

Who Shares the Bread, John 13:18-38

Elgin, Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

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Introduction

To be true to the order of the story we have put communion ahead of the sermon tonight. Jesus had supper with his disciples: They received him as their host, bonded with him at his table, shared his bread. And then he taught them. Knowing how each of them would fail, he reassured them, teaching them his promise that their failures would be redeemed.

The work of Jesus was entering a new phase. He now commissions his disciples as his “sent ones,” his apostles. Those who accept the apostles accept the one who sent them, Jesus himself. The apostles, then, are ambassadors: their mission is to represent Jesus Christ and the interests of his Kingdom. To accept the promise from the ambassador is to accept Jesus Christ as King, and so become a citizen of his Kingdom, that is, to enter into a relationship with God.

But sometimes ambassadors fail. Judas played the double-agent and betrayed Jesus; Peter tried to be a spy and, to protect his cover, compromised his mission. We fail in the same way when we try to play both sides and compromise ourselves. Yet we are reassured, just as the first apostles were, that God is greater than our failures. We are called again to our duty and to our message, carrying on the Kingdom mission in our generation. Let us pray:

Father God, we have confessed our failures and our need. Remind us to be repentant of ourselves and confident in you and your promises in Jesus Christ, that we may proclaim the Lord’s Death until he comes again. In Jesus’ name and on the merits of his blood, amen.

1. Accepting

These days of Holy Week remind us that Jesus Christ, the King of Glory, has entered into

that glory by suffering on our behalf. He who is without sin came to die in order to set us free from the curse of death, for death is the punishment we each bear for our sins. I believe that had Jesus not been murdered by sinful people, he would have lived forever in his flesh. But the world hated him with envy and spite for his holiness and his claims. The systems of tyranny stamped his murder with the legitimacy of government action, even as they made a mockery of their own legal process. God, who is perfect with justice and is partial to no one, could not allow the sinless person to stay dead. This is the good news of Easter and the resurrection, which we celebrate this coming Sunday, which we are inspired to believe, and share as gospel in our world.

Jesus tells his disciples, while they are still at the table: "I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me." This promise is the foundation for the church. When people put their trust in the Word spoken by the apostles, their hearts open to Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ did not write one word of the New Testament, yet he is the source and inspiration of it all, because it is the faithful testimony of the ones he sent. This is the Word that opens our hearts to receive Jesus Christ.

No one today is an apostle in the same way as were the eye-witnesses to Jesus Christ. But we are still apostles in the sense that we are also sent to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ into our world. Faith must still come by hearing. It is a good thing to distribute Bibles everywhere in the world, but there must be teachers, preachers and evangelists too, people who instruct the readers in where it comes from, in what it means, in how to be saved, and in what living for Jesus can look like.

It is easy to pick up a Bible, read something, and get a notion in our heads that has us falling right off our rockers into craziness of every kind. Some people think that they are the

second coming, others think that their tiny group of devotees are the only people in the world whom God has ever loved and saved. This comes from a Bible that is read but is not taught.

The apostolic faith comes through in more than just what is written, it comes also in learning how what is written forms our rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. The Bible is not a magic book, giving us magic words to speak to make God do what we want. The Bible is a discipleship manual, teaching us how to live, and how to embrace the mind and attitude of God towards all the complexity of life.

The promise Jesus made to his apostles remains true. As they have mediated the gospel through their faithful witness to us in the New Testament, so we find that their testimony reveals God to us in Jesus Christ, and invites us into relationship with God and citizenship in God's Kingdom. The duty of the ambassador remains, we are called to continue to teach and preach and evangelize according to the faith of the apostles. The Bible knows of no program for salvation which stands apart from the Church, which is God's Embassy and mission to the World. Every congregation is a Kingdom consulate, a diplomatic outpost where the citizens of the Kingdom gather in the Lord's House at the Lord's Table.

2. Denying

In Holy Week we remember the sins that led to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. He who was sinless died, in the place of those who judged him falsely, who mocked him, who beat him and drove in the nails, thorns and spear, who betrayed him, denied him, abandoned him.

Judas, an ambassador, proved to be a double-agent working for the enemy. Peter, an ambassador, at first tried to fight. We are told in John that he drew his sword and cut off an ear of one of the arresting party. When Jesus declared he would not resist, the disciples fled. I think Peter was willing to die in a battle, that was his promise at the table; he was not prepared to die

as a martyr to non-violence. The disciples likely felt the same way: ready to die, but as soldiers for Christ, not as witnesses to Christ's Peace. They fled, and then Peter went undercover to spy out the situation after Jesus was arrested. He was an amateur spy. When his cover story was interrogated he panicked, and to protect his cover he abandoned his witness.

Such compromise comes easily. In Peter's place we justify ourselves by comments like, "Let's live to fight another day," and "Discretion is the better part of valor." So it is that we come to hear the gospel for ourselves that Jesus died for us too, for we have sinned against him in the same ways as those in the Bible story. Violence to another is violence to Jesus. Misuse of his name, sharing jokes that demean a person's humanity, mock Jesus. How many of us who have eaten at his table, are guilty of betraying him, of living as though we never knew him, of running from our call to be witnesses when it gets a little bit uncomfortable to take a stand.

Many Christians still make Peter's mistake: we are ready to die for Jesus, but only as we take down as many enemies as we can. What does our share in the cross mean when a genocide of Christians is taking place in areas controlled by ISIS, or when terror strikes the cities of America's allies? There is no easy answer. We affirm as Christians that God is sovereign over the nations and history and brings the sword to punish evil-doers. But we cannot pretend to ourselves that somehow the gospel can be spread on the wings of bombers. In God's rule over history that might be the resort of a worldly power, however it must not be the witness of Christians that we desire anything that reduces peace and obstructs reconciliation.

Let us not be distracted by world events, but bring Peter's mistake home to our lives. Too many of us live in the world as though we are not ambassadors, but under-cover. We would rather not be an embarrassment to our friends, our colleagues, our classmates, so we deny we know Jesus when we join in the gossip, we deny we know Jesus when we behave at the party just

like everyone else. We might tell ourselves that we are building trust in friendships and that talking about Jesus can come later. But an ambassador's word hangs on credibility. The moment you are waiting for, when you will share Christ with your drinking buddy, will never come, not without your own repentance coming first. This might have to include apologizing to your friends for being such a social chameleon that no one would have guessed you had a personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

But receive the good news. Jesus knew in advance his apostles would fail, and when he appeared alive to them he restored them to their mission. Jesus knows our failures, he died for them, and he loves us still. We also can repent, and be restored to our mission.

3. Glorifying

Jesus has glorified himself by taking up the cross and rising from the dead. At the moment of his arrest, when the disciples were ready to fight alongside Peter, they thought the glory was coming in another way. They did not understand, and they spent the next few days plunged into anxiety and despair. The Christ snatched from them, then tortured and crucified for all to see, his body broken in death. They did not even have the resources to do anything for him, it was two members of the Sanhedrin, who had quietly objected to the sentence of death, who got him down from the cross and laid his corpse in a tomb.

Knowing now that the resurrection is the end of the story, the cross has become our glory and the banner of our Kingdom. The Apostle Paul writes that it is our privilege, as Christians, to suffer for our witness. As we suffer tyrannies and oppression the world sees that we really believe in God's power to raise the dead, and we really believe in God's promise of eternal life. What we lose in the world, what we suffer, cannot be compared with what we gain.

It is not only suffering that carries our diplomatic witness to the world. Jesus states in verse 34, **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”** How we love one another is an even greater witness of our message to the world, than how we suffer for Christ. Paul describes this principle too, in First Corinthians 13, “If I give my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Suffering will come against us externally, we are not called to seek it out. What we are called to do, is love one another. This is to the glory of Christ, and it make clear our message as his ambassadors.

There was a time when Benjamin Franklin, as the ambassador of the United States to France, came under a cloud of suspicion that he was not doing enough. So John Adams was sent to France. Adams put the entire mission at risk; he did not have the temperament of a diplomat, and he was acting on the premise that Franklin was failing. Franklin wrote a scathing report to Congress, Adams was removed, and Franklin repaired as much damage as he could.

A diplomatic mission that is divided against itself has a confused message for the people it is trying to reach. A church whose members are unable or unwilling to trust one another, confuses its message to the people it is trying to reach. It is bad enough when Christians go on harangues across lines of doctrine and denomination. It is worse when each diplomatic outpost, each congregation, shows a witness of internal confusion and mistrust rather than mutual love.

We glorify Jesus Christ and we show the power in his gospel as we love one another. There really is no other plan that Jesus Christ has put in place for the church to function. We cannot tell ourselves, well, we are deficient in love but fully grounded in doctrine. If love is deficient, so is the doctrine. If love is deficient, so is the gospel. But as we love one another with

mutual trust in our joint mission to the world, we show those we long to reach the true nature of what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Jesus bonded with his disciples at supper first, and then he taught them, reassuring them because he knew in advance how they would fail. And he knows our failures in advance as well, he has died for us and our failures. The cross, which at first seems the symbol of failure, has become our banner, the flag of our diplomatic mission to the world. We, like the first apostles, can repent of our failures and cling to the cross, reassured of our forgiveness, loving one another, confident in Christ's glory and ours. Amen.