

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday of Lent
Year A

Duane M. Harris

March 5, 2017

Text: Mark 14:12, 22-25

Title: “24 Hours that Changed the World: The Last Supper”

Wednesday night we had one of the best potlucks in Fellowship Hall since I've been serving here as pastor. It was marvelous! All kinds of food. Great variety of foods. AND Lynn and I were gifted with some fresh salsa to take home. It was made by Al Gonzalez! So the good times continued at home when Lynn and I pulled it out of the fridge on Thursday and enjoyed it with some tortilla chips also given to us by Al and Carol. What a great potluck it was! I want to thank everyone who came and prepared such a great feast! It's what church potlucks are meant to be!

Meal times shared with family and friends are so important. I had a friend in Owosso who invited me to dinner one night for the first time. He told me that when he and his wife wanted to get to know someone, that's what they did: invite them for dinner. As a result of that invitation to dinner and the conversation around their table, our friendship began that night and continues to this day.

There's just something about gathering around the table and sharing a meal that binds us together. The act of giving and receiving, the opportunity to have conversation over the table, has the power to bring people together in ways that watching TV or other ways of being together just do not accomplish. It's how to get to know someone, how we come to love someone.

It was not much different in the first century. The Gospel accounts repeatedly describe Jesus eating and drinking, often with the wrong people, so much so that criticisms were expressed that he was a “drunkard and a glutton”. He had dinner with 5,000 people on a hillside picnic, and according to John's Gospel, made wine out of water in his first miracle. Eating and drinking with Jesus was something that brought people closer to him and him to them.

So when Jesus spends his last night with his disciples, how does he choose to say good bye? It really should come as no surprise that he has dinner with them. Listen to the Gospel According to Mark's version:

12 On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?”

22 While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." 23 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

This meal began a period of 24 hours that changed the world as the title of our series suggests. The events in Jesus' life in this period made history and have resulted in transformed lives in the centuries since those 24 hours passed which is why we will be spending the Sundays in Lent on those experiences of Jesus and his followers. The series is based on Adam Hamilton's book which 3 groups are studying throughout Lent, and if you want to learn more details, you can participate in one of those classes. The last time I checked the serving center, there were 3 additional books available if you'd like to do so.

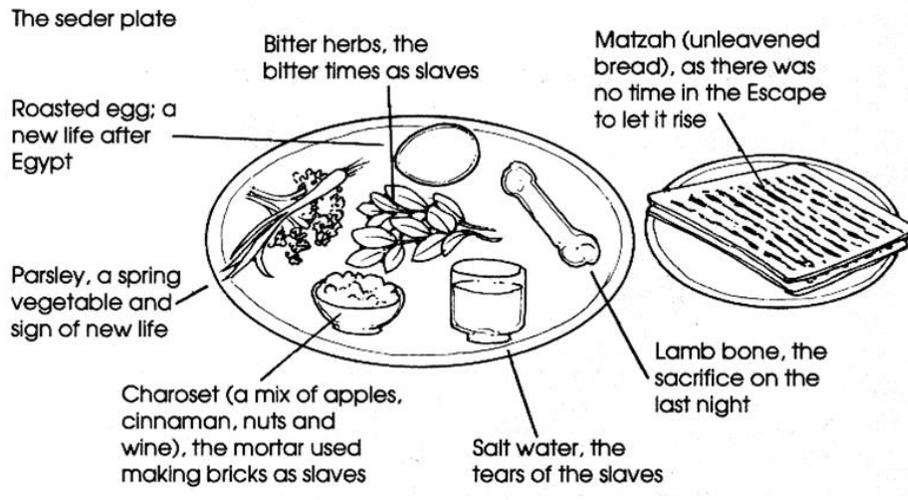
The details vary in each of the Gospels, but Mark says Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead of the group in order to prepare the Passover meal. Passover is a religious ceremony that celebrates the liberation of the Hebrews from servitude in Egypt. Now the Passover meal was not just a burger on the grill with some chips on the side. This took some doing. We have a photo of a plate to demonstrate what a modern day celebration of Passover might look like.



These are called Seder plates. The word "Seder" means "order" in Hebrew, referring to the 15 parts of the Seder ritual which are observed in a specific sequence during the ceremony and centers around the Passover Seder meal. (<http://www.americanhaggadah.com/sederfaq.htm>) On this particular plate, we have a roasted lamb bone, at 3 o'clock, chopped apples with spices like cinnamon in the dish at 6 o'clock, salt water at 9 o'clock, a boiled or roasted egg next to that, some parsley at 1 o'clock and horse radish in the center. There are some variations today.

Some will use lettuce in addition to the parsley. I've also seen oranges on Seder plates but this one is the basic Seder plate.

So why these foods on this plate? We have another slide to explain.



The foods on the plate are symbols of the story of the Jewish people's ancestors being freed from slavery in Egypt. It's the way the story is remembered year after year after year. Beginning with the Matzah bread on the right. The bread is flat because the Hebrew slaves didn't have time to allow the bread dough to rise as they escaped Egyptian slavery. The Beitzah or roasted egg is a symbol of new life after Egypt. The parsley or Karpas is a spring vegetable that is also a symbol of new life and when it is dipped in the salt water it reminds them of the tears of the slaves as they bore the weight of heavy labor. The Charoset symbolizes the mortar the slaves made and used to build Egyptian projects. The bitter herbs or Maror which is most often horseradish reminds them of the bitterness they experienced as slaves. And finally the Zeroah or lamb bone is a reminder of the final sacrifice of an unblemished lamb a year old, its blood painted on the door posts and lintel of every Hebrew entryway so that God would "Pass Over" their doors and move on to the Egyptians whose first born sons were taken that night. This was the final plague that resulted in Pharaoh letting the people go. The Seder meal, then, was and is a celebration of freedom, a celebration of God's act of justice in freeing the people.

According to Mark's Gospel, this is the meal Jesus and the disciples were in Jerusalem to celebrate. There are disagreements among scholars about whether or not this was a Seder meal as such. And if you read the Gospel According to John, you'll find a very different last night with the disciples with Jesus washing the disciple's feet and no last supper symbolizing bread and wine as Jesus' sacrifice. And some of the sources say that traditionally only matzah bread was required for the week-long Passover observance. These other foods became part of the celebration as things evolved over the years.

But in Mark when Jesus sends two disciples ahead to prepare it, there would have been a shopping list and cooking to do, a table to set. Regardless of all the nitty gritty details, this was Jesus' last night with his disciples, and it was a night spent eating together and remembering together the freedom from slavery and God's redemptive action in giving them the gift of freedom.

Have you ever imagined yourself there in the room around the table? For the class studying in more detail about all of this, Hamilton talks about a triclinium, a low table with three sides at which everyone would have reclined with left elbow on a pillow and guests eating with

the right hand. The head of the table wasn't in the center as da Vinci's last supper painting depicts it but rather off to the left side. Leaning at the table was one who would betray him, one who would deny he even knew him—and he would do it three times, and all the others who would abandon him to his fate. His closest friends, and yet he would find himself soon very much alone.

I wonder if you've ever imagined yourself at that meal. When eating this meal and remembering the gift of God in giving the Hebrew slaves newfound freedom, remembering perhaps all the times this man ate with so many people the religious leaders rejected, remembering the times he fed people who were hungry, healed people that were hurting in mind or body or both, shared the mercy and love of God with women other males wouldn't give the time of day, shared the good news that God's kingdom is near and now and inviting people to turn around and believe the good news, where would I have been? Where would you have been? On his right or his left? On the other side of the table or somewhere in between?

As he at some point during the meal, took a loaf of bread in his hands and offered a blessing, then taking it and breaking it, all eyes are on him, including yours as he says simply: "Take, this is my body." Would you think about the Passover lamb whose life was given to save others? Would you think about him as the lamb of God offering his life freely that others might have life? Would you wonder perhaps with Judas why this powerful leader wasn't leading a revolt against the powers that be? Clearly he was a leader with authority and others would follow him if he chose to lead the kind of movement that would overthrow their oppressors. He could—if he wanted to—be a great revolutionary leader. If he wanted to.

As he then took the cup of wine and gave thanks and offered the words "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" and then passed it along the table: when you drink after others, would you get it? Would you know what was coming? Would you recognize that this was the last time you would all be together like this eating and drinking like this? Would you have any inkling that in a few short hours—depending on your place in this drama—you'd be running or denying or even betraying him? Would the fear of experiencing the pain and suffering he would be experiencing cause you to abandon him, too?

"My body. My blood." He said at the table. A different kind of Seder meal. A Last Supper. It reminds us that God's ways are not our ways and that Jesus freely chose to take the hard way that we might have life knowing that God loves us so much that God will suffer willingly to show us how profound that love is. It is a supper of forgiveness knowing that those, like us, who ate with him around that table were flawed human beings and yet—and yet—Jesus forgave them and used them to reveal God's kingdom is present and alive in the risen Christ. If Jesus can forgive and use them, then there must be hope for us too. God is willing to "pass over" our weaknesses, too.