

The Covenant Cup

Mark 14:22-25

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Our theme these last two weeks has been “Dining with the Lord”, and we are exploring together the deeper meanings of Holy Communion. Let’s look closely today at the words Jesus says in Mark 14, verse 24, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

The Good News is that God in Jesus Christ has made a covenant of salvation with us. A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties. A labor contract is a covenant. It stipulates the responsibilities and obligations of both employer and employee. Social Security is a political covenant between the United States Government and its citizens. It makes certain promises and requires the cooperation of participants. A marriage is a covenant. In the eyes of the state, it is a legal covenant that lasts as long as you want, but in the Church, it is a moral covenant that is unconditional and permanent. This is the kind of covenant that God makes with us.

About 2000 BC, God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:2-3). By the first century it seemed this covenant was failing, since the Jews lived under Roman domination and were slowly being impoverished by taxation and the oppressive policies of the empire.

God made a covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant [the Ten Commandments] then out of all nations...you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5-6). But again by the first century, it seemed this covenant was fading away, since the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of God depart from the Temple, and after 600 years, this glory had yet to return.

God made a covenant with David, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” (II Samuel 7:16) And again it seemed the covenant was failing since by Jesus’ time there had not been a king for over 600 years.

Then there was the New Covenant than God promised was yet to come: “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel...I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people...I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jeremiah 31:33-34) This was a covenant that would not fade or fail because God himself would both forgive and transform the human soul. Are you in this covenant? Are you even looking for it? It is the covenant of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

It is a terrifying thing not to have a covenant; not to be in a covenant. If we did not have covenants like marriage or social security or labor contracts, we would be lost. We would be living lives once described by Thomas Hobbes as “poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Without a covenant with God we are lost; in the words of St. Peter we would be no people instead of God’s people; we would be people who had not received mercy instead of people who have received mercy. But the people of Jesus’ day kept themselves together by practicing hope for the Messiah—the anointed king who would come and restore the covenant promises once made to Abraham, Moses and David. Even more he would come to bring the New Covenant announced by the Jeremiah.

Jesus is announcing that he is the one. He is the Son of David who will fulfill all the promises made to Abraham, Moses and David. But he also brings the New Covenant: The Kingdom of forgiveness and final righteousness for all people. We are at the hinge of history with this cup. The old is passing away and the new is breaking forth. With this cup the ages turn and we enter into the new age, the new covenant, the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus Christ. And we who drink this cup are obliged to work for the kingdom. We are obliged to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:12-13) We seek justice for the oppressed, good news for the poor, liberty for the addicted, healing for the sick, and mercy for sinners. For those living under the New Covenant the slaughter of innocents, the rape of natural resources, and the thousands who die each day without the love of Jesus Christ are a call to action. Complacency is impossible.

God paid dearly for this covenant. Jesus shed his blood to establish it.

There is a wonderful story by Isak Dinesen called *Babette's Feast*, about a strict, dour, fundamentalist community in Denmark. Babette works as a cook for two elderly sisters

who have no idea that she once was a chef to nobility back in her native France. Babettes' dream is to return to her beloved home city of Paris, so every year she buys a lottery ticket in hopes of winning enough money to return. And every night her austere employers demand that she cook the same dreary meal: boiled fish and potatoes, because, they say, Jesus commanded, "Take no thought of food and drink."

One day the unbelievable happens: Babette wins the lottery! The prize is 10,000 francs, a small fortune. And because the anniversary of the founding of the community is approaching, Babette asks if she might prepare a French dinner with all the trimmings for the entire village.

At first the townspeople refuse: "No, it would be sin to indulge in such rich food." But Babette begs them, and finally they relent, "As a favor to you, we will allow you to serve us this French dinner." But the people secretly vow not to enjoy the feast and instead to occupy their minds with spiritual things, believing God will not blame them for eating this sinful meal as long as they do not enjoy it.

Babette begins her preparations. Caravans of exotic food arrive in the village, along with cages of quail and barrels of fine wine.

Finally the big day comes, and the village gathers. The first course is an exquisite turtle soup. The diners force it down without enjoyment. But although they usually eat in silence, conversation begins to take off. Then comes the wine: Veuve Cliquot 1860, the finest vintage in France. And the atmosphere changes: Someone smiles. Someone else giggles. An arm comes up and drapes over a shoulder. Someone is heard to say, "After all, did not the Lord Jesus say, *love one another?*" By the time the main entrée of quail arrives, those austere, pleasure-fearing people are giggling and laughing and slurping and guffawing and praising God for their many years together. This pack of Pharisees is transformed into a loving community through the gift of a meal. One of the two sisters goes into the kitchen to thank Babette, saying, "Oh, how we will miss you when you return to Paris!" And Babette replies, "I will not be returning to Paris, because I have no money. I spent it all on the feast."

Can you think of anyone else who gave his all to make us a loving community through the gift of a meal?

Such a meal cannot be kept locked up in the church. Such a covenant ought not to be buried under a pile of papers in a file cabinet deep in the bowels of the church basement. Such a cup should never be hidden away in some secret mountain fortress like it was portrayed in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Holy Grail*. Such a cup ought to be lifted up for all to see and all to hear the invitation to come and join the covenant.

Years ago, Walt Disney spoke at the dedication of Disneyland in California and said this, “We did not build this for ourselves but for others.” Wow. John Wesley our founder captured some of the same spirit when he said to his preachers, “You have nothing to do but save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those you want.” I want the people no one else wants. I want the hardened skeptics and jaded atheists; I want the broken people, the divorced, the addicted and the unemployed. I want the lost, the confused and the lonely. I want the Moslem, the Hindu, and the New Ager. I want the people with tattoos, blue hair and pierced noses. I want the loggers, the students, the teachers and the bankers. I want to love them not judge them. I want to welcome them, not condemn them. I want the opportunity to come along side them and invite them into the covenant. I want to tell them about the wonderful love of our blessed Redeemer.

What do you do if your church has no passion? Complacency is the death of evangelism. What do you do if your passion is low? I’ll tell you what you do. You come back to the cup because it is all in there.