

**Lenten Midweek Worship—Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest, IL—March 18, 2020--Psalm 31:1-8; Matthew 26:20-29—Live streamed.**

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

This morning/evening many of us are longing to be in the company of friends, companions and sisters and brothers in the faith. Some of us feel a hunger to gather with our faith community around the Lord's table. And, likely most of us wonder when we will celebrate the Eucharist together again. In the midst, of our social distancing and staying at home and wondering what the next days and weeks will bring, we have this text, so familiar, of Jesus gathering with his friends, in troubled and uncertain times, to share a meal and have one more conversation.

"Surely not I, Lord?" "I don't think, I am the one, am I?" "Certainly, you can't be talking about me, can you?" The twelve disciples in turn ponder and ask.

In troubled and uncertain times, Matthew the gospel writer, knew well, and Matthew's first readers did, too: Even the most faithful can't be sure how they will act in troubled and uncertain times. They might unwittingly make mistakes, unintentionally or intentionally do harm to someone, and even do something that would be unthinkable in ordinary times. "Is it I who will betray you, Rabbi? Am I the one who will hand you over?" Finally, when it is Judas' turn to ask, Jesus replies, "You have said so."

Jesus might have expressed disappointment in the other disciples, too—three will soon fall asleep when asked to watch and pray with Jesus; one will outright deny knowing Jesus, three times; and all will vanish during Jesus’ most difficult and darkest hour on the cross.

Still it is this motley group with whom Jesus shares this simple, but special meal. Blessed bread. “Take eat, this is my body.” The cup over which Jesus gave thanks. “Drink from it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

Surely not for me, Lord? Surely not for the ones who make mistakes, Jesus? Surely not for those who do the unthinkable? Surely not for Judas, who had already arranged with the chief priests to hand Jesus over? Surely not? They all were at the table, given the bread, the body of Christ; they all were at the table, given the cup, the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Only in Matthew’s account of the last supper do we see the blood explicitly connected to forgiveness of sins. In the gospels of Mark and Luke and in Paul’s account in 1 Corinthians it is simply the blood of the new covenant or new testament.

My colleague Fred Niedner at Valparaiso University believes this is there in Matthew because Matthew links Jesus crucifixion with the Day of Atonement which we read about in the Hebrew Scriptures. I won’t go through all the details of Fred’s reasoning, but in the Atonement ritual, for example, two identical goats were brought forth. One was sent off into the wilderness never to be heard of again. The other goat was killed, and the blood of the slaughtered one was

splashed on the people for their forgiveness. In Matthew, we have two prisoners brought forth; one, Jesus Barabbas, is released, sent into the wilderness never to be heard of again. The other, Jesus Messiah, is slaughtered. Jesus Messiah's blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

The blood is poured out—not to appease an angry god—not to curse or punish the guilty—but to free the people from sin and guilt—because of God's wondrous love.

Maybe you know, I surely do, how sin and guilt can eat away at a person. Surely this forgiveness can't be for me, after what I have done? Jesus, surely you don't mean for me to be freed from guilt; look at what I failed to do. Surely, not for me.

This morning/evening we are not taking the bread into our hands. We are not drinking from the cup of wine. We are not even gathered in one place. Still, Jesus would have us be very sure that this forgiveness, this freedom, this life is for each of us and would have us drink deeply from the cup of forgiveness and would have God's wondrous love permeate our whole beings.

But it is not just for **us**, it is poured out for **many**, for all the people. We now have the privilege, the calling, to be, in this weary world, the tables around which sinners can gather, to be the cups from which others can drink of forgiveness and know that wondrous love of God.

Surely not I, Lord? Surely not at my age? Surely not now? How, you might ask, do we do that in this time of social distancing and protecting the most vulnerable and staying out of public places? I've been seeing, reading and hearing about how some people are doing just that. I have friends, a church musician and a pastor, who go on Facebook every evening for "Community Hymnal" to tell about a hymn, to sing and to pray with all who join in. I know a deacon in New York who goes shopping every day for those who should not go out in public. Pastor Lyle writes a daily devotion on his blog. People here cook for and deliver Grace Care meals (not just in time of national crisis but all year long). An artist who illustrates children's books has a "Noontime Doodle" online for children home from school or day care communicating that we are all connected. There are folks who are working extra hours to make meals available for others, health care workers who are generously giving of their time, pastors and musicians and others who are making worship and devotions available through the internet, people phoning and texting others to check in and visit, people praying for others who are ill or grieving or fearful or at risk, people being unusually kind and polite in grocery stores and pharmacies.

We may be apart or feel isolated, but we are not alone. We belong to each other. God is with us and in us in our acts of forgiveness, kindness, love for many, for all the people—until we can gather here again, until we can share our Lord's supper together, until...until we join in the great feast to come. What wondrous love, indeed!

In Jesus name. Amen.

Commented [ELW1]: