



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### May 5, 2013

#### "The Meaning of the Lord's Supper" - Luke 22:1-23

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There was a film made in the late 80's called, "The Mission". It's a movie about a Spanish Jesuit priest who travels deep into the South American jungle to convert local natives to Christianity. The protagonist of the movie, Robert De Niro, plays a deadly mercenary and slave hunter, who is surprisingly converted to Christianity after killing his younger brother in a sword fight over a young woman.

Mourning the death of his brother, he sequesters himself in the Jesuit monastery from where the missionaries of the movie originate. Jeremy Irons, the lead Jesuit priest, eventually pleads with De Niro to do something with his life. De Niro, convinced that he is unredeemable because of his act of murder, ultimately decides a heavy penance must be paid for his sin. His answer is to join the Jesuit priests on a mission trip, dragging a bag that contains his weapons and armor, deep into the jungle.

At one point, the Jesuit brothers think he has carried the bag far enough, and Liam Nielson cuts the rope that tethers De Niro to his bag. This frees him from what looks to the priests like an unbearable burden. But De Niro, wanting to fully pay his penance, ties the rope back around his neck and struggles on.

After a harrowing climb up

shear rock walls, the Jesuit priests finally arrive at the top of towering waterfalls and are met by the natives. De Niro, still struggling with his heavy bag, gets himself just to the top but cannot muster enough strength to pull his bag over the top.

His burden is simply too much to bear. He just cannot make it the last few feet. He can go no further—until one of the natives comes at him with a knife, cuts the rope, and sends the bag hurtling down the cliff, into the river below. De Niro weeps at the relief of finally being relieved of his burden.

This is a great scene, and an appropriate image for the burdens many of us carry around. Some of us carry that kind of bag, right? We get up in the morning and start filling it up. We fill it with our doubts, our guilt, or our shame. We fill it with all kinds of sinful behavior. Sometimes we are filling it unconsciously, and other times we know exactly what we're stuffing in there.

We should know, deep down, that our sins have been dealt with by Jesus, but so often we are so quick to forget. We are quick to forget that the price for our sins, our guilt, and our shame has all been paid for. But, like Robert De Niro, we may not remember until after we have traveled a very long way.

However, the good news this morning is that what needed to be done, has been done!

Jesus Christ accomplished it all on the cross. He accomplished what we could not accomplish ourselves. He died for our sins, has risen, and will come back for us. That is a promise from our Lord and something we should always remember. It's what the Lord's Supper is all about.

We have been working our way through the Book of Luke for just over a year now, and for much of the time we have been following Jesus on his 3 1/2 year ministry that began with his baptism in Luke 3:21, and ends in a few chapters with his trial, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Today, in chapter 22, we find the Jewish community preparing for the celebration of the Passover meal. The Passover meal is the Jewish meal eaten at the end of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, and serves as a commemoration of what God did for the Israelites when He liberated them from Egyptian bondage.

In our scripture this morning we find Jesus preparing for the Passover meal that God had instituted some 3,000 years earlier. Let's hear God's Word as you join me at Luke chapter 22, verse one.

**N**ow the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. 2 And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people.

3 Then Satan entered into Judas, called Iscariot, who was of the number of the Twelve. 4 He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them.

5 And they were glad and agreed to give him money. 6 So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.

7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it."

9 They said to him, "Where will you have us prepare it?" 10 He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters 11 and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'"

12 And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." 13 And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

14 And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him.

15 And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.

16 For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."

17 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. 18 For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

21 But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. 22 For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!"

23 And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this.

This is typical Luke, in that he provides us with an accurate and detailed account of an historical event. Luke himself tells us back in chapter one that he wrote this so that we may know the certainty of the things. These are not fables. These are historical accounts of real events.

Sir William Ramsey, a 1920's era Oxford professor and considered one of the world's greatest archaeologists, believed that the New Testament, particularly the books of Luke and Acts, were second-century forgeries. He spent thirty years in Asia Minor, seeking to dig up enough evidence to prove that Luke and Acts were nothing more than a lie.

At the conclusion of his long journey, however, he was compelled to admit that the New

Testament was a first-century compilation and that the Bible is historically reliable. This fact led to his conversion and embracing of the very faith he once believed to be a hoax. He said, "Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."

In fact, all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, give an account of the Last Supper, making this one of the most documented events in the life of Jesus. The Last Supper was, and is, the final meal Christ had with His disciples before He was arrested and ultimately crucified.

Leonardo da Vinci, arguably one of the greatest men to have ever lived, captured the event in his famous painting the Last Supper—the moment when, in the Upper Room, Christ tells His followers that He is about to be betrayed and that He will be leaving them very soon.

About four years ago, a group of us from this church traveled with Pastor Stoker and his family to visit the Holy Land. Our trip included a visit to the "Upper Room" and I had the honor of delivering the devotion that afternoon.

I can close my eyes and envision that very night with Jesus and His disciples. I can see them reclining at the table. I can hear the murmur of conversations, and I can sense the silence that must have overcome the room when Jesus said, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

Before You suffer?! They were enjoying what they thought was an ordinary Passover meal, when Jesus springs it on them that this would be their last meal together.

**W**hat must the disciples have thought? Jesus had known all along *where* He was headed, and He knew perfectly well *why* He was headed there—but the disciples did not.

We know now that it was because of our sin. *“For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.”* - Romans 3:23

And sin is our burden. *“For the wages of sin is death.”* - Romans 6:23. That’s bad news.

At supper that night, Jesus knew that in a few short hours He would be found guilty of a crime He did not commit, and sentenced to a death He did not deserve. But He also knew that this had to be. He knew that the Father loved the world so much that He gave His Son, so that those who would believe in Him would not perish, but have an everlasting life with Him. That’s good news!

In short, Jesus had to be found guilty, had to suffer, and had to die on a cross for a life that He did not live, so that we could be found innocent for a life we do live.

Jesus died on the cross so our sins could be forgiven and so that we could spend eternity with Him. God loves us, despite our mistakes. God wants us to be close to him, and He wants to be close to us. Despite our sinful nature, God wants to be in a relationship with us for eternity.

That’s why Jesus had to die and that’s what Jesus wanted His disciples to remember.

The evening had started out as something that all at the table were very familiar with, but with very few words, Jesus ends one thing and starts another. He moves the attention of the disciples from the

Passover meal towards an explanation of the last meal.

As Reformed Protestant Christians, we look at the Lord’s Supper with great reverence. Along with baptism, it is one of only two sacraments that we practice. The Sacraments should be of great importance to us. There are Scriptural commands for them and promises from God attached to them.

A sacrament is a testimony of God’s favor toward us and the church. It is a sign of an inward spiritual condition that is confirmed by a physical outward action. It signifies a spiritual and a personal relationship with Jesus, a relationship between the saved and the Savior.

We recognize that the sacrifice of the FIRST Passover lamb, as described in Exodus 12, focused not only on the preservation of the lives of their firstborn sons, but on the promise that they would possess a promised kingdom. In the same way, Jesus commended this SECOND Passover, not just as a memorial of His death on the cross, but as the promise of future heavenly kingdom FOR ALL that would believe in Him.

It is both supernatural and practical. On one hand God restores and frees His people of sin. And on the other hand, He gives us something very tangible in the bread and the cup to bring us back to the meaning of the cross.

Jesus knew we would need reminding because He experienced this with His own disciples. In many instances, the Gospels tell us that even though the disciples were witnesses to Jesus’ many miracles and direct one-on-one teaching, they were quick to misunderstand, disbelieve, and argue.

We are like the disciples in the sense that we are quick to forget and quick to fall back to our old ways. We need practices and reminders and disciplines to help keep us focused on Him. We need to be constantly reminded of what He did for us so we can remain anchored in the meaning of His death. And that’s what the Lord’s Supper, or Communion, does for us.

As sailors, my wife Vicki and I have sailed all over Hawaii and have ended up at anchor in some of the most beautiful places God has ever created: Hanalei Bay on Kauai, Honolua Bay on Maui, and Kaneohe Bay right here in front of our church.

We have sailed in some of Hawaii’s calmest leeward waters, and crossed its channels with seas as high as a house. The reason we sail is because we want to end up in idyllic anchorages. When we are sailing between islands, hour after hour in rough seas, we think a lot about being at anchor.

Arriving at sunset in these peaceful places reminds us of why we sail in the first place. It is not because we enjoy suffering through the all-day crossing, but because we understand the purpose of the crossing: to rest in the embrace of the creation made just for us. We remain anchored.

In Communion, we are reminded of the One who endured the suffering on our behalf, and of the purpose of that suffering, and we remember that His suffering resulted in the forgiveness of our sins. We rest in the embrace of assurance created by our loving Father.

There is something we need to remember. When we have blown it, Communion reminds us that we are forgiven.

**W**hen we wonder if God loves us, Communion reminds us that God sent Jesus because of that love. When we doubt the future, Communion is our hope.

But what is Communion? Are we simply taking part in a memorial service? Is it like a lantern floating ceremony where we remember those who have gone before us? Or is it a national holiday where we remember those who have fallen in service to our country?

It is some of each of those, but it is more. In Communion, we come together as the people who are forgiven in Christ and it should remind us that we have the power and the reason to show our forgiveness to others.

It is a bad thing when we forget that Jesus forgave our sins. It is doubly-bad knowing that Jesus has forgiven our sins, that He died on a cross for them—and then don't forgive others.

So we come to the Lord's Table as an expression of our faith and our commitment to follow Him, to enter into a deeper relationship with Him, and to symbolize that as a community we are one, together, in Christ.

This is not an act we *have* to do, but it is an act that we should *want* to do. Much like when we applaud the announcement for our tithes and offerings, in Communion there should be a part of us that it is anxious to come to the table, to share in the meal, and celebrate its importance in our spiritual and physical lives.

It was important to Buzz Aldrin, an Apollo 11 astronaut and Presbyterian elder, that in 1969 he took part in Communion while waiting to walk on the moon. Aldrin understood in his soul the message

of John 3:16, and knew deep inside that which would save the whole world. And Communion on the moon for him was a reminder that God was the Creator of all, and that He sent His Son to forgive us and save us.

The sacrament of Communion, in the context of our Reformed tradition, is that it is done as a sign and seal of eating and drinking in communion with the crucified and risen Lord. The bread and the cup do not supernaturally become Jesus, they are symbolic of Jesus and the sacrifice He made for us.

The cup represents His blood shed for our sins, and the bread, His body broken for us. In the Passover Meal, the cup taken after supper was known as the Cup of Redemption. And Jesus calls this cup "the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

Communion is a time when we remember this new covenant, and remember the promise that He will return again. In Communion, we call on the Holy Spirit to lift us into Christ's presence, to unite us with all the faithful in heaven and here on earth, and to empower us spiritually and keep us faithful as we are sent out into the world to do Christ's work.

As you approach the Lord's Supper this morning, it may be helpful to remember these three things help us focus on the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Think: **Community, Cross, Crown.**

First, look at ourselves in Community. When we come to the Lord's Table we should look within ourselves, and ask the Holy Spirit to show us any areas of our lives that may not be pleasing to God. Are there areas of anger or unforgiveness in your heart? Are there any issues at home, or school, or at

work, that need to be dealt with? God doesn't want us hanging on to our burdens, He has already dealt with them. So pray about how you can deal with those issues before you join the community of believers at the table.

Second, look back to the Cross. Communion speaks of intimacy and fellowship, and we need to look back to the cross to remember what Christ accomplished for us there, and be reminded of His immeasurable love for us. The cross represents where Jesus went for us, and looking back to that day is a good reminder of the price He paid to be close to us forever.

Third, look ahead to the Crown. Jesus promised He would come again and that we will spend an eternal future life with Him in heaven. 1 Corinthians 11:26 tells us: "*Do this until he comes again.*"

Jesus came as a sacrificial lamb the first time, but the next time He comes, He will come wearing the crown of a conquering King. Jesus' promise to us this morning, and each time we come to the Communion table, is that He will always love us, that He has forgiven us, and that He wants to spend all of eternity with us. Jesus calls us to the table. He calls all of us who are weary and restless, all who hunger and thirst, all who are heavy laden.

At the table this morning, remember what Jesus has already done. Let Jesus remind us, that like the native in the Robert De Niro movie, that He can sever the ties that bind us and set us free. Let Jesus be the One who sends the burdens of your life hurtling over the cliff and down to the river below.

He can do that for us, and we can come to His table to celebrate that Jesus is our Savior.