

“FOUR STORIES: I – THE LAST SUPPER”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Trinity Sunday

Psalm 8

Mark 14:12-25

Well, here we are at the start of June, and I’m staring into the face of my final four sermons before I retire. As most of you know, I’ve spent the last few years offering sermon series, which center upon different themes, like the last one “Little Things with Big Meanings” and the one before that, the one for Lent, “Cross Words,” and so on.

When it came time to plan this last series, I decided to go in another direction. I decided to pick four Biblical stories – four of my favorite Biblical stories – and preach on them. And the one I picked for today is the story of Jesus’ last meal with his disciples – the Last Supper.

You may think it’s an odd choice – after all, it’s not filled with action or adventure, but I chose it because it tells us so much about Jesus and his love, and

because it has a lot to say to us as we prepare to gather at the table of Holy Communion this morning.

So here we go!

You know well the background of the story. After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, and then spent time in the wilderness of temptation, he went forth and began his earthly ministry. Part of doing that entailed drawing together a group of disciples.

Truth be told, he put together an interesting group of men, from diverse backgrounds. We know best the story of his calling some fishermen, but there were others – twelve in all.

Throughout the Gospels, we hear about their adventures together. We hear incredible stories of love outpoured, healings changing lives, teachings enlightening crowds, and so much more.

The further we go into the story, the more we watch the atmosphere change, for Jesus and his disciples bucked the status quo, called others to live in new and holy ways, and challenged people in authority and unholy practices.

And now, just before this gathering, this holy meal, the tide has completely turned and the powers that be are out to get Jesus. They will settle for nothing less than his death.

The time is growing short, and Jesus knows it, so he calls the group together – his disciples – calls them to an upper room for a meal with them, time with them, and that’s where we find them this morning, and it’s where, I believe, we get a beautiful portrait of the kind of man Jesus was, and the kind of love he shared with those around him.

The first thing I want us to consider is that Jesus knew those twelve men as well as he knew himself. He knew what made each one tick, he knew their strengths and their weaknesses, he knew the gifts that made each one unique and special, he knew their triumphs and their tragedies, he knew them through and through. And he valued each man and loved him for who he was.

Notice that Jesus didn't draw together twelve identical men – twelve who had the same gifts and same personalities. He drew together a diverse group, which made them all the stronger. Sure, that meant they butted heads sometimes because they disagreed; and sure, it meant that he found them jockeying for position at times because they were human and wanted to be considered more important than the others to Jesus. They were who they were, and Jesus chose them because of that. He valued each man for who he was and how he had been created by God. And he loved each one through and through – to the end. Which meant, that on one of his final days on this earth, he desired to spend this special time with these twelve.

Which leads me to a second point about Jesus – and that is that he cherished time in community. Jesus very easily, at this frightening time on his journey, could have chosen to closet himself away – alone – in prayer and isolation. Instead, Jesus chose to be in community, with the people as long as he could, and with this special group of men, as the end was nearing. I think he drew strength from being with others, and sharing his strength with them. You know that they all had to be terrified of what was to come, and they needed to lean on each other for support and strength. Jesus knew that, and for them, and for himself, he called them together on this night to get just that – support and strength through their communal gathering around the table.

Thirdly, we see in this story how Jesus loved them enough to challenge them. Read through this story in Mark (and versions in the other gospels) and you'll see there are some uncomfortable moments – moments when Jesus had to confront those he loved, which, I believe, tells us a lot about him. He loved them enough to call them to account. He wasn't afraid to confront and challenge out of love.

So he confronted Judas who would soon sell him out for thirty pieces of silver. He confronted Peter who would soon fail to stand up for him – denying three times that he knew Jesus.

Jesus was never afraid to call people on their sin, not because he liked to do that, but because he loved the person so much he invited them to repent and change. He wanted them to live the whole life God created them to live. It brought no joy to Jesus to have to confront and challenge these men he so loved, but he could do no other – for they were traveling the wrong road.

A fourth thing I want to say about Jesus is that he wanted more than anything for these men to continue his work in the world after he would be physically gone. They had been faithful by his side for three years, now he wanted

them to continue on in that work. By gathering them by his side at this critical moment, I believe he showed them how important they were to him, how much he trusted them, and how much he wanted them to stay together and be in ministry for the sake of the world. While it was a farewell of sorts, I believe the Last Supper was also a sendoff of this new ministry team as well.

This holy meal – this Last Supper – was one those men would never forget. And Jesus made sure of that, because at one point, he picked up a loaf of bread, gave God thanks for it, broke it and then held those pieces in front of the disciples, telling them that whenever they broke bread in the future, they should remember him. Likewise, he picked up the chalice of wine, gave God thanks for it, then lifted it in front of his disciples, and implored them, that whenever they drank from the cup, they should remember him. Powerful, indelible images that carried them into the future, knowing that Jesus would always be with them through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

So, you see, in a nutshell, this story tells us so much about Jesus and his love. And just as it spoke to those men in that day, it speaks to us in much the same way today.

For today, we too, are gathering around the table for a meal with our Lord. While all of us wish we could be physically present with each other at the table, nevertheless, I think the lessons from that first gathering speak to us as well today and can strengthen and sustain us.

I think it would do us well to remember that Jesus knows us through and through just like he knew his disciples. He knows what makes each of us tick. He knows the gifts we possess. He knows our strengths and weaknesses, our triumphs and tragedies. We are so diverse, and he loves and values every single one of us. How important it is for us to remember that, especially in times when others try to tell us we're less than, or put us down, or when the times in which we're living cause us to question ourselves, or be afraid. Be not afraid, dear friends, for you are loved and valued by the God of all creation, by the Lord of all life, by the One who sat at table with the disciples, and sits next to you as well.

It would also do us well to remember today how much Jesus valued community, how much he values the community that is our church. You know, even though we're not meeting in this church building, and sitting side by side, our community of faith is as strong as ever. I have witnessed powerful acts of community between many of you. You're reaching out and staying in touch with

each other, you're sending in prayer requests that so many are lifting up, you're loving those who are hurting, and celebrating with those who have moments and occasions of joy. You still are the church, the community of faith – and Jesus so values that. He is giving all of us what we need to be community in the best ways we can, until we can be back together side by side. Thanks be to God for his gift of this community in all of our lives.

Thirdly, as Jesus loved the disciples enough to challenge them, so he does the same with us today. Try as we might, we're all human, and we fail sometimes, we struggle to be the people God created us to be. So still, Jesus comes to challenge us, through the nudging of the Holy Spirit. Still, we feel something inside when we're not doing what we're called to do, and being what we're called to be. Jesus is still at work in our lives calling us to be better and do better – to be instruments of peace and channels of love.

I think in these days we feel Jesus challenging us in numerous ways – just this week I hope many of us have been challenged to consider how we are racist, and in these past weeks, I'm pretty sure we've all been challenged to consider how we'll sacrifice to ensure that others will be healthy and safe in light of the coronavirus pandemic. Still today, friends, Jesus challenges us, not because he tries

to make us squirm, but because he loves us – all of us – in such a way that he wants us to be all that we can be, and the world to be more whole because of that.

Finally, as we gather at the table this morning, let us remember that, as Jesus called his disciples to carry out his work in the world, he calls us to that task today. We are to be his hands and feet in the world. We are the ones to show the way to health and wholeness, to love and peace, to understanding and cooperation. Still today, he relies on us to be beacons of light in our often dark world, healers in a world that too often chooses harm.

Friends, the table of our Lord stretches the world around. We are, as the hymn we're about to sing says, "One Bread, One Body" under the "One Lord of All." He has called us blessed, he loves us more than we can possibly understand, he challenges us to be the best we can be, and he sends us out to be in ministry with others. As you eat the bread and drink from the cup this morning, may you know again how much you are loved, and may you go forth renewed and committed to be a faithful disciple of Christ.

Oh dear friends, in these scary times of viruses, upheaval and uncertainty, how good it is for us to know we have a Savior who walks with us, loves us, and feeds us – as he has in the past, as he does this very day, and as he will, all the days ahead. Thanks be to God!

Amen.