

At Table with Jesus

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, October 16, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Matthew 26:26-29](#) and [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#)

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I'd like you to start today's sermon. I'd like you to start with the memory. Think, if you would, of an early experience with communion (or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist – whatever name was used). Think back to an early experience. I realize that if you are new to Christianity, an early memory of communion might be fairly recent. That's okay. For many of you, your memory may be from your childhood. The invitation is to think back and remember.

I'd like you to really remember, so it might help to shut your eyes. As you remember this early experience of communion, take a look around inside that memory. Notice where you are. Notice the people around you. Notice what's going on around you. If you can remember the smells, notice them, too. And remember the sounds. Notice how your body felt physically. Notice how you felt emotional. And notice the tastes you experienced.

Hold on to that memory. We'll come back to it. For now, let me tell you about mine.

The oldest cousin on my mom's side of the family was graduating from high school. He had attended Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. I'd describe Andover as being a fancy boarding school – though given how highly they think of themselves, “posh” might be a better descriptor. The graduation ceremony included a baccalaureate service held in Cochran Chapel. It was only after poking around the Andover website that I came up with the name of the Chapel. When I saw this picture, I knew this was the place because I remember those pillars.



I think I was probably 11 years old, and I remember feeling the immense volume of the space – the high ceiling and the distant chancel (only back then I probably would have called it “the front of the church”). Even though the space was so big, we were packed into the pews. I assume that every graduate and every graduate’s family was there – and in some cases, like ours, the graduate’s extended family.

We were seated pretty far back, and I was near, but not on, the center aisle. That might have been an attempt to allow me to see more of what was going on, but we were back far enough it didn’t really help. I don’t remember much else about the service – until we got to communion. I remember really wanting to participate in communion and wanting to do everything correctly.

The bread was passed on plates down the pews. Eventually, the person with the bread got to the Pew in front of us. The plate was passed down to the end and then returned to the center aisle. I assumed the same thing would happen in our pew, so I passed the plate without taking any bread, thinking I’d take a piece on its way back to the center aisle. Only the plate didn’t come back to the center aisle. I suppose one of those pillars was at the end of the pew in front of us and so, for practical reasons, it needed to come back to the center aisle. Not so with our pew. Our pew didn’t have the pillar at the end, so the plate went down to the end and was passed to the pew behind us.

After the bread had been passed, trays with little glasses in them were passed down the pews, just like at my home church. Well, I wasn’t going to miss out on this element, so when that tray got to our pew, I took my cup as it went past. And then the tray came back. I remember thinking, “Darn it! Make up your mind on how this works!”

When the time came, I downed what was in the little glass. It did not taste like the grape juice we had at my church. This had a kick. They’d used wine and, yeah, I wasn’t expecting that!

At the time, I found the whole experience quite frustrating. Looking back now, I’m intrigued not by my frustration, but by how important it was to me to be included. I think I sensed, at some level, that this simple meal was connected to something far larger than myself. And as I look back at that memory, it is in that sense of the meal being about something bigger that I recognize the presence of Jesus.

I invited those gathered at the Monday Morning Bible Study to notice the beauty they saw in the scene Matthew describes. They noticed beauty in the simplicity of what Jesus did. They saw this simple meal as a gift and found beauty in the gift. There was beauty in how inclusive it was – even Judas was included. And they saw forgiveness and acceptance in the scene. Matthew’s description also has a beautiful hopefulness in it: Jesus will drink of the cup again. There’s beauty in the covenant Jesus made with his disciples, and by extension, with us. And that reminded us of the community aspect of communion. The meal links us. The meal links us with each other who share it in that moment. And the meal links us to communions we’ve experienced in our pasts.

We shared stories of communions we celebrated in the dark of night and in youth group meetings and retreats. We remembered being in non-English speaking countries and understanding what was being said at the communion table even if we didn’t speak the language. We remembered communions celebrated in big church meetings and in small,

intimate settings. We also remembered hurts experience when churches barred us from the table, and times we ignored the barriers and received communion anyway.

As I've continued reflecting on these passages of scripture, I've thought a lot about Jesus. The thing I keep coming back to is Jesus' compassion. The setting is the Passover, the Jewish celebration of liberation from oppression. The setting is also the final hours before Jesus personally experiences the full power of an oppressive regime. Within hours, he will be arrested, tried, sentenced, and executed. And still, Jesus is filled with compassion – at least it seems that way to me.

He looks at his disciples who will shortly abandon him in one way or another and he has compassion for them. He gives them this gift to help them make some sense of the crazy stuff that is happening, stuff that they don't really comprehend.

This ability to look with compassion is something that Richard Rohr calls a "second gaze." "The first gaze is seldom compassionate," Rohr explains. "It's too busy weighing and feeling itself: 'How will this affect me?' or 'What reaction does my self-image demand now?' or 'How can I regain control of this situation?' Let's admit that we all start there. Only after God has taught us how to live 'undefended' can we immediately stand with and for others, and for the moment."¹

He goes on to explain that it has taken years of contemplative practices "to begin to have the second gaze," which he describes as "The gaze of compassion, looking out at life from the place of Divine Intimacy."²

The second gaze "is well worth waiting for, because only the second gaze sees fully and truthfully. It sees itself, the other, and even God with God's own compassionate eyes. True action must spring from this place. Otherwise, most of our action is merely *reaction*, and cannot bear 'fruit that will last'."³

I think Matthew and Paul each describe a Jesus who looks at the disciples with this "second gaze." He sees his friends as God sees them: with compassionate eyes. And it's because of that compassion that I see the depths of Jesus' faithfulness and generosity when we gather at the table with Jesus.

Since faith and trust are so integrally tied together, Jesus' trust that this "last" supper won't really be his last is a sign of faithfulness to me. His fidelity to his path, even though it means deep suffering, even though it means a torturous death, is faithfulness. And his trust in these fallible, easily scared, loving disciples – though they will deny him, though they will flee, he trusts that there is more in them that will be drawn out – this, too, is faithfulness. All this comes from his second gaze, his ability to look with God's compassionate eyes.

¹ Richard Rohr, quoted in an email newsletter from the Center for Action and Contemplation dated 9 October 2022.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Likewise, his generosity is fully present because of this second gaze compassion. His gratitude is poured out. His life is poured out. This gift, the sacrament is given to them and to us. "Drink it, all of you," he says. All of you. And he gives his very life for this community.

Just like I asked you to start this sermon, I'd like you to finish it as well. I invite you to go back to that memory of communion, to sit with it for a little bit and to ask yourself four questions. As you look back at this early memory of communion,

- Do you see now how Jesus was present then?
- Do you sense Jesus' faithfulness?
- Do you sense Jesus' generosity?
- Do you sense an invitation to a faithfulness and generosity that reflects the faithfulness and generosity of Jesus?