

“Risking the Loss of Friends”

The Rev. Victor Kim

Luke 22:14-27

(03-21-21) Lent 5

I want to begin by thanking Heather Min for the beautiful solo and Jannie for the accompaniment. Not only was the solo beautiful, but it was so meaningful given the connection with the testimony that Heather shared, especially about risking for the sake of her mother. Thank you Heather for I know how difficult and challenging speaking like this in English must have been for you, but please know that your testimony will be of great help to many others!

This morning we will be celebrating the sacrament of Communion. Communion, or the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, is tied to the Jewish festival of Passover. Our text from Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus said to his disciples that he has eagerly desired to eat this Passover with them before he suffers, for he would not eat of it or drink from the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom of God comes. Then Jesus took a loaf of bread and broke it and gave it to them saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

So what exactly is Passover and what is the connection of Passover and Communion? A.J. Levine, who teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School is Jewish and helps in making the connections for us. The celebration of Passover commemorates the Exodus from Egypt for the people of Israel. In the Passover meal, called the Seder, unleavened bread is eaten to recall the bread that the Israelites ate in haste as they prepared to leave Egypt. Bitter herbs are eaten in remembrance of the bitterness of slavery. Green vegetables, such as parsley or lettuce, are dipped in salt water to remind the people of the tears of the slaves. Other parts of the Seder meal also have deep connections with the Passover. Jesus understood the rituals of the Passover meal. Earlier, he instructed Peter and John to go prepare the Passover meal so that they might eat it. It was the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Once that meal was prepared, it was to be eaten on the same day.

While the 3 synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, largely agree on the Passover meal and Jesus breaking the bread and sharing the cup, the gospel of John differs. John locates the meal with Jesus and his disciples on the day before Passover and in John's gospel account, at that meal Jesus doesn't break the bread or share the cup with the disciples, rather he washes his disciples' feet. Levine points out that John's gospel wants to emphasize that Jesus is crucified before the Passover begins, that Jesus dies on the day of Preparation. So according

to John, Jesus doesn't celebrate the Passover meal with his disciples because he is the Passover.

On the day of Preparation, the lambs were brought to the Temple to be sacrificed, but for John, Jesus is the Passover lamb and there is no need to reinterpret the Passover because Jesus himself is the lamb. In John's gospel, the reference to the bread and wine come much earlier, after the feeding of the 5000 when Jesus says that he is the living bread, that whoever comes to him will never be hungry and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty. He goes on further saying, whoever eats of this bread will live forever and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

John foreshadows this from the very beginning of his gospel when John the Baptist declares about Jesus, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Just as the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of the homes of the Israelites in Egypt saved them from the angel of death, allowing death to pass over the Israelites, so the blood of Jesus, who is the Lamb of God, saves the people from our sins for eternal life. In Passover the Israelites were freed from slavery for freedom. In Jesus we are freed from sin for reconciliation, from death for life.¹

Christians don't celebrate Passover and we don't eat a Seder meal, but we do celebrate a different meal, Communion, the Eucharist, we celebrate the Lord's Supper. I once read something that said in effect, if someone who knew absolutely nothing about the Christian tradition or really any religious tradition, walked into a church on Communion Sunday, what would they think was happening? We talk of words like sacrifice, but such words are difficult to understand today because in the literal understanding of sacrifice, in the way it was understood in the days of Jesus, we just don't do it anymore. A sacrifice meant to take an animal, to kill it, to spill its blood and then to eat part of that same animal. Nobody does that anymore, at least no one I know does. But in Jesus' day, everyone did, even Gentiles. The practice of sacrifice was ubiquitous, and it was a way of sharing a meal with God. It brought families and communities together over a shared meal. In a way, it's not so different from what we confess about our unity in coming to the Table of our Lord. We come as God's family, one family, united in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, sharing at the table provided for us.

In the time of Jesus there were many reasons for making a sacrifice. Some sacrifices were for thanksgiving, others for dedication, some for atonement for sin and others just a freewill sacrifice. And it wasn't only animals that could be brought for sacrifice. You could sacrifice oil or grain or produce. But you often brought animals and if an entire animal were to be sacrificed, that was called a whole burnt offering. The priest would be given the animal and he would butcher the animal, drain all the blood, burn parts of the animal on the altar and give the other parts back to the person who had brought the animal. Then that person and his

¹ A.J. Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus* p.114

family or community would eat of that animal and they would symbolically be sharing a meal with God.²

But you never, ever, ate blood. Not in the Temple, not in the home, not in the field. In the covenant God made with Noah after the flood God prohibited the eating of flesh with its life, that is, its blood. So no Jewish person ever ate blood and in the same manner, they could not eat human flesh. Which would have made what Jesus said at that table shocking. This is my body which is given for you, this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. No wonder when Jesus spoke in John's gospel about the bread of life being his flesh, the people responded by saying, this is a difficult teaching, who can accept it? A good question, concurs Levine.³ But Levine argues that shock is essential. Jesus wants his disciples to remember the meal. Do this in remembrance of me. If the meal, if the sacrament is just a common meal, we miss the shock, we miss the scandal of what is being said, what is being embodied in the bread and the cup. This is the risk Jesus takes in reinterpreting the Passover meal. He risks losing his friends and certainly any causal clingers on by saying that the broken bread is his body and the cup poured out is his blood. No one could have missed the shock of Jesus inviting his friends to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood.

Now we as Presbyterians are part of a Christian tradition that understands the elements of bread and the cup as symbols, symbols that point to the story of Jesus offering his body and blood, not literally in the bread and cup, but very literally in his crucifixion, when his body was indeed broken and his blood indeed poured out. We believe that in eating the bread and drinking from the cup, we remember what Jesus did for us and in believing in him Jesus redeems us from our sin and saves us to eternal life. But I wonder whether sometimes we have lost the shock value of how scandalous the gift of God's grace and love in Jesus truly is? Sometimes the sacrament of Communion is just a ritual that we enact 4 times a year. When we were meeting in person, we would line up and receive the bread and the cup, but how much did we, how much do we even today, truly consider what these elements symbolize? I realize that in this time of being forced to worship online this is even more difficult. But I invite you to truly reflect, to truly remember what the Lord's Table means. How shocking is it that God would offer God's very own life, through the life of God's Son, for our sakes, because God so loved the world, all the world?

And here's the thing... if God so loved the world that God risked everything, God's very own Son, because God wanted us to be reconciled to God, to be redeemed to God, how then can we take these elements of bread and the cup and not risk being reconciled to others, to one another? Some of you will remember something called a preparatory service. It was a service that preceded the service of Communion, where the faithful would examine themselves before they ate of the bread and drank from the cup. It was a time to confess and

² Levine, p.120

³ ibid

acknowledge our sin before God with the full intention of amending our lives. It was a time to make restitution for wrongs done to others and to forgive those who had offended us. It was to acknowledge that we as children of the covenant needed to be reconciled with one another before we could come to the banquet of the Lord's Table. Jesus even said that before we bring an offering to the altar, we have to first be reconciled to our brother or sister. Only then can we bring our offering as a gift to God.

If Jesus commands his friends to do this in remembrance of him, don't we need to remember what it is that Jesus did, that he took the ultimate risk, that he gave his life for the sake of his friends? Then as those who would take the bread and drink of the cup, shouldn't we be willing to respond by risking for one another as well? It's interesting and perhaps a bit disappointing that immediately after Jesus speaks of this new covenant that a dispute arose between the disciples about which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. It's unbelievable! Jesus sacrifices everything and his numbskull disciples are arguing about who's the greatest among them! But Jesus reminds them, he chides them, look, you're not to be like others who want to lord it over others, rather if you want to be great, then be the least. Who is greater, the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? But I am among you as one who serves, how can you not serve each other? And in John's gospel Jesus took it even a step further by washing the feet of his disciples. If we want to remember Jesus and his love for us, we need to remember how much he risked for the sake of his friends, for all of us.

I love Heather's story of risk. I was moved by her story of her mother, how difficult it was for her mother here in Canada and how she moved back to Korea. I felt for Heather in how much she suffered knowing that her mother was suffering alone in Korea. It took real courage to sell the business, it took risk to stop doing something that was successful so that she could provide for her mother's needs. The blessing of a caregiver for her mother came because Heather took the risk to serve another. Yes, it was her mother, but still, it took real courage and it took real risk, to make that commitment, to care for another more than we care for ourselves. It took a sense of sacrifice, it was risk taking.

So I wonder about us. Can we come to the table of our Lord, can we eat of the bread and drink of the cup but then not remember what the table symbolizes? Jesus wants us to remember that the bread and cup point to his life sacrificed for us out of love and Jesus wants us, out of that same love, to consider how we might serve and sacrifice for one another. Don't we know people with whom we need to be reconciled? Don't we know situations in which we need to take a risk? Aren't there places in our lives where sacrifice is necessary? Yes, it's a risk and yes, it may be difficult and painful. But Lent is a season to repent, to reflect, to follow the way of Jesus, to follow his way of risk. And so I pray, that as we move to celebrate at the table that our Lord has prepared for us, that we would be a people who would remember what Jesus did and that we would be a people who would embrace and live out the risk of being reconciled with and serving one another. Thanks be to God, Amen.