

The Last Supper

May 19, 2019

Pastor Tom Ford

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

John 13:31-35

[31] When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

[32] If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

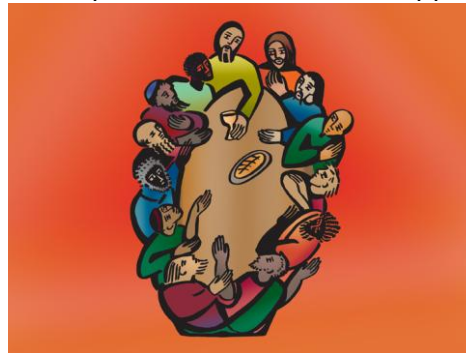
[33] Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

[34] I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

[35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ.

There are many different artistic interpretations of The Last Supper. (Slides)

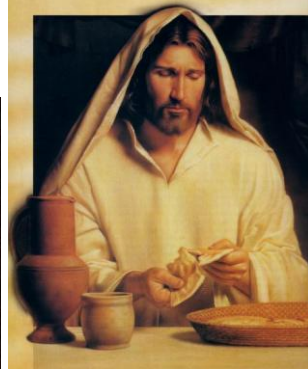
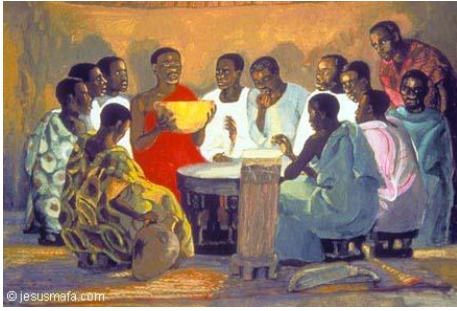


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Centennial Celebration 1919-2019

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I remember very vividly The Last Lord's Supper I had with my father. It was October 1, 2000. A Sunday. I had been invited to preach in my home congregation in North Carolina for their 225th anniversary. Dad had not been going to church because of numerous health problems, including crippling arthritis and a very troublesome prostate. This Sunday, though, since I was preaching, he made an extra effort to come. He was 81.

He sat at the very back of the church so he could quickly get to the bathroom as necessary. When it was time for Communion, the Pastor and I took Communion to the people in the congregation who were unable to come to the altar. It was all I could do to say to him as I gave him the Wine, "The Blood of Christ shed for you."

The next day Elsie and I left for 3 weeks in Europe. We were back in Kansas at the end of October. The first of January of the year 2001 I learned in talking with my parents by phone that Dad had reached the point where Mom was having to do everything for him – literally everything. So I flew in and went to their home. Dad was in excruciating pain. He realized he needed specialized care. And so, within a couple days, Dad was admitted to The Lutheran Home.

I don't remember the last supper we had the evening before Dad was admitted to The Lutheran Home. I'm sure we had one, but the searing memory is the one of Dad's great pain and suffering from the

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arthritis.

Dad died in July of the year 2001. I saw him last in April of that year. I remember our last visit at the Lutheran Home. It was a bright, sunny day, with a slight chill in the air. Dad was relatively free of pain that morning and wanted to go outside. So he and I and Mom sat outside. It was a wonderful visit. I had no earthly idea that it would be the last time I would see him alive.

I'm sure you can tell similar stories about your loved ones. And recall similar bitter and sweet memories of the last time you were with him or her.

Jesus' disciples, no doubt, had similar bitter and sweet memories of their Last Supper with Jesus.

As Frederick Buechner describes it: "It is an unforgettable scene there in that upper room – the shadows, the stillness, the hushed voices of people speaking very carefully, very intently, because they wanted to get it all said while there was still time and to get it said right. You can only imagine the way it must have haunted them for the rest of their lives as they looked back on how they had actually sat there with him, eating and drinking and talking; and through their various accounts of it ... and through all the paintings of it, like the great, half-ruined da Vinci fresco in Milan, and through 2000 years of the church's reenactment of it in the Eucharist, it has come to haunt us too. But I think of the Last Supper as haunting in another way as well – not just as a kind of shadowy dream of an event long past but also as a kind of foreshadowing of an event not all that far in the future, by which I mean our own last suppers, the last time you and I will sit down with a handful of our own closest friends."¹

We want to believe that there will always be a next time. So that when the last time does actually arrive, we most often don't know it. It can be a husband, a wife, our children, our closest friend. One day we are together. Everything is normal. Moments, hours, a day later – the loved dies or is killed.

What this means for us as Christians is that we are to regard each moment we have with each other and with all the people we encounter in this world as precious opportunities for loving service. As that occurs, The Last Supper is also our last supper.² And Christ Our Lord continues to be revealed.

Some people believe Holy Communion is what you do when you eat bread and drink wine in church. No. No. Holy Communion is who we are as The Body of Christ in loving service to each other and to all people. Each offered act of kindness, love, forgiveness, compassion, comfort, tenderness – each one is The Body of Christ given, the Blood of Christ shed.

¹ Frederick Buechner, Secrets in the Dark, A Life in Sermons, Harper, San Francisco, 2006, p. 266.

² Buechner's term, Op. Cit., p. 267.

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Listen to John's Gospel, what he writes just before today's Gospel, in which his recollection of The Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples is most unique:

[12] After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

[13] You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am.

[14] So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

[15] For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

[16] Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

[17] If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

[34] I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

[35] By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus is telling his disciples then and you and me now – this is who you are! You are my loving servants. That is your core identity. Do this in memory of The Last Supper – mine and yours and ours.

Now, we know for sure, it is at times and indeed often a very hard thing to do. Not everyone will be receptive to our love. We will be misunderstood. We will be disliked. We will be ignored. People will seek to hurt us. There will be power plays. And we will be tempted to give up on people, especially when they bite us.

“Once there was a very old man who used to meditate early every morning under a large tree on the bank of the Ganges River in India. One morning, having finished his meditation, the old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the strong current of the river. As the scorpion was pulled close to the tree, it got caught in the long tree roots that branched out far into the river. The scorpion struggled frantically to free itself but got more and more entangled in the complex network of the tree roots.

“When the old man saw this, he immediately stretched himself onto the extended roots and reached out to rescue the drowning scorpion. But as soon as he touched it, the animal jerked and stung him wildly. Instinctively, the man withdrew his hand, but then, after having regained his balance, he once again stretched himself out along the roots to save the agonized scorpion. But every time the old man came within reach, the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hands became swollen and bloody and his face distorted with pain.

“At that moment, a passerby saw the old man stretched out on the roots struggling with the scorpion and shouted: ‘Hey, stupid old man. What’s wrong with you? Only a fool risks his life for the

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sake of an ugly, useless creature. Don't you know that you may kill yourself to save that ungrateful animal?'

"Slowly the old man turned his head, and looking calmly in the stranger's eyes, he said: 'Friend, because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I give up my own nature to save?'

"Well, that's the question: why should we give up our nature to be [loving servants] even when we get stung in a biting, stinging world?"³

I don't know how much time I have left to live. You don't know how much time you have left to live. We don't know when our last supper will be. Nor with whom we will share it. All we know is we still have time to love and serve.

The Jesuit scholar Walter Burghardt, who used to be theologian-in-residence at Georgetown University, remembers an evening at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater where he heard the Broadway singer Barbara Cook. Burghardt was entranced by the concert, but what stood out for him was a lyric that had been written in part by someone who had lived for quite some time with AIDS. The lyric which spoke to Burghardt was: Love is all we have for now, What we don't have is time. We don't have time for bickering, for prejudice, for spin, or self-promotion. We don't have time for greed, for domination, for one-ups-man-ship or trashing one another. We only have time to live today as if it were our first day, as if it were our last day, as if it were our only day. We only have time to see ourselves and others as part of the whole, and to use our gifts with great love.⁴

Sotoday, as we come to The Lord's Supper, we don't know if it is a last supper. All we know is: remember, remember this: Jesus speaks this moment from his Last Supper to ours and to each and all of us at all our suppers in between: "Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other." (John 13:34-35).

Amen.

³ "Compassion: The Old Man and the Scorpion," *Seeds of Hope, a Henri Nouwen Reader*," Robert, Durback, editor, New York: Image Books, 1997, pp. 180-182.

⁴ Told by Pastor Verne Arens in a January 25, 2004 sermon. See:
<http://www.lrucc.org/archive/VerneSermon2004/VerneSermon20040125.htm>

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