe you know what that is like? You come to church thinking that will solve all your problems, finally you will be the one to win the 1.6 billion dollar lottery,

your marital problems will go away, your radiator will no longer make that clunking sound, and so on. But when those things don't happen, then what's the use? So one of Matthew's purposes was to inspire community members to persevere in faithful discipleship through the time to come, to remember that they can still encounter Jesus every time they gather at the table over time, even when memory retention isn't one of your strong suits.

The passing of time is an odd thing. My preaching professor of 30 years ago wrote that time is simply a way to keep everything from happening at once. And that is a good thing. If life had no orderly sequence of events, it would not be possible. But there are exceptions to this rule, occasions when time fades before us. Naturalist John Muir spoke of those "great one thousand-year days" he experienced in the high Sierra – maybe you've had just such a day. Time takes a step back in our consciousness to make room for the events-in-time, those things that smack us back to the present moment in all its grandeur. The same is true for the Eucharist, especially on a day like today, when we remember and celebrate the lives of all the saints who from their labors rest. As James Sanders said, "Whenever and wherever this celebration takes place, the church at that moment is the pilgrim church arriving, just about to step over the threshold. And it is in this act of remembrance, that the whole church is present, or as Hebrews put it, we are surrounded by so "great a cloud of witnesses." In one of my favorite movies, *Places in the Heart*, starring Sally Fields, there is an amazing scene that preaches volumes at the end of the movie. The scene is set in a little country church. The camera follows the communion trays as they are passed from the front to the back of the sanctuary. In each frame, people who have been enemies or arch rivals are shown sitting side by side sharing the cup and the bread. Then all of a sudden, people who have died show up sitting next to people who are alive – all are present to receive the sacrament. Everyone, living or dead, is at the table and everyone always is. In the words of de Chardin, "From the beginning of the Messianic preparation through the historic manifestation of Jesus and the phases of the growth of Christ's Church, a single event has been developing in the world: the Incarnation, the birth of God, realized in each individual, through the Eucharist. All the communions of a lifetime are one communion. All the

communions of all people now living are one communion. All the communions of all people, present, past, and future are one communion.”

As some of you know, I love church camp and highly encourage it for anyone who is interested. I read a story about a group of 5th-6th graders at church camp who were asked what is communion? Some looked at each other, then finally a hand went up from a young boy who responded, “Isn’t it like a big family reunion?” What a brilliant concept! When you think about it, communion is a family reunion. Family reunions are known for seeing wonderful aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, nieces and nephews. We reacquaint ourselves, finding out just who we are related to, we eat good food, and celebrate the day just because we are a family, a fellowship. Willa Cather, in her novel *My Antonia*, has one of her characters say, “That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.” Those words are carved upon her tombstone in New Hampshire, and although an epitaph, they also lend some light on the sentiment Matthew intends for his telling of the Last Supper. That table fellowship provided at the Lord’s Table seeks a union with something worthy of our labor, loyalty, love, and certainly our stewardship. The search for true fellowship is a pilgrimage toward that true belonging into which each of us yearns to enter, a belonging that has to do with what the theologians call “at-one-ment,” or being at one with God and God’s people, past, present and future.

Jane McAvooy attempts to make it a little easier to understand as she talks about having company at her farmhouse. Her family never used the word “guest,” but instead, “company.” The root word for “company” refers to people who share bread together. The word “company” also shares the same root as “companion.” Companions are those whose lives intertwine and sustain us along our life’s journey. Sometimes our company or companions saw a dirty kitchen floor or clothes all over the laundry room or toys scattered everywhere except in the toy box. But as we share together with company, breaking bread and drinking from the cup, there is no judgment, no attempt to be better than anyone else. There is no need to be fancy about it all, to hide our dirty laundry; after all, this is company: people we trust and love, who brighten our lives, not because they are so important or outstanding, but just because of their presence. Such visits to this table sustain us through

the passing of time. As time marches on, generation after generation, Matthew wants to remind the church, to remind us, that we are company who share the Lord's Supper together. We are companions in worship, all equal with one another, doing this in remembrance of Christ.

Fifty-three years ago, Americans celebrated the first humans landing and walking on the Moon's surface. What you may not know is that before Neil Armstrong took his famous "one small step for (humanity)," Buzz Aldrin commemorated the event by receiving communion inside the lunar landing module. That's right – the sacrament of holy communion was celebrated on the moon, the only surface other than earth where humans have visited. On July 20, 1969 during a planned period of rest between the landing and the astronauts' exit to walk on the lunar surface, Aldrin pulled out a small wafer and some wine in a sealed bag in order to give thanks to God and mark the significance of the event. He read a brief Bible passage, offered a private prayer, and received the elements. The wine swirled a bit and took awhile to settle into the moon's gravity, which is one-sixth that of Earth. But even in a place where physical laws were different, he felt God's grace; he knew not only was Christ with him but a whole cloud of witnesses past, present and future all gathered in that tiny module to commemorate and remember. We do so again and again lest we forget. Brothers and sisters, I assure you everybody else is already at the table. We wait only... for you.