

## **“Seeing Ourselves in the Disciples”**

Date: April 21, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Theme: Holy Communion, Last Supper

Occasion: Maundy Thursday

We come together this evening to recall in our hearts and minds the events that occurred on Thursday, of what the Church calls Holy Week, the last week in the life of our Lord. One third of all the events that we have about Jesus' life occurred during this week, reminding us of the great significance of these last days. The disciples have gathered in a home, whose we are not sure, but we do know that it had a furnished second floor.

As they gather, they participate in what is called a Seder meal, one of the highlights of the Passover week. The Passover festival, of course, had been done for centuries before Jesus came on the scene. It commemorated that time when the Jews were in bondage in Egypt.

Moses warned Pharaoh to let his people go, but Pharaoh hardened his heart. So, God sent a death over the land of Egypt, but miraculously this death passed over the homes of the Jews. Thus the season of Passover was given birth.

The meal itself was a symbolic one, reminding the Jews of the suffering of their forebears, and the power of God's deliverance. The foods that were eaten were symbols to remind the Jews of their captivity in Egypt. Apple sauce was eaten to remind them of brick mortar, and the fact that they were forced to make bricks with no straw.

A bitter herb is eaten to remind them of the bitterness of their captivity. It was this Seder Meal that the disciples were partaking of, that night in the upper room. It was at the conclusion of that meal that Jesus himself added two more

symbols. He took a loaf and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you, do this in remembrance of me." Then he took a cup of wine. He drank from it and gave it to his disciples saying, "Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sin." And thus was born our sacrament of the Lord's Supper, out of the experience of the ancient Jewish custom.

Leonardo da Vinci, by his famous painting, has forever impressed on our minds this supper. The scene that he depicts is that moment when Jesus announces his impending betrayal. The disciples look at one another with great shock, all that is except Judas, who refuses to look Jesus in the face, and clutches his money to his breast.

I wonder, as we look at those disciples around the table, if we can see ourselves. For me, they represent all that is good and bad about our humanity.

Maybe we can see ourselves in Matthew. Here was a man who had a brilliant, analytical mind, but who initially used it for self rather than God. He became a tax collector, a man who was in bed with the Romans.

It was his responsibility to extract the tax money from his brothers, money that went to support the very institution that was enslaving the Jews. Matthew's mind was like an adding machine. His god was the dollar mark. He reminds us of just how far many of are willing to go, to advance our own personal ambition.

But when Matthew came over to Jesus, he came all the way. Now he was using that brilliant, analytical mind to analyze the message of the Master. Now he was using his education to keep an account of the Master's teachings. Matthew reminds us that our talents are God given. But we must choose to use our talents toward the right end, that is, to enhance humanity, to make the world a better place.

Matthew did just that. His Gospel which bears his name contains Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and a majority of Jesus' parables. The Gospel according to Matthew changed the world, like few writings have ever done.

Maybe we can see ourselves in James and John. They remind us of the pride and the ego that is within us all. It was their mother who went to Jesus to do their bidding for them. She admonished the Master, "When you come into your Kingdom, place my sons, one on your right hand, and one on your left hand."

Even on this, the occasion of their last night together, the disciples were arguing among themselves which one is the greatest and who deserves the seat of honor at the table. James and John remind us that if we are to follow Jesus, we must first surrender ego. We must decrease so that he might increase. Remember the words of Jesus when he said, "He who would be greatest among you, must be a servant."

Or, maybe we can see ourselves in Nathaniel. He reminds us of the prejudice that is within our land and in our hearts. When he first heard about Jesus, he was quoted as saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" In a thousand ways we echo his words and sentiments. Can anything good come out of downtown Erie? Can anything good come out of Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Afghanistan?

Nathaniel would remind us that if we are to free others, we must first be free ourselves - free of the prejudices that separate us from others, people whom God also loves.

Certainly we can see a part of ourselves in Thomas. He was like the man from Missouri who announces everything with the words, "show me." Like Thomas, we too long for proof, something tangible that we can cling to when our experience of God begins to fail. We live in a cynical, prove-it-to-me age.

But Thomas would remind us that resurrection faith is not something that can be neatly wrapped up in a package. We can never possess faith as one would possess a thing. To follow the Master, we must be able to echo the words, “Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief.”

There was Simon the Zealot. It embarrasses me to say that I see some of myself in this man, for he was one who hated with a passion. He reminds me that anger is an emotion that many of struggle with. The zealots were a political faction who wanted the Romans out and the Jews in, and they were more than willing to commit murder and mayhem to accomplish their goal.

They were terrorists, who said that the end justifies the means. Simon would remind us that if we are to follow the Master, we must look at His total message, even the parts that say, “Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you.”

There is Andrew. It was he who brought his brother, Simon Peter, to Jesus, but never does he get the notoriety. He always lives under the shadow of his brother. Never does he enter into the inner circle, consisting of Peter, James and John. Although, it was he, Andrew, who brought them all to Jesus.

Andrew reminds us that if we are to follow the Master, we cannot insist on being in the limelight. Those who are truly in service will rarely get recognition and notoriety. There will be times when we must defer to others in humility, and for the sake of unity.

There was Judas. If we do not see Judas in ourselves, it is because we are not looking closely enough. Judas was so impatient with Jesus. He believed that Jesus really did have the power to bring about the Kingdom of God, but he did not understand why He kept waiting.

Judas, therefore, contrived a situation in which Jesus would be forced to

show his power. He would turn Him over to the Jews and the Romans.

Judas would remind us that if we are to follow the Master, we must remember that our schedule is not always God's schedule, and that our means are not always God's means. We see with the vision of the immediate. God sees with the vision of eternity. God knows. We only think we know.

And finally there is Simon Peter. How impetuous he was. Always willing to leap before he looked. When Jesus told the disciples they would all fall away, it was Simon Peter who shouted, "Lord, though they all may fall away, I will never leave your side."

But Peter did fall away. He denied Jesus, not once, but three times. He would remind us that to follow the Master we must count the cost of discipleship.

As we come forward and go into the prayer chapel, our Upper Room for the evening, to participate in this ancient sacrament of the Church, may we confess before God that we are all of the disciples, with all of their frailties and sinfulness.

But we are also like them in our sincere desire to follow Jesus. My prayer is that through the sacrament this evening, that the power of God may re-instill in you a sense of mission, and remind you of who you are - a disciple of Christ. Amen.