

Sermon: This Bread is for You  
Text: Matthew 26:17-19, 26-30  
Date: October 2, 2016  
Context: WWPC  
World Communion Sunday  
Homecoming Weekend  
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*While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."*

Matthew 26:26

I won't say who this person was, or who they were referring to when they said this. But just before last Monday night's presidential debate, a well-known political operative said on national television that he believed his preferred candidate had, quote, "a 100% chance of winning."

By this he did not mean winning the debate. He meant the general election itself.

His claim was not empty bluster. This person is a highly respected political professional and he is basing this prediction on very careful analytics, as they say nowadays.

Still, it was a bold claim.

I mention this because I'd like to make a bold prediction of my own this morning. And it's this:

I am 100% confident in saying that we have all traveled a long way to get here today. This is true even if the road we've taken to reach this place, and get to this time, is different for every one of us.

For some of you, the journey to get here has been acutely personal, and literal.

Maybe in your case a rather intrepid lady from the Presbyterian Board of National missions somehow found her way to your little coal town, tucked away in some back holler in the mountains of West Virginia.

She came there as a kind of domestic missionary, and her plan was to teach Vacation Bible School, the summer of your 14<sup>th</sup> year. In the course of her time there in your little town, she told you about a small Presbyterian school in Swannanoa, North Carolina.

Maybe you were already looking for a way out of that little town, a way out of that little life, so you followed her advice and you came here. And because of that lady, and because of this school, your life changed dramatically and forever.

Some of you know this story because Billy Edd Wheeler has told it to you himself.

Or maybe your cousin from Charlotte graduated from Warren Wilson. This in itself was no surprise. Everyone in her family had graduated from college, most of them from UNC.

Your cousin loved coming to visit you on on the farm where you grew up. And on one of these visits she told you about the place she had gone for her degree, a small liberal arts school called Warren Wilson College

Even though no one in your immediately family had ever gone to college before, she said she thought you would fit right in here. “After all, it even has a a farm,” she was quick to emphasize.

So her father, your uncle, worked some magic on your father to get his permission for you to come here, to this place, and you did come, even though you literally had eight dollars to your name when you arrived.

But somehow, your total penury did not keep you from coming here, or keep you from staying here, or keep you from being welcomed and accepted here.

Your ongoing stay and acceptance here was almost inexplicable to you. It seemed like one of those miracles of abundance you read about in the Bible—something out of nothing.

Except that it wasn't a miracle. Later you learned that President Bannerman made it happen, or maybe it was Doc Jensen – accounts differ on this point.

Or maybe it really was God that was behind it all, that made that it possible for you to stay here, despite your total inability to pay for your tuition and your books and your food.

Whoever was responsible, the experience changed your life completely. Before that conversation with your cousin, you expected to stay on in Mecklenburg county, and be a farmer's wife and become a mother to maybe a half a dozen children.

But instead, because of the education you received here, and the confidence you gained here, you ended up teaching high school English in Baltimore, becoming not just a teacher but a *de facto* mother to thousands of children during the course of your long career.

And now you're back here, fifty years later, because no place has ever felt more like home to you than this particular place.

In fact, just a couple years ago you realized that it was right here, in this very room, a room you helped to build, that you were born again and that your soul was saved. And so you will consider this Chapel your spiritual home, even if you live to be 112 years old.

For others of us, the story of how we got to this place, and this time, is less literal and more theological but it's no less true.

Because the story I'm thinking of now is how we all came to gather around this Table to share, today, in this communal meal with our brothers and sisters around the world.

Of course this is a much older story, one that goes back to a time well before there even was a Church. This story starts, in fact, in the heat and mud and oppression of Pharaoh's Egypt.

Because what we know as the Last Supper did not start out that way. When Jesus sat down to share this meal with his disciples it already had a name. For generations of faithful Jews it was known as the Passover feast.

We know this because it says so right in the text we read a moment ago: *On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"*

Some of us, perhaps even a good many of us, have participated in a Passover meal, or a Passover Seder as it's often called.

But for those of us who have not enjoyed this privilege, it's worth taking a moment to highlight what this meal, this last supper Jesus shared with his disciples, was all about.

In brief, it was, and it still is, a celebration of God's liberating act that created a covenant people out of a disparate tribe of enslaved nomads. Liberation not from sin, it should be noted, but from political oppression, from bondage in Egypt.

The Passover meal commemorates the Exodus experience. The bread is unleavened because to get bread to rise takes time and time is the one thing the Hebrews did not have.

An army was chasing them and they were fleeing for their lives. But they made it out, across the Red Sea. And so to this day they share this feast to celebrate and to remember that journey, that escape from bondage.

One should also note that there is a reason the Exodus is the primordial story of the African American church because it is their same story and it is still being written and still being lived today.

The next chapter in the story of how we got to this place – and to this day – takes a fascinating turn. We know that the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples was in fact a Passover Seder.

But what I find fascinating is that when it comes to Christian history, it was not the gospel writers who first told this story of the so-called Last Supper.

The first person to describe this meal from a uniquely Christian perspective was not Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Instead that distinction goes to the Apostle Paul.

The account he gives us is less a story and more a set of instructions on how the meal should, and should not, be taken.

These instructions come to us in chapter 11 of the book of II Corinthians – and, yes, that’s *Second Corinthians*. What’s interesting about this is that II Corinthians was written some 10-15 years *before* the Gospel of Mark – the first gospel – appeared in written form.

First, Paul gives us what we now call the words of Institution, language that directly echoes the words of Jesus himself:

*This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*’ He does the same with the cup.

But Paul doesn’t stop there. He goes on to offer the following exhortation:

*Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.*

*For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.*

*So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.*

Stay with me; it’s about to get better . . .

This exhortation is a surprising twist in the story, to be sure, and it raises a host of questions.

First of all, how did this even happen, that Paul would have known anything about this new sacramental practice? How did he even hear of it if the first Gospel to be written down was still a decade or more away?

Well, the obvious answer is that he must have heard an oral account of the meal.

Okay, but why did he give this particular set of instructions to the Corinthian church and to no other churches? You don’t find anything remotely like this in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians Philippians, Colossians.

Only here, in his second letter to the Corinthians.

And why did he take this particular tack, offering these words of instruction and exhortation and not something instructions—that the bread should be baked in a certain way, for example?

It turns out that we have a little bit of an answer to that question, too. And the short version is the Corinthians were doing it wrong.

From what we can deduce not everyone in Corinth was equally welcome at this table. Some of the richer members of the community seemed to have privileged access to the Table.

They ate first because they counted themselves first among their less well off neighbors.

When they took this meal, they ate too much, so that others who came after them had little left to eat. And when they took the cup, they drank too much, so that they left the table inebriated.

This small group of privileged elite managed to turn what was meant to be an agape meal, a love dinner, a holy meal meant for everyone, into a bacchanalian feast more fit for a pagan ritual for a select few.

So, yes, the Corinthians were doing it wrong, and, yes, Paul came down hard on them.

But here's the biggest question. Did Paul intend these words for us? Without all this background information at one's disposal it's easy to think of his exhortation as a universal prescription.

Not surprisingly, that is how this passage has been understood. It's in the Bible after all. Historically the church has generally brought this same level of high stakes scrutiny to the observance of this meal.

*Examine yourself before you eat this bread and drink this cup. This is serious business. And it's holy. And you should be holy, too.*

We have lately realized that, as with more than a few things the church has done throughout its history, these attitudes have caused more than a few people to feel guilty and ashamed, like they're not worthy to receive this sacrament.

Which brings us to the final chapter of this story, the final leg of the journey to this Table.

You can debate whether or not Paul meant these word of instruction as a universal prescription for all Christians everywhere, or whether he wrote them to a specific church, in a specific place and time, for a specific reason.

Either way, I think it's fair to ask, is there an alternative approach, one that is less legalistic and judgmental and more focused on joy and hospitality?

And if so, where might we find this version?

Well, it turns out that there is just such an approach, and it comes to us from the person who established this sacrament in the first place.

And here is how I would summarize this story: *Here. Take eat. This bread is for you.*

For this may have been the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples but it was not the first time he showed them, and the world, what his unconditional love, his gracious welcome and his radical hospitality looked like.

When he was on the hillside with some 5000 hungry people, he took the bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them.

He gave it to hungry fathers and to tired mothers and to cranky children. To the merchants and the innkeepers, the gawkers and the hucksters, the searchers and the skeptics, to everyone who had followed him out into the wilderness only to realize late in the day that they were miles out of town and completely out of food.

So he took a couple loaves of bread, along with some fish, and he blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. *Here, take and eat. This bread is for you.*

Then, after his resurrection, he does it again. Two strangers are walking back from Jerusalem after the crucifixion to their home in Emmaus, their hearts broken, their hopes lost, and they take him in for the night.

And there, at their table, he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. *Here, take and eat. This bread is for you.* And their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

But on that night, the last night before his death, he gives it to his disciples.

*Here, Matthew, this bread is for you. Yes, you're a tax collector and, no, nobody really likes anyone who works for the IRS. Nobody except me, that is. In fact, I love you. And here's proof: Here, take and eat.*

*Here, Peter, this bread is for you. You're the most impulsive person I've ever met in my life. You've embarrassed yourself repeatedly during our three years together. And, honestly, you've embarrassed me a little too – I get questions all the time about the selection criteria for my disciples thanks to you.*

*Oh, and p.s., you're about to deny me not once, not twice but three times. But still I will always love you. And here's proof: Take, eat, this bread is for you.*

*Yes, Judas, you and I both know what you are about to do. You and I also know it's wrong, and I'll tell you right now that you and your twenty pieces of silver will go down in infamy. Even so, I will always love you. And here's proof: Take, eat, this bread is for you.*

And so, now, here we are. Our journey to this day and to this Table is complete. So I am going to close with another bold claim.

It doesn't matter if you are a country boy or a city girl. If you are soft spoken or outspoken. It doesn't matter if you are a newcomer or an old timer, or if you're single or married, gay or straight, young or old, black or white, prosperous or poor, uncertain or sure, broken or whole—or somewhere in between.

None of that matters because I am 100% confident that what was true the first time is still true today: *This bread is for you!*