

Sermon Notes for 2/17/16 (Midweek Lent 2)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: Luke 22:14-34
Theme: A DIVIDED GROUP, A UNITING CUP
Hymn: LBW 215 (O Lord, We Praise You)

The Point: Whereas the Twelve proved to be divided, fickle and unreliable, Jesus demonstrated His faithfulness to them by means of a gift intended to forgive, to renew and to unite.

Introduction: This picture of the Twelve on the very night of Jesus' betrayal is not flattering, is it? Here this little band gathers with Jesus at a Passover meal, the most sacred and solemn of the celebrations of the Jewish calendar. They gather as a family at this meal, the last one Jesus will share with them during His earthly sojourn. And, just like some of our family celebrations, things fall apart! It is not a pretty picture.

First, the disciples hear Jesus' prediction of His betrayal by one of their number. Immediately they begin to question how this could ever be and who among them could possibly be responsible for such treachery. One can imagine Judas, as this conversation begins to take place, putting forth denials just as stout and resolute as the rest of them. We can even imagine some of them questioning Jesus' own stability. What would possibly cause Him to question their loyalty, after all that they had gone through for Him?

Then Luke tells us that a dispute arose among them about who was considered to be greatest. I wonder whether Judas was the one who led the conversation into that dead end, at least in part to deflect further speculation about the identity of the traitor. And then, within the space of tonight's assigned reading (only some 21 verses) we also have Jesus predicting His denial by Peter. I wonder how many of the group associated this prediction with the earlier prediction of a betrayer in their midst. Judas may have been happy to have Jesus finger Peter at this point – and perhaps breathed a little more easily as the focus of the group turned to the spokesman of the company. It's always comforting to have someone else's misdeeds overcome interest in your own.

No, this is hardly an ideal portrait of our fathers in the faith. Not ideal, indeed. But it is very real, isn't it? They proved themselves divided, fickle and unreliable, especially when it came to dealing with the most severe crises. Suspicious of one another, uncertain of the very words of the Savior, boastful and selfish, the disciples gave evidence of their lack of faith and trust in the Father.

We can easily see ourselves in the actions and words of the Twelve. We have often been fickle, willing enough to pledge our faithfulness to our Lord within these walls, but uncertain and hesitant about claiming Jesus as Lord among those whom we perceive as being our enemies. It is so easy for us to fall into the trap of accusing our brothers and sisters in the faith of unfaithfulness in ways that speak more of our own deceitful hearts than of theirs. When we have faced the conflict between following Christ's call versus going along with the world's easy way, we have been inclined to let the Savior's words be put on the back burner. Our desire to be the best, the first, the greatest, the smartest, the most decorated has alienated us from our Lord and His self-giving ways.

So how does Jesus respond? That is really the heart of the matter in Luke's writing, isn't it? Does He become angry and seek to get revenge on those who have proven unfaithful to Him? Does He castigate or publicly humiliate the ones who are about to fall into serious sin and blame all of them for their willingness (in just a few hours) to abandon Him to His enemies? Does He write them off and start over with a new and different group, hoping they will do a little better when it comes to crunch time? Does He invite the enemies of the Twelve to wreak vengeance on them while He sits back and watches with glee? You know He does not!

Instead, He seeks to strengthen each of them as they are about to face situations that they will be ill-equipped to deal with in their own ability. He deals graciously with Peter: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” How grateful Peter would be for these prayerful assurances in the days and weeks following his denial of the Lord! Jesus knew that Peter’s flesh would fail him – but He prayed that his faith would not! He does not exclude Judas from this final meal, but He shares a dipping bowl with him and lovingly invites him to consider what he is about to do.

In addition, Jesus models for the Twelve the servant life to which He calls them. “The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” He came among them (and among us!), not as one who rules and dominates from the head of the table, but as one who serves. He showed it that very night when He washed the disciples’ feet, a job none of them even thought to do. He showed it when He stood under the beating and the mockery and the accusations and the walk with a cross down Jerusalem’s busy streets. He showed His servant spirit as He prayed for those who hammered the nails through His flesh and as He hung from the cross always thinking of those around Him – and of you and me – and thus refusing to save Himself, as people tried to taunt Him into doing.

He takes bread and wine at this Passover meal and makes it something powerful and uniting. They would taste that night, as we taste at His table continually, of the very body and blood that He willingly offered into death for us. They all ate of the same loaf and drank from the same cup – the betrayer, the denier, and those who would abandon Him. And after His resurrection, that meal became the very center of their worship life. For in it the Savior fulfilled (and continues to fulfill) His promise to be with us always, even to the end of the ages. In that meal, we get to taste just what we need, the full and free forgiveness of a Savior who loves even those who are divided and undependable. And in that uniting meal, we find something more – a unity between us and all who trust in Jesus’ name for salvation.

Conclusion: Whereas the Twelve proved to be divided, fickle and unreliable, Jesus demonstrated His faithfulness to them by means of a saving, powerful gift intended to forgive, to renew and to unite. Even a badly divided group was able to gain new purpose, new direction, and new hope from the uniting cup that they shared – the same meal that has been pledged to us down through all the generations. May we rejoice in the gifts of the Savior that we share with one another, so that we may work together in unity and joy and thanksgiving so that all people may come to know this Jesus and His redeeming love. AMEN!