

The New Covenant According to Jesus: "Not a Last Supper but a Meal that Will Last!"

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FCMF # 1

Scriptures

Mark 14:22 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." 26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

1 Corinthians 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sermon

Well at long last my series on God's evolving Covenant
with humanity has finally come to an end!
This morning is part five of a series
that began way back during Lent with the story of Noah.
And then during the season of Easter included
the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Jeremiah.
And in each instance God's covenant
crossed a monumental threshold in new understandings
of the Divine as well as in the inclusion of new folks
who could now be included in the community of God's people.
Thresholds, that certainly fit our Lenten and Easter definition,
"as places of wild possibility... and places that invite us to stop,
to imagine, to dream, and to question."
Now the concept of Covenant in the Bible is a formal alliance
or agreement made by God with his chosen people.
It is a contract of sorts between God and those
who desire to be a part of "God's People"
by living out the expectations laid out in the contract.
Jesus now claims, in the passages that were read this morning,
during what Christians call his "Last Supper,"
that he is instituting a "New Covenant."
A covenant that was symbolized by a cup of wine,
a cup that he claimed contained his very blood, shed for all people.

It was a symbolic representation of his suffering,
of his life of service to others and of his deep sacrificial love for all.
A simple cup of wine that symbolized Jesus' willingness
to die in order that the entire human family might find true life.

As I have tried to point out over the past few months God's Covenant
was never sedentary but an ever evolving relationship.
For Noah it was between God and one family or clan of people.
And to fulfill their part of the bargain all Noah and his sons
had to do was to build and fill a big boat - one and done you might say, and their part of the bargain was
completed.
I also suggested that God's sign of that covenant, the rainbow,
should become a recurring symbol reminding us all
of the hope and optimism that God has in us.

A reminder to us that God has never
and will never give up on us.

Through Abraham and Sarah, God began to expand the Covenant,
going from one clan to an entire nation of people.
A nation that was called to resemble the stars in the night sky,
simultaneously distinct as well as limitless!
It was a story of redemption where God hoped to use
an entire distinct nation of folks to once again
save humanity from its proclivities towards self-destruction.
If an entire nation of folks can listen to God's voice and walk in God's ways, then God's peace, love and
joy can more fully infiltrate
throughout the world - at least that was the idea!

Moses' covenant with God was symbolized with two slabs of stone,
carved with ten simple, yet specific instructions
on how God's people were expected to behave.
A far more reliable, consistent and duplicatable format,
where being a part of God's chosen people was no longer
just for those who share the same blood or nationality.
The God of the Covenant was now the God of all
who were willing to hear God's law and follow it!
The boundaries of inclusion, were being pushed further
towards the frontier, just like a pebble dropped into a still pond,
the ever expanding circles of inclusion were rippling outward.

But as the old adage goes; “Rules are meant to be broken!”
Though helpful at times, written rules,
tend to not always be the best forms of motivation.

And so the prophet Jeremiah came along with a new vision
of God’s covenant based upon a fresh view of
the relationship between God’s people and Yahweh.
That “new” Covenant was based upon a relationship with God
that was to be internally grounded and motivated
rather than based solely upon external rules and rituals.
By winning hearts and filling minds, this new covenant
transcended familial loyalties, nationalistic alliances,
race, gender and age and even perceived mental and physical disabilities
such as illiteracy, blindness, deafness and speech impediments.
Again through Jeremiah, God’s covenant is made new again
and those who are included as a part of God’s people expanded.

And though Jeremiah’s vision was never fully put into practice
his legacy was preserved through centuries of prophetic tradition.
A tradition that eventually compelled
and nurtured a young carpenter from Nazareth.
And in what we read this morning, both Jeremiah’s words
and his vision come alive again in Jesus’ farewell supper
symbolized by a cup of wine he shares with his friends.
Now Mark’s gospel had already introduced this cup to his readers
several times and he had been quite clear in its meaning.
Whether it was in the context of “baptism” or now as “eucharist”
“the cup” that Jesus must drink from, refers to the suffering
and death that he must undergo at the hands of the powerful.
And according to Ched Myers, for those who participate in this meal,
“Baptism and Eucharist both have the same meaning: solidarity with and participation in the
way of the cross, embodied in Jesus.”

Myers also notes that Jesus surprisingly changes
the traditional interpretation of the Passover meal.
Passover had always been about recalling the suffering
of God’s people and their deliverance from Pharaoh.
Jesus instead, boldly reinterprets those symbols of Passover
in terms of himself and his life’s vocation.
The bread that Moses used to sustain the hungry masses
in the deserts of Sinai has now become Jesus’ body,
a body, that just a few verses before, had been prepared
through the tears of Mary for a sacrifice.
The “cup” that Jesus offered symbolizes a new “covenant”

that is nothing like the one of old, purchased with the blood of lambs painted above the thresholds of Jewish homes.

Jesus' new covenant will be purchased through the shedding
of his own blood through the ultimate sacrifice of his death.

This vicarious death of the true "suffering servant" will atone
for the sins of the "many" and usher in the beginning of the final salvation and fulfillment, once
and for all, of God's covenant.

And it is in his death that Jesus' new covenant departs radically
from all those previous covenants that I have talked about.

Yes everyone else does eventually die,
but Noah was said to have lived well over 900 years.

And Abraham, we were told was already about 100
and Sarah 90 when Isaac was born!

We know that Moses never did set foot in the promised land
but he did die peacefully in the bosom of God after a long and full life.

Now Jeremiah was executed for his proclivities of truth telling,
but again it was after a rather long and productive prophetic career.

Jesus however, died young, cruelly tortured and executed by the state
after being arrested on false charges, tried in a kangaroo court
and only after a few years of active ministry.

But in his death Jesus finally and fully did "purify" God's people
and thus it is, through his death, there is the possibility of full life.

But it is also critical to remember that this final meal
was not, as some proclaim it, merely a meal of remembrance.

Eucharist is not a memorial meal alone, it does not merely look backwards
since it was originally celebrated in anticipation of future events.

For Jesus, these reimagined symbolic acts of table fellowship
invite both the disciples and the reader, to join him
in his impending arrest, torture, and execution.

As Ched Myers says,
"In this episode, Mark articulates his new symbolic center,
and overturns the last stronghold of symbolic authority in the
dominant order, the high holy feast of Passover. In place of the
temple liturgy Jesus offers his "body" - that is, his messianic
practice in life and death." ("Binding the Strong Man" pp. 363-364)

Jesus built upon Jeremiah's vision,

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

But Jesus' call to covenant goes one step farther.

Jesus invites us to up the anti by offering our entire lives,
not just hearts and minds, in order to seal the deal!

That is certainly a hefty price, no doubt,
but one he proposes is certainly worth it.
It's that old paradox once again, where those
who desire to find their lives must first be willing to give it away!

And what is a life worth?

What is the ultimate value of my life or yours?
Jesus did ask this very question earlier in his ministry:
"What does it profit a person if they sell their soul
in an attempt to save their life?"

And in the lead up to this morning's passage
we are actually given a real life contextual example.

According to Judas the value of his life was a bag of silver coins.

Our current society seems to agree;
money, possessions and things are what is most valued!

But that is not the value God places upon our lives,
that is not what the followers of Jesus' are being called to.

Life, each of our lives, is far more precious than things!

Our lives, our very souls are of ultimate value
and only fully lived when they are given away,
freely, openly and even sacrificially in the service of others.

We are being called to a radical reorientation that seeks
to act out of love rather than hate,

that seek to give rather than to merely receive,
and a true willingness to give even our life to save another,
even when that other person is perceived to be our enemy.

True life, true value in the sight of God,
is not our willingness to take life, but to give it away,
offering that life freely, willingly and abundantly
each and every day it is in our power to give!