

# The Ripple Effect

## *Eucharist: Pouring Out Your Life*

Mark 14:17-26

March 18, 2007

When our daughter Bonnie celebrated her first birthday we threw her a huge birthday party. We put on silly hats, blew on little horns, waved bright streamers, brought out the cake with ice cream, lit the candles and blew them out, sang “Happy Birthday,” and then after we ate everyone ran around on the grass and started dancing. One of our friends, a tall and regal African man named Festus Babalola, was watching his first ever American-style birthday party. So at each little symbol or gesture or action, Festus would interrupt and say in his broken English, “Oh, good for Bonnie, but why do you do that now?” And we would pause and think, “Hum, why do we do that?” And then we’d try to explain to Festus why we used candles and wore silly hats and blew on little horns and sang a song and danced on the grass. As we began to think about it and talk about it, all the symbols and gestures made sense. It was a party so we made noise and blew into silly horns and lit candles. We were glad that Bonnie was born so we sang a song in her honor.

In every age and culture people have developed ways of saying things by doing things. Could you imagine a world without gestures and symbols – no handshakes or hugs or kisses or wedding rings or special songs or flags or dances or salutes or flowers on Valentine’s Day? Symbols – both symbolic objects and symbolic gestures - “open up a level of reality for which non-symbolic speaking is inadequate.” For instance, my wedding ring says, “I love my wife and I’m committed to her until death do us part” but the symbol explains all of that in a single glance.

Now you might say, “Well, I don’t need symbols – especially in my relationship with God. I’ll get by with the word of God and only the word of God. I will use only my rational brain to figure it out.” But let’s remember that all throughout the Bible God used physical things and symbols and actions to communicate his love and truth to us. So, for instance, when God wanted to express his love for Noah and all of creation, he not only said it but he put a rainbow in the sky. When God wanted to demonstrate His glory, he said it but He also led His people to build an elaborate tabernacle. When God wanted to show us how awful sin is and how much forgiveness costs, he had his people pick one of their best sheep, bring it to the tabernacle and kill it and then sometimes the blood of the animal was sprinkled on the people. That may sound rather crude and old-fashioned, but I promise that you’d never leave a worship service and say, “I just don’t understand why God hates sin so much and what forgiveness means.” You participated in it. You watched it. You felt it. You smelled it.

So why does God give us symbols and gestures and signs? The short answer is this: the God we see in the Bible actually loves us and wants us to know Him – not only to know about Him but to trust him with our whole heart. You see, it’s really the error of modernity to assume that we can grasp God with verbal analysis and clear thinking – apart from deeper-than-rational symbols and actions and gestures.

In the Bible (you'll find it in the second book of the Bible called Exodus) one of the most important symbolic things that God told his people to do was to celebrate the Passover Supper. So every year (and our Jewish friends still celebrate it) would gather in Jerusalem to remember the story of how they were slaves in Egypt but God, in His wonderful love and power, came down and set them free, bringing His wrath on Pharaoh and his cohorts and setting God's own people free. Ever since that first Passover Jews have celebrated it by eating, drinking, telling stories, enacting rituals.

That's where this story of Jesus begins. In verse 12 we read that all of this happened "On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened bread" (that's another name for the Passover). Now for Jews of Jesus' day the father as the head of the household was responsible to make the arrangements. So as the leader of this rag-tag band of disciples, they ask Jesus, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" Let me read what happened next (see verses 13-16). This is unusual because men didn't carry water jars; only women did that – so the disciples couldn't miss this guy. Now keep in mind that Jesus has predicted his own death at least three times, but in spite of this, Jesus' death is not a shocking tragedy. My son and I are reading Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in which nearly everyone dies and nearly every death is a tragedy. The plans of Cassius and Brutus and other all go awry. But Jesus' death isn't a tragedy; it all happens according to plan – God's plan. In this darkest of hours, God is still in control. God has a plan. Isn't that good to know for your life – that when you truly place your life in Christ's hands, He has a plan for you even in your darkest hour?

So now we're ready to explain what Jesus did on this traditional but radically new Passover that we call the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Let's continue the story of Jesus with the end of verse 17 and the beginning of verse 18: "So they prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were at reclining at the table eating (and drinking and telling stories and bonding as friends), Jesus said, 'I tell the truth, one of you will betray me.'" We have to understand how chilling these words would sound. Imagine that you're eating a big family dinner. Everyone is happy and clinking glasses and telling stories and enjoying the moment, and all of a sudden, the father stands up and announces, "I just want to let you know that I received a death threat in the mail and in a few days I will be murdered. O, and by the way, one of you in this room sent me the death threat." Yes, that puts a damper on things. You'd all wonder: Who is this creep? I'll strangle him. You'd probably respond just like the disciples in verse 19 – "they were saddened, and one by one they said, 'Surely not I?'"

They all howl in protest and innocence – "no, not me. I'm not a creep. I wouldn't sell out my Lord. I'm among the righteous people." Now here's the ironic thing in this story: a disciple named Judas will literally fulfill Jesus' prediction here, but by the time Jesus gets nailed to the cross, every single disciple will betray Jesus. Notice what Jesus will say in verse 27: "You will all fall away." Judas betrayed Jesus with his greed, but others will betray him with their weakness and laziness (verses 37-42) or fear (verses 50-52) or cowardice (verses 66-72). But in spite of their failure and betrayal and sin we only hear the howls of protest and innocence "Surely not I, Lord?"

You still hear it today. So the spouses in a conflicted marriage howl, “Surely not I, Lord?” The addict says, “Surely not I, Lord – I’m not really addicted.” “Surely not I” says the child to the parent – “no, he started it, not me; no, it’s her turn to do the dishes, not me.” So we all clamor and prove that we are, indeed, among the righteous, not the sinful creeps that cause all the problems and truly betray Jesus. But as we protest and prove our innocence, we miss the fact that this meal has always been for sinners, not the righteous. My brothers and sisters in Christ, never forget that. This is a meal for sinners. We’re always a little surprised by that, aren’t we? I mean, here we have our best linen and our best silverware and we play our best music. It’s all so pure and holy – and perhaps it should be – but then we turn around and we’re shocked to see real sinners here. Imperfect people. Unqualified people. Goodness, look at him – what is he doing here? Or maybe – more accurately - we look at our lives and say, “What am I doing here?” The Lord’s Supper will always be attended by and offered to people (like me) who betrayed Jesus last week yesterday and may betray him again on Monday morning. That doesn’t minimize our sin (actually it should make me see and feel the wretchedness of my sin even more!); it merely magnifies God’s love and grace for us.

Now let’s continue the story by skipping down to verse 22: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take it; this is my body.’” This morning we’re going to think about the Lord’s Supper and then we’re going to experience the Lord’s Supper. Notice the very physical nature of all of this. Jesus took the bread (he held it in his hands and touched it); Jesus gave thanks to God the Father (the Greek word for give thanks was “eucharisto” from which we get our word Eucharist – that’s why many Christians call this feast the Eucharist); he broke it and then he gave it to his disciples. And then he did not say, “Now analyze this bread; think good thoughts about this bread; ponder this bread.” No, Jesus said, “Take it and eat it; this is my body.”

Jesus spoke Aramaic, not English, and then the New Testament was recorded mostly in Greek. So literally Jesus’ Aramaic phrase went like this: “This – my body.” The verb “is” doesn’t appear in the verse. So what’s the big deal? Well, the big deal is that the church has been arguing for nearly 2,000 years what the “is” means. Some people have interpreted “This *is* my body” as a kind of mathematical formula. So, then, quite literally, this piece of bread becomes the flesh of Jesus. But then other Christians have said, “No, no, it’s just a piece of bread. It’s no different than when some people tie a string around their finger to help jog their memory.”

So which view is right? Based on this story, I would say neither. It’s not a literal mathematical formula, but it isn’t just a string on your finger kind of thing either. No, this is way too deep for that. When Jesus said, “This – my body” he meant this is my person, this is myself, this is my life offered to you. Jesus was really asking them to feed on him, to draw life from him, to somehow get him into us – or to get us into him and his life. So most Christians have believed that when we take the Lord’s Supper – in faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit – we really do feed on Christ. Those ancient Jews around the table with Jesus would have understood it that way as well. After reciting the

blessing over the bread – “Blessed art Thou, O Lord, Ruler of the universe, who causes bread to come forth from the earth...” – the host of the Passover supper would pass each member a piece of the bread. By taking the bread and eating the bread, each participant was participating in the power of the Exodus, the power of being freed from slavery into God’s new life. You remembered it all by participation. The same God who came worked with compassion and power to set his people free was now here, right now, available to love and set His people free again.

Now notice what Jesus did next (read verse 23). “Then he took the cup (again it’s a very physical object and symbol, but it’s also a very ordinary Passover cup, probably made by a local craftsman), gave thanks (there’s that word eucharisto again) and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.” Notice again: they didn’t analyze it or do an eight-week study on it; they drank it - the rich, deep, bittersweet wine burning as it descended from their lips to their gut. But don’t get me wrong – words are important here because Jesus will use a mini-sermon to explain the cup: “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many.” Now if you were sitting around that table, these words would have felt like a jolt of electricity running through your body. Everyone knew the old covenant in which God said, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” It was a good covenant but it kept unraveling. But God Himself kept promising a new covenant – not a replacement covenant but the fulfillment of the first covenant. So those first followers of Jesus must have looked each other in the eyes and thought, “Did we just hear Jesus right? Did he say the New Covenant is now here? The New Covenant of deep forgiveness and deep power?”

Notice the key words: “This is *my blood ... poured out* for you.” We have to realize how completely dumbfounded this must have sounded to those first followers of Jesus. As Jews they knew that the centerpiece and focus for Passover was the lamb. But according to Mark’s story the lamb seems to be unimportant. Why? Because Jesus has become the lamb of God, slain for the sins of the sins of the world. What is God like? The one who is equal with God, the very form of God, the one who had more rights and more privileges than all of us combined, gave himself in love for us. He poured himself out for us.

With such beautiful simplicity and clarity, the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, answers this question: What is God like? For followers of Jesus, the answer becomes so clear: God is love. At times we say that so glibly, as if it was obvious – “why, of course, God loves me.” But in the history of religious ideas and concepts this is simply astounding and shocking and almost scandalous. If we put ourselves in the story, it looks like this: we are not the righteous ones. We are all in the same boat: we are sinners. We howl and protest, “Surely, not I, Lord?” but we are the very ones who have betrayed him, turned our backs on him, ignored him. And yet, here He is, not only sticking with us, but offering us a meal, and not only offering us a meal, but giving his life for us.

So what is God like? Let me tell you a true story. In his book *How the Irish Saved Civilization* author Thomas Cahill mentions two famous silver cups uncovered in the marshy bogs of Ireland. The first cup, known as the Gendstrup Cauldron, comes from a

few centuries before Christ. It is adorned with pictures of violent gods and warriors. One panel on the cup shows a gigantic cook-god holding squirming humans to appease their appetites. The second cup, known as the Ardagh Chalice, comes from seven hundred years after the good news of Jesus came to Ireland. Like the first cup it is a superb work of craftsmanship, but it depicts a radically different view of God. It was used as a cup of peace, designed to be used in the Lord's Supper. As the worshipper lifted the cup to his lips, he was reminded that this God sacrificed himself for his people. Jesus, the Lamb of God and the Living God at the same time, gave himself in love for us.

What does that do for us? How does that change our lives? What does it mean to live a Eucharistic life?

First of all, the Eucharistic life is a faith-filled life. It receives life from Christ who wants to pour out his life into us. John Calvin, a famous Christian writer who lived about 500 years ago, used a very simple analogy to describe this aspect of the Eucharistic life. He said our lives are like a cup with a lid on it - so even when God pours his love into our lives, nothing gets in. The lid is on tight. (Demonstrate trying to pour water into a cup that has a tight lid on it). Calvin said that faith is like taking the lid off. By faith we tell the Lord, "I am removing the lid of sin and my own self-will and I want you, Lord Jesus, to truly come into my life. Pour out your love on me. I am ready to receive you now. (Demonstrate with a cup that now has the lid off of it). The Eucharistic life is an open life – open to God, open to God's grace, receiving from Jesus the life that he wants to pour into us.

Secondly, the Eucharistic life is a poured out life for others. When we come to the Lord's Table we remember that life is not just about getting or receiving; it's about receiving so that I can pour out God's love to others. We have this remarkable privilege and call and challenge: worship changes us. Worship reorients our lives. We become poured-out people. We've been talking about letting our lives be a ripple for God – having God touch us and then allowing God's Spirit to work through us.

In my former days as a Methodist pastor we used to end Communion with the following prayer: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by His blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world..." I love that! What a challenge and what an invitation. We don't just come to church and our Bible studies and our small groups to get fed. Hopefully, we do get fed, but we also come the body of Christ for the world.

So where are you pouring yourself out for the glory of God these days?