

March 3, 2024

## Lesson 1: Jesus' Dinner Prayer

Scripture: Matthew 26: 26-30

### Context:

Today we begin our spring curriculum, "Encounters in Prayer and Love," where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God's presence in our lives. We begin our first unit titled "Jesus Prays," by continuing an examination of all the ways Jesus prays. Today's lesson will be to discover how the use of established liturgy can help us pray in difficult times.

Our lesson comes from the gospel of Matthew in the New Testament. The focus of Matthew's gospel often centers around Jesus as teacher as well as being the "new Moses." Most of the original audience of Matthew's context would have been Jewish Christians, those who were familiar with the Jewish holidays and religious convictions. With this background, most of the early church would have been familiar with religious ritual and understood the importance of liturgy, rituals and works of the people.

The setting of the text today is the Last Supper, or as Jesus and his disciples were celebrating, the Passover seder. Yet this will be no ordinary Passover ritual dinner. Jesus tells his disciples he will be betrayed by one of them and even take from the same cup as him. Even as Judas names what will happen with his complicity in the event, the dinner goes on.

At one part of the Passover meal there was a customary raising of the cup which would begin a liturgy. In the traditional seder meal, there would be four cups of wine placed on the table to help tell the story of the Passover and the escape from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Each cup would have been important as after it was lifted up, there would be a part of the story to recite and retell. Jesus and his disciples would have known the prayers and the stories as they would have observed it year after year.

As Jesus talks about the dipping of his hand with the one who betrays him (vs.23), we see a shift to what would have been the second cup. The second cup was perhaps the most important of the four cups of wine as one would retell the exodus story with prayers for the future redemption of the people, most likely with a prayer for a Messiah to come.<sup>2</sup> Yet Jesus gives a twist as when he lifts the cup, he gives us what is known as part of the Great Thanksgiving from our liturgy with Holy Communion. When Jesus states, "This is my body," and "this is my blood of the new covenant," he is providing a prayer for those who follow him. Implicit is a reference for God's future saving act: just as the blood of the Passover lambs had been a sign of salvation at the beginning of Israel's history, so Jesus' blood, when "poured out for many," would be the sign of God's end-time saving work.<sup>3</sup> Jesus is also beginning a new covenant, one to include his disciples and all those who come after them. When Jesus completes this new liturgy and all is shared, they then begin their way to the Mount of Olives singing songs of praise.

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R.A. "Matthew." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 297.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 298.

## **Application**

This past Sunday I woke up around 5:00 a.m. as I usually do. I took care of the dog, pulled out my devotional materials, and made my little cup of coffee. Just as I had finished my first sip to wake me up, the power went out. I thought of how odd it was as there was only a light rain, no thunder or lightening present. I made my way through the dark to the big bay window and saw absolutely nothing. The entire neighborhood and Main Street had no power! I went around lighting candles, thinking it was just a jolt and the power would come back on. I read my devotion by candlelight and did a few other morning tasks, and then realized as I neared 7:00 a.m., the power was not coming on for whatever reason. On a Sunday of all days!

I made the decision right then and right there worship would go on regardless of the power outage and I sent a message to my people to bring their flashlights and to come as they were to worship. When I arrived at the town church after being with my country church with power, I was met with a vision of beauty. Some of my people had pulled out the candelabras used for weddings and special occasion to place at the front of the church. There were candles in every window. And there the table for Holy Communion was prepared with the light shining behind it.

The power did come on mid-service, which was lovely. Yet the initial part of me thought of how neat it might have been to receive Holy Communion in the dark. We often look at paintings of the Last Supper with these beautiful scenes of light flowing through the windows and everything being illuminated. Yet would it truly have been as such? Back in the times of Jesus, rooms sometimes did not have windows and fire was a precious resource with candles being also limited and monitored so one did not run out of oil. If we use our biblical imagination, the Last Supper most likely would have been in a darker room where the disciples gathered closely to be with our Lord.

Every time we receive Holy Communion, we are reminded Jesus stood between the light and the dark. He had been teaching, healing, and praying over the people and his disciples for several years. In every one of the gospels, the Last Supper is a turning point where Jesus will ultimately move towards his arrest, condemnation, torture, crucifixion, and death. These last words of Jesus at this final meal with his disciples will set in motion the events which will change the world. Yet there will be pain before there is glory.

I have often found the sacrament of Holy Communion can be one of the most beautiful ways of healing for people where other means of grace may not quite be able to reach or speak into someone's life. Jesus' words which have become liturgy, fill the soul in ways in which only the Holy Spirit can truly move and breathe life. As we come to the table in whatever state we find ourselves, Jesus' words and his invitation give us grace and hope.

This week will have the date of the tenth anniversary of my father's death. I have often wondered if the memories of March 5 or Ash Wednesday will ever go away and I am not sure they will. In what was a foggy time of my life which seems so close yet so far away, I will never forget the initial attempts I tried to compartmentalize my grief. I tried to go to class at seminary and fulfill my church intern obligations. There were so many wonderful people who were compassionate and supportive.

Yet during the grieving, there was a lot of time I wanted to be alone with my thoughts and feelings, trying to process the waves of anger, denial, and sadness within me. There were indeed moments of alone time yet I was truly grateful for one of my colleagues at Vanderbilt who kept inviting me to go to the chapel on Friday to receive Holy Communion. She had recruited various United Methodist clergy to come on Fridays for anyone who wanted to receive

the means of grace and to end the week being filled from the Lord's Table. While many things are blurry from this time, I constantly remember her text inviting us to come and then joining with my brothers and sisters around Christ's table. The words were beautifully the same again and again; "Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me...Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." It was there around the Lord's Table when much in my life at the time did not make sense, the presence of the Lord in these means of grace were nourishment to my soul.

I have reflected since this season of my life of how there is a healing in liturgy which God gives us words when we do not know what to say or feel. It is God speaking into us and for us. God reminds us of how God's Spirit will help us in the times and places where the only prayer we pray are the words Jesus prayed and there is power in those moments.

How have you seen liturgy help others pray in a difficult season? When has liturgy helped you in seasons of difficulty? Why do you think God gives us liturgy in the scriptures? Who can you invite to the Lord's table to receive Holy Communion and remind them of God's love for them? What are ways you can use liturgy in your daily journey of faith?