

Week 2

The Dinner Guests of God

By Lee Eclov



Text: [Matthew 26:17–30](#)

Topic: [How Communion affects us](#)

Big Idea: [Communion searches and strengthens our hearts.](#)

Illustration:

Mary Poplin, professor of education and Dean of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University, attended a Methodist church as a child, but began searching other spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, even telepathic attempts to bend spoons.

She began teaching at Claremont, where a Christian friend encouraged her spiritual journey. Eventually, in 1993, she became a Christian. In her own words, this was the last step:

In January, my mother wanted to go to North Carolina to where she had grown up. We went to this little Methodist church, not because she was religious; she just wanted to see her friends.

When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn't even an altar call. It was a communion call. The guy said, "You don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus Christ lived, that he died for your sins, and you have to want him in your life." And when he said that, I was so powerfully moved that I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion.

I took the communion, and I didn't even listen to the guy. I knelt down and said, "Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get

me.” And when I took the communion and I said that, I felt free. I felt like tons of things had been lifted off of me.

Communion—the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist—is a powerful experience. It is a meal that touches the soul. During this Lenten season we are having Communion each of the six Sundays. This morning, as we continue our study of Matthew 26, we look at the story that gives rise to our observance of the Lord’s Supper. This passage helps us see what makes Communion such a uniquely significant meal.

We’re invited to a meal made from God’s ancient recipes of redemption and release.

Jesus built Communion on the Passover: “On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?’ He replied, ‘Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, “The teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house”’ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover” (Matthew 26:17–19).

For 1,500 years, the Passover had been teaching God’s people the flavors of man’s great need and God’s great salvation. This sacred observance looks back to God’s deliverance of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt and the plague of death on all the firstborn in that land. It was a meal of strange recipes and flavors—salt water to remind people of the tears of slavery; bitter herbs, like horseradish, so people would remember the sour flavor of bondage; a fruit paste with cinnamon sticks to remind people of making bricks of clay and straw; a meal of lamb, remembering how a lamb was killed for every household and its blood sprinkled on the doorposts, signaling the angel of death to pass over; flat bread, made without yeast, to remind God’s people both that they are to be holy and ready to travel (such bread would travel well and wouldn’t spoil).

And then there were four cups of wine taken throughout the meal. The custom was drawn from four promises made by God to Israel in Exodus 6:6–7: “I will bring you out ... I will free you from being slaves ... I will redeem you ... I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.”

The Passover was so precious to Jesus because it gave his disciples a taste for the ways of God. It reminded people that sin is a life of bondage like Egypt had been, and that sin’s slavery is like making endless bricks from clay. It reminded them that death will pass over every house and our only protection lies not in our heritage or might, but in the blood of a sacrificial lamb. It reminded them that God is a redeeming God, buying people out of slavery; and that he is a liberating God, sending them out victoriously and safe toward a land flowing with milk-and-honey promises.

These truths about life and God actually acquired a taste in Israel. They learned their theology at a table. And Jesus now wanted to teach his disciples that the Passover was the appetizer for the feast of salvation he would bring. To this day, Communion is ever so much more precious to us when we realize that we taste the ancient recipes of God’s redemption and freedom.

Illustration:

I probably mention every year a column I read by Mary Schmich in the Chicago Tribune in the spring of 2000. She wrote, “I have seder envy. I’m stricken by this curious condition every year as my Jewish friends gather to eat and drink and tell the tale of the Jews’ liberation from slavery in Egypt ... [T]here’s something about Passover that makes me want to feel included.”

That’s the idea, of course, on a much more profound level that Mary Schmich realizes. Jesus brings his disciples to the Passover meal on the eve of his death so that their taste for salvation would be piqued.

We’re invited to a meal that exposes our hearts.

The story of this Passover feast is in Matthew 26: “When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, ‘I tell you truth, one of you will betray me.’ They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’ Jesus replied, ‘The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.’ Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, ‘Surely not I, Rabbi?’ Jesus answered, ‘Yes it is you.’”

It continues in verse 31: “Then Jesus told them, ‘This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

What a strange feast that drives one guest away, leaves all the others unsettled, and the host with a broken heart. Communion is not a safe meal. What happened on that solemn night usually happens when this meal is eaten.

At this meal, the pretender cannot hide from the Lord’s judgment. Jesus saw in Judas’s heart what no one else could see. He saw the heart of a betrayer and a liar. In 1 Corinthians 11:27–32, Paul issues the solemn warning that this is not a meal to be trifled with, to be taken in an unworthy manner, because it can literally kill you. That doesn’t mean that sinners cannot eat this meal—for it would be an empty table indeed! But it does mean that betrayers dare not dine here; that fakes and frauds eating this food eat poison.

When I was a teenager, Communion in our church posed a serious problem for me. I did not believe I was right with the Lord, and I heard the solemn warnings about partaking in an unworthy manner, but I went to a small country church and it was very hard to avoid Communion without everyone wondering what was going on. I remember to this day the agitation I felt, and how I landed on the idea of slipping out of the service a couple minutes before Communion, hoping people would think I felt the call of nature, and staying out till the trays had been passed. It was the call of my sinful nature at work! But I was right about the danger of this meal for the pretender.

At this meal, every disciple must invite the Lord’s examination. The stunning news that a betrayer was among them grieved the disciples greatly, but it has always been interesting to me that it also prompted them all to ask, “Surely not I, Lord?” Or as the NLT puts it, “I’m not the

one, am I, Lord?” It was a question to which they each expected Jesus to say, “No, of course not.” But apparently he never replied. And the fact was, that while only one there would betray Jesus, they would all forsake him. He eventually told them as much in verse 31: “This very night you will all fall away on account of me.”

John tells us that these disciples moved very quickly from their shocked question, “Surely not I, Lord,” to an argument about who of them was the greatest. There is a sense in which this meal is intended to bring out the worst in us—not to provoke bad behavior, but to reveal the worst about our fickle hearts. Nancy Mairs wrote, “I don’t partake because I’m a good Catholic, holy and pious and sleek. I partake because I’m a bad Catholic, riddled by doubt and anxiety and anger; fainting from severe hypoglycemia of the soul.”

Jesus’ own profound suffering began at this table among friends. This meal was terribly hard on Jesus. There are a couple of things in these verses we might miss:

First, in verse 23 Jesus said, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.” The point is that they had all dipped their bread in that bowl of fruit paste as that part of the meal had come. That’s what friends did. Jesus was saying, “My betrayer is one of my most intimate friends.”

The other thing lost on us was that Jesus was the host of this meal, and the absolute essential of that culture was that no one would speak ill against the host—let alone betray him!

I puzzled for a long time over why the betrayal by Judas was necessary in the plan of God. Jesus surely could have been arrested and crucified without a turncoat, had God planned it so. I have concluded that in order for Jesus to drink the full cup of human suffering, the betrayal of a dear and trusted friend was part of the deal. It was a heartache foreshadowed by David in Psalms 41:9: “Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.”

Do not forget that Jesus loved Judas. It was grief enough to be forsaken by all those he loved most, but to be betrayed by a dear friend, and to know that such a betrayal condemned that friend to fierce and eternal judgment—that surely hurt Christ beyond description.

Like you, I have read this account many times, but a few weeks ago what struck me most forcefully was the kind of people invited to this meal—the dinner guests of God—one who would betray and all the others who would forsake.

Illustration:

A few weeks ago I heard an interview on the radio with Sister Helen Prejean, made famous in the movie *Dead Man Walking*, about her work with a condemned murderer. She has a new book that deals with the execution of men she believes were innocent. One was a man named Dobie Williams, a mildly retarded man convicted of murder and condemned to death. Dobie had become a Christian in prison. She explained an unusual custom in that Louisiana penitentiary:

Warden Burl Cain is a born again Christian who believes that in capital punishment he is basically sending people on to God. He makes sure they have spiritual advisors and really