

WHEN JESUS STOPPED TALKING...
(A Communion Sunday Sermon Making Jesus' Forgiveness Point)

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Scripture

Matthew 9:10-13 (Jesus, wanting mercy not sacrifice, eats with tax collectors & sinners)

Text: "*I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I die*"—Luke 22:15

Okay, boys and girls, I have a question. Here's my question: What did Jesus talk about the most? Now, before you share your answers with me, ask your parents what they think Jesus most talked about ... Now, parents—and every person—turn to someone in the row before or behind you and consult on the question. "What did Jesus talk about the most?" ... Having done this, please tell the children or whoever is the youngest in your pew group what you agree on.

So, kids, what do you think or what does your group think?

Answers: Jesus spoke most often about...LOVE, LOVE ON ANOTHER, PEACE, GOD, HIMSELF, THE NEIGHBOR, THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

I've never done a theme content analysis of the New Testament, but I'll bet the thing which Jesus most spoke of was THE KINGDOM OF GOD, THE REIGN OF GOD, THE REALM OF GOD, GOD'S EMPIRE, GOD'S NEW ORDER or, in the Greek, the *BASILIEA OF GOD*. That was his burning passion. And, without doing the sharing exercise again, let me say what I think is the main characteristic of Jesus' spoken Kingdom. It is **FORGIVENESS**.

The problem that Jesus had in his proclamation of the Kingdom of God with its plenteous forgiveness was that his disciples did not get it. These guys were absolute dunderheads. He tells them the story of the Kingdom being like a sower who scattered seed and then has to painstakingly explain it to them, 'cause they don't get it. They don't get the wheat and weeds parable we heard earlier this summer or the leaven in bread analogy or treasure in a field teaching or the pearl of great price—all which are about the Kingdom. In the lesson of last week, Peter rightly acknowledges that Jesus is the Lord but when Jesus says he must go to Jerusalem to suffer Peter says "No! Never!" and, so, must be rebuked: "Get thee behind me Satan--you don't get it." When Jesus comes down from the mountain of transfiguration, James and John ask to sit at his right and left hand in the new kingdom. They don't get it.

What Jesus then tries with his dense disciples is another tactic. He decides to show them. He stops talking and demonstrates. He does this at a meal, the meal described in the scripture lesson of the morning. He sits down to have dinner with "tax collectors and sinners." By all standards these would be "unclean" people, contaminated by handling Roman money or unclean not because they were blatantly immoral but because they could not live up to the Holiness Code of pure living as did the best, most religious Jews. It is to these outsiders to whom Jesus felt called. He wanted them to know they were part of God's Realm, loved, and forgiven.

Jesus practiced what is called OPEN TABLE FELLOWSHIP. Open Table Fellowship was the most radical thing that he ever did. Not only was he at table with his disciples, tax collectors, and sinners, he ate at Simon the Leper's house and he let a woman come to the table to anoint him with oil. He invited Pharisees to break bread with him. He did not expel Judas who betrayed him. By implication we can believe that vile Samaritans, pagan Greeks, and the hated Romans, people of all classes, age, race, and sexual orientation were welcome at Christ's table. Me, I would want to exclude several categories of folk from the table: bait fishermen, Oklahoma

basketball franchise owners, fundamentalists, and certain Pac 10 referees! Jesus, though, would let them all sit down.

We, however, regularly find ways to exclude and disdain others whom Jesus would welcome. The story is told of an Irish priest who regularly railed against the English in his sermons. So just before Lent one year the priest's bishop called him in and. "Father, I don't want you to make one nasty crack all these forty days about the Brits." He said he would try, and he made good till it came to Maundy Thursday. He recounted the Last Supper and said that at table Jesus said to his disciples, "Shore'n one of ye will be betray me."

Peter on his left hand asked, "Shore'n, Lard, is it I?"

John on his right also asked, "Shore'n, Lard, is it I?"

So did all the disciples around the table, till it came to Judas Iscariot, and Judas said, "I say, Governor, is it I?"

This is an inclusive table from which no one should be turned away. Our text of this morning says Jesus "earnestly desired" to have his last supper with his disciples to re-make his main point. Lifting up the cup he said, "Drink of this, **all** of you, [why?] for the **forgiveness** of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Last Tuesday in Bible study we looked at the story of the healing of the paralytic whom Jesus first forgave, then healed. The Pharisees objected as only God can forgive. Jesus replied, "Is it easier to say 'you are forgiven' or 'rise up and walk'?" When I was younger I always thought that enabling someone to walk was more difficult. Now that I am older, I understand how deeply and almost incurably afflicted people are to their additions, alienation, and guilt. Forgiveness is hard to offer and hard to receive. We'd rather die than forgive offenses.

In each pew today is a free copy of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann's book, *The Prophetic Imagination*. We will be reading and discussing this book with our fall theme of IMAGINE LOVE AND JUSTICE. Brueggemann notes that philosopher Hannah Arendt discerned that forgiveness of sin was Jesus'

most endangering action because if a society does not have an apparatus for forgiveness, then its members are fated to live forever with the consequences of any violation. Thus the refusal to forgive sin...amounts to enormous social control. While the claim of Jesus [that he was the messiah] may have been religiously staggering, its threat to the forms of accepted social control was even greater. [p. 85]

In passing let us note that the United States of America has more people in jail longer and unforgiven than any nation in the world--and more than any country in the history of the world.

So it wasn't just Jesus' first century disciples who didn't get what he was saying in his teachings, meal time modeling, and final self-giving! The cultural historian Rene Girard at Stanford says that the message of the cross is essentially that there are to be no more victims, no more blaming, no more violence. All are forgiven. All. That's what Jesus said, and, when he stopped talking, that's what he modeled here at the table. And that's how he died, saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Truly, what the world needs now is love...and especially love in its final form which is forgiveness. Imagine it, my friends. Imagine it. It is the one thing most lacking. I ask you, what else can save us? Our wealth? Political tough talk? Our arsenals? Our alliances? No. Only love. Only love and its final form, forgiveness. Jesus knew it, taught it, and lived it to the end.

That is why Jesus is the savior of the world!

Let the people say, "Amen!"