

THE LAST SUPPER

(Mark 14:17-25)

The story of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection is the climax of the gospel storytelling tradition. It is a story about the making and breaking of covenants between persons, between Jesus and God, and between God and humanity. The story of the last supper invites the listeners to experience Jesus' last meal intimately. In the context of his awareness and announcement of imminent betrayal by one of his disciples, Jesus makes covenant with them. The story sets all covenants, human and divine, in the context of God's covenant with us in Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Story

And when it was evening he came with the twelve.
And as they were reclining and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me."
They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?"

He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread in the same dish with me. For the Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!
It would have been better for that man if he had not been born. "

And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take.
This is my body."

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

Learning the Story

Verbal Threads

"The twelve." Both episodes of the betrayal prophecy have this phrase: "He came with the twelve"/"one of the twelve" (vss. 17,20). It is Jesus' name for those who were his disciples and closest friends.

"As they were reclining and eating." The two stories of the supper – the betrayal and the interpretation of the bread and wine – are connected by this introductory phrase (vss. 18,22). Jesus' prophecy of the betrayal is introduced by the phrase literally translated "as they were reclining and eating," while the setting for the supper has the abbreviated form of the verbal thread, "as they were ... eating."

"One of." A typical verbal thread is formed by the introduction of this phrase, "one of you" (vs. 18), which is combined with the opening thread "the twelve" (vs. 17) to form the phrase which names the scandal that Jesus is betrayed by one so intimate, by "one of the twelve" (vs. 20).

"That man." The only other verbal connection in the prophecy of the betrayal is "that man," which describes the betrayer (vs. 21 a, b). The phrase expresses the distance and alienation from Jesus that Judas' betrayal has caused.

"Took...he gave it to them...and said... 'This is my.' " This extensive verbal thread is the verbal tie between the two episodes of the supper story (vss. 22-23). It is also the climactic conclusion of the motif of Jesus' blessing at sacramental meals that was established in the two earlier stories of the feedings in the wilderness (Mark 6:41; 8:6).

This is one of the simplest stories in the gospel tradition in its form and structure. There are no real changes in the scene or developments of the plot. The two parts of the supper story deal with the betrayal of the covenant between Jesus and his disciples and the establishment of covenant between them in his gift of the bread and the wine. Each part has two episodes that develop the theme first of the betrayal and then of the bread and wine.

Listening to the Story

Nowhere else in the gospel narrative does a prophecy follow the first steps of its fulfillment. Just prior to the story of the preparations for Passover, Mark has reported Judas' trip to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus (14:10-11). The verbal threads--"betray" ("hand over") (vss. 10-11, 18, 21) and especially "one of the twelve" (vss. 10, 20)--make the connection between this betrayer and Judas unmistakable for the listener. The context of Jesus' prophecy is the time of greatest intimacy in the entire religious year, the Passover meal.

Mark graphically delineates this context by drawing out a series of highly emotional associations with earlier memories from the story. "When it was evening" is associated in the earlier narrative with times of fellowship and retreat for Jesus and the disciples (the boat trip, 4:35; the trip out to Bethany, 11:11).

"The twelve" were Jesus' disciples, the students whom he had taught in his traveling seminary. All of the memories of the events they had shared are caught up in this term. The particular character of their relationship is concretized in the story of the Passover preparations that precedes the betrayal prophecy (14:12-16). The agreement between disciples and rabbis was that the rabbi would teach them in exchange for help in the provision of his basic needs. The disciples were, therefore, acting appropriately when they asked Jesus where they should prepare the Passover meal for him. All of the warmth and commitment of their relationship is present in the disciples' preparation of the Passover meal for their rabbi. The setting creates the anticipation of an evening of intimate fellowship and festive celebration in eating the Passover meal together.

This setting is reinforced by the description of the meal itself: "as they were reclining and eating" (vs. 18). Reclining to eat was normal in Jesus' day. But Mark only uses the word *anakeimai* ("to recline") one other time, in his description of Herod's guests at the birthday party when Herod had John beheaded (6:26). In both instances, the image of reclining draws a picture of a festive banquet, at which violence and betrayal become the main event. Thus, Mark establishes an atmosphere of convivial good cheer as the context for Jesus' prophecy of betrayal by one of the twelve.

Jesus announces the prophecy twice. In both statements, the betrayer is named in two ways: first, in terms of the covenant of rabbi and disciple, and, second, in terms of the

covenant of table fellowship: "one of you" / "one of the twelve," "one who is eating with me" / "one who is dipping bread in the same dish with me." The description of these covenants is a crescendo of scandal. The degree of offense is hard for contemporary storytellers to feel. First, it was virtually unthinkable for a disciple to betray the covenant with his rabbi. It is like a soldier shooting his commanding officer in the back during battle.

But the greatest emphasis is given to Judas' betrayal of the covenant of table fellowship. This covenant was supremely sacred in the ancient Near East. A person would do almost anything to avoid violating that covenant. The centrality of that covenant is reflected in a number of stories in Genesis and Judges. The connection between making covenants and sharing table fellowship is evident in the stories of Isaac's covenant with Abimelech (Gen. 26:28-30) and Jacob's covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:43-54). The most graphic stories of the violation of the covenant are the two stories of assault on a visiting guest: (1) the attack by the men of Sodom on the angels who were visiting the city and had been welcomed into Lot's house (Gen. 19:1-11), and (2) the rape and murder by men from the tribe of Benjamin of an Israelite woman, a concubine who with her husband was a guest in the town of Gibeah (Judg. 19). In both instances, the punishment for their outrageous crimes was extreme. Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone and all of Israel attacked the tribe of Benjamin and killed thousands of Benjaminite men (Judg. 20). The tribe of Benjamin never fully recovered from this disaster.

In both instances, the men who had welcomed the guests appealed to the laws of hospitality and table fellowship (Gen. 19:8; Judg. 19:23). In the world of biblical narrative, the horror and revulsion that the stories of these crimes elicit is appropriately associated with violations of the covenant of hospitality and table fellowship. The memory of these most despicable crimes in the history of Israel is an appropriate connection with Judas' betrayal. Jesus' response is to recognize the horrible judgment that the betrayer's crime would bring upon him, a judgment not unlike that which fell on Sodom and the Benjaminites. The pronouncement of "woe" is an ancient prophetic tradition of sharing beforehand the fate of one who is going to endure great suffering (e.g., I Kings 13:20-32). The spirit of Jesus' words is not then to condemn Judas but is rather to recognize and to share his impending suffering. Jesus contrasts his own coming death in fulfillment of the will of God with Judas' coming disaster in violation of God's will.

The audience can judge, therefore, that Judas' action was not divinely determined and that he stands under divine judgment. The story appeals for a high degree of sympathy with Jesus in his grief. And because of the story's structure, the listeners can confirm that Jesus' prophecy is true.

This prophecy of betrayal is the immediate context for Jesus' reinterpretation of the bread and wine of the Passover meal as his body and blood. Jesus' response to this violation of covenant is to make a new covenant with his disciples including, by implication, even the betrayer. The expected response to the violation of covenant is reflected in the Judges story: outrage and punishment. Jesus' response is radically different.

The warmth and fellowship of the meal is reestablished in the introduction of the setting, "as they were... eating." The distribution of the bread has an extensive verbal connection with the earlier feeding stories in Mark:

- The feeding of the five thousand – "*And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people*" (6:41).

- The feeding of the four thousand – *"And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people"* (8:6).
- The Last Supper – *"He took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them"* (14:22).

In each of these earlier feedings stories, Mark has developed the motif of disciples' misunderstanding of the loaves (e.g., see 6:52 and especially 8:17-21). The culmination of this motif in the plot is Jesus' speech as a highly frustrated teacher whose students don't understand:

And being aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)

It is important for prospective storytellers to recognize the function of this speech in Mark's narrative. Not only do the disciples not understand, the information is not given in the story that would enable the listeners to understand either. The puzzle of the meaning of the loaves remains throughout the narrative until this moment in the story. It is a classic mystery story technique. Jesus' words – "Take; this is my body"-are the solution to the mystery of the loaves. The bread that was miraculously multiplied was and is Jesus' body. Jesus had given himself to the crowds and to the disciples.

The second episode of the supper is Jesus' reinterpretation of the Passover wine and his vow of abstinence from wine. The only major verbal link with earlier motifs in Mark's Gospel is the introductory formula. Jesus' reinterpretation of the meaning of the Passover wine has one major link to the tradition of Israel. In the story of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel at Sinai, the covenant is sealed by the sprinkling of the blood of the oxen on the people: "And Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words'" (Exod. 24:8). Thus, Jesus links the wine with his blood and with the blood of the Mosaic covenant. By analogy, therefore, Jesus is a human sacrifice whose death seals the new covenant, just as the sacrifice of oxen sealed the covenant in the Exodus story.

The climax of the story is Jesus' vow of abstinence from wine until the coming of the kingdom. The background of such vows in Israel can be seen in the story of Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba. When Bathsheba became pregnant after David took her, Uriah was called back from the battlefields for a leave during which he would presumably sleep with her and cover David's tracks. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house. When David asked him about this, Uriah said:

The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing. (II Sam. 11:11)

Uriah's refusal is an expression of his faithfulness to the vow of abstinence taken by soldiers consecrated for war (see also I Sam. 21:4-5). Thus, at the end of the meal, Jesus takes a vow of abstinence as a consecration of himself for his struggle. The vow of abstinence from wine is a Nazirite vow which has a long and rich tradition in Israel (Num. 6:1-4; Judg. 13:4-5; I Sam. 1:11; Amos 2:11-12).

The dynamics of this story are to be found in the depths of the most solemn covenant traditions of Israel. This last supper is a time of solemn vows. This new covenant is made in the context of Jesus' recognition of the betrayal of the covenant by one of his disciples. Knowing that one of the twelve is betraying him, Jesus makes covenant with them. Ordinarily, a betrayer is to be exposed and expelled. But Jesus protects his betrayer's identity and makes covenant with him as well as the others. Jesus gives himself even for the trusted one who has made himself Jesus' enemy. The impact of this story lies in the unspoken depths of its passion. To a unique degree, its meaning is known in the slow intensity of the words and the silences that plumb the depths of God's covenant.

Connections

The appropriate telling of this story is simple and direct. Our connection to the dynamics of the story is our experiences of making and breaking covenants. But the words of Jesus are difficult. How can we appropriately render Jesus' words in this story? It is the intimidating nature of this question that has led to monotone recitals in which the words of Jesus sound like a computer or a robot. The chant of the ancient tradition is one solution. But chanting is a strange and alien modality for the dominant cultures of the Western world. If, therefore, Jesus' words are to be experienced as those of a human being, they must in some sense express human emotions.

The connection with the prophecy of the betrayal is the experience of being let down or hurt by someone whom you have loved and trusted. Therefore, your deepest experiences of betrayal are your link with this story. Remembering and retelling those stories can provide a context for telling Jesus' story and for rethinking your own experience. If you have a partner, I would suggest that you do that. When has someone whom you loved and trusted broken covenant with you? Tell that story and then tell the story of Jesus' last supper. Also when have you broken a covenant that you made with someone who loved and trusted you? Listening to the story in this context may shed new light on both sides of your covenantal relationships.

There are many other potential connections with the last supper story: good-byes, last holidays together, festive mealtimes. But the primary connection is with the times of making covenant: marriages, baptisms, ordinations, installations, inaugurations, and the swearing of oaths in court. What are your primary memories of making covenant? Those occasions at their deepest level are the most direct link to the dynamics of the supper narrative.

Few words are spoken in making covenants. At these times, words do something rather than just convey a meaning. Paying attention to what these covenant words do links us with what matters in Jesus' story and in our own. Experiencing our covenants in the context of God's covenant with us in Christ puts our covenants in good light.

Telling the Story

The sharing of this story is an opportunity to invite persons into a new relationship: with God, with others, and with themselves. In the Christian community, the primary occasion when we tell this story is the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Unfortunately, our celebrations of the sacrament are often so distant in their remembrance of the story and in their connection with our covenants that they become meaningless. The Eucharist as a time of covenant renewal is often remote or absent. And the story is often buried in the liturgical formulae.

Is there an approach to Eucharist that grows out of the storytelling tradition? I offer here a few suggestions. The story of the supper in the Gospels is always associated with the breaking of covenant. The story invites us then to bring those experiences of the breaking of covenant to the celebration of covenant making. The covenants have two dimensions: first, covenants between God and us, and, second, our covenants with other persons.

The impact of Jesus' gift of himself is tied to the realization that I might be the betrayer. The story thus invites us to bring to the sacrament our own examined memories of those times and manners in which we have broken covenant with God. Preparation for receiving communion has always included some rite of penance. In the liturgy of the Episcopal/Methodist tradition, this was expressed in the prayer of humble access. In current ecumenical liturgies, communion is immediately preceded by the recital of the centurion's word: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." But these words are most meaningful if they express some awareness of the current condition of my covenant with God.

In what ways have you broken covenant with God? That may mean ceasing to believe or trust in God's power or faithfulness. It might be related to dissociating from God and establishing greater distance. Or it may mean being angry with God for asking you to be faithful through suffering and death.

I find that the feeling also is present sometimes that God has broken covenant with me. For example, when sudden suffering or an unexpected death occurs, it feels as if God is not keeping God's promises. Examining this apparent breach of covenant makes it clear that the covenant God has broken was one I developed. The contract was that I would do certain "religious" things with the assumption that God would do certain things for me, such as protecting me and those I love from sudden suffering or unexpected death. If I am afflicted or grieved, the feeling is that God has forsaken me and is not being faithful to the covenant between us. Granted, this may not be a covenant God either proposed or entered into, at least as I have defined it. Nevertheless, those feelings are present and are connected in some way with this story. Such aspects of our covenant with God can be shared with God or with another person prior to the covenant meal.

The covenant meal also recalls to us our broken covenants with those who have loved and trusted us. In what ways have you broken covenant with those who have loved and trusted you? In some way, either in prayer or in dialogue with a minister or priest or a spiritual companion, it is appropriate to acknowledge our own fracturing of covenants. The sharing of the peace prior to the receiving of the sacred meal is an opportunity for reconciliation of our covenants that have either been fractured or just stressed. But, regardless of the ways, the gift of the story of the last supper is most fully received in the context of these relationships.

Therefore, the sacrament and the telling of these holy tales have the same function. They are the means by which God is present with us. The words of the story and the actions of the sacrament mutually reinforce and strengthen each other. The gifts of God are uniquely present in these simple means of grace.

Storytelling and Religious Education

While Jesus' last supper is the most frequently remembered narrative in the Christian community, few Christians actually learn to tell the actual story. In fact, children and adults are seldom taught to tell any of the biblical stories. There are values inherent in the biblical storytelling tradition that can strengthen the Church's educational work.

The basic model of a storytelling process in education is simple. Children hear the stories from adults, first their parents and grandparents and then other significant adults in the family or community. They learn the stories from repetition and study. As they grow up, the children are encouraged and rewarded for developing their own abilities to tell the stories. When they become adults, they tell the stories to their children as well as to others in the community.

Biblical storytelling is, therefore, a foundational process in religious education at all levels. The reason is that biblical storytelling is a primary language of faith. In the process of mastering this language, both the individual and the community are formed. Learning to tell biblical stories is good for the growing of healthy persons and communities.

Rather than outlining a programmatic model, I want to describe some of the values of approaching the gospel as storytelling in education. A pedagogy based on the values of storytelling can give life to Christian education at all levels.

The Intimacy of the Spoken Word

When the stories are told by adults who love them, the sound of the stories creates resonance, "vibes," between adults and children. Rather than the distant analysis of printed texts, storytelling, when done well, is alive and vibrant. The love of God, for example, is then understood by the nuances of meaning that are communicated through the voice.

The Nurture of Memory

The elimination of memorization in religious education or the restriction of memorization to individual verses of Scripture or answers to catechetical questions impoverishes the tradition. We recognize how traumatic the loss of memory is for a person with Alzheimer's disease. But, as a religious community, we have so minimized the nurture of our communal memory that the Church suffers from a kind of amnesia, with all its symptoms: disorientation, insecurity, immobilization and inability to act, and a lack of confidence.

The deepest effect of minimizing memorization of the tradition is on internalization. When the stories of the Gospels are no longer known "by heart," the knowledge of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is superficial and relatively unimportant. The stories are associated with concepts but are dissociated from feelings and the resonances of primary experience. They are inadequately interiorized. Poets, dramatists, and musicians who live in the world of sound know that only those traditions that have been deeply internalized can be understood and performed well.

The effect of this elimination can be seen in the graduates of the Church's educational system. The graduates of our programs are often familiar with a wide range of knowledge, but know little in depth. A recovery of storytelling as a means for the internalization of the principal Christian traditions would help to minimize this problem. The elimination of aural memory from the pedagogical process in most mainline Protestant churches may help to explain the decline of the educational programs of those churches. Catholics, who have only in recent years begun to emphasize biblical study in religious education for both children and adults, would do well to learn from the Protestant experience.

Community Formation

Storytelling is a potential source of renewal for the two basic educational communities of the Church: the family and the congregation. In both communities, the loss of a deeply internalized and broadly based communal memory grounded in the stories of the actions of God has been a source of weakness.

The family has been the primary center of education throughout the history of Israel and the Church. In Israel and the early Church, parents were expected to tell the stories to their children. In Protestantism, families gathered for the weekly or daily reading of the Scriptures. For Catholics, the family rosary with its fifteen mysteries or meditations on events in Christ's life passed on the memory of those events. The role of parents in religious education has always been closely connected with some form of biblical recital or prayer. This has involved reading or telling the narratives of the Scriptures or leading the family in prayer and meditation on the events of Jesus' life. But, with the decline of oral recitation, the role of the family and parents in the educational process has declined.

An important step in the revitalization of religious education may be, therefore, to enable parents to learn and tell the stories to their children. The most natural time for this training is prior to the birth and baptism of their children. I would suggest that a constituent part of the preparation for parents who want to have their children baptized might be a period of training and education in storytelling.

One of the values of such training is to prepare women and men for the crises of parenting. I remember one night when my eight-year-old was unable to settle down because of a recurring nightmare about a ghost. It was near Halloween and ghosts were in the air. In response to his cried "Dad, I can't go to sleep! I'm scared!" – I first tried to lighten the atmosphere: "Come on. You know that ghosts don't exist. They are only imaginary. Just say 'Hi' or imagine that it is like Casper." After a little while, he said, "I tried that. I'm still scared." When the lightening-the-atmosphere approach didn't work, I tried threats: "If you don't settle down in three minutes..." "You can imagine how effective that was."

I then went upstairs and told him the story of Jesus walking on the water, how in the middle of the night the disciples saw him walking on the water and cried out, "It's a ghost." And how Jesus said, "Be not afraid. I am." (This was during the era of "Happy Days" and the Fonz; so I did a sort of Fonzie interpretation of Jesus' words, with my thumbs up: "Hey, don't be afraid. I am in charge." That cracked him up.) I told him how Jesus got into the boat and that, suddenly, there was a great calm. And how Jesus had said, "O men of little faith, why were you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Apparently my son could accept virtually the same words I had said earlier when they came from Jesus in the story.) After I finished the story, he sighed a big sigh, as if a big load had been taken off his shoulders, and said, "Thanks, Dad." And after a hug, he rolled over and went fast asleep.

In addition to telling the stories, parents also need to enable their children to learn to tell the stories themselves. This will in part be the natural result of frequent tellings. One of my earliest memories is learning to recite "'Twas the Night before Christmas" when I was four years old. I required my mother to read it to me over and over again. And through sheer repetition, I was soon able at the age of three or four to astound my Aunt Mary by reciting the whole thing. I used to tell this story with pride. I now know that many Hasidic children have learned the entire books of Genesis and Exodus in Hebrew by the time they are four. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this early experience has been a source of my interest in storytelling.

What my mother and aunt did was in direct continuity with the basic principles of Suzuki education. This pedagogical genius has taught young children from all over the world to play the violin with a degree of facility that is truly incredible. The principle is simple.

Children are rewarded by praise at every stage of learning to play the violin. And the parents are required to be involved with the entire process of their child's learning. But their most important job is to provide positive reinforcement.

Suzuki developed the basic principles of his method by observing how Japanese children accomplish a remarkable learning task by the age of four: they have all learned to speak Japanese. He observed that the way parents teach their children to speak Japanese is by constant positive reinforcement. A child says "Mama" (or its Japanese equivalent), and the mother responds happily with big smiles, hugs, and as soon as father comes home, a command performance. And if the child says it again, there will be more smiles, hugs, and celebrations from the father.

A Suzuki recital is a wonder and a joy to behold. One child, who has just begun the program, steps up and bows—that's all, just a bow. And everyone applauds. Another steps up, puts the violin under her chin in the correct position and places the bow on the strings; then she bows. And everyone applauds. Each child performs at the level he or she has mastered, from the most simple to the most complex. And everyone applauds! This basic process is continued at all stages. Corrections of notes and technique are made by the teachers along the way. But corrections are always made in the context of affirmation and positive reinforcement.

The same process works with all ages of persons who are learning to tell biblical stories. Begin with small efforts, such as having them tell a story from personal experience. Next, teach them a short biblical story and have them tell it to another person, perhaps with puppets or clay or a picture. Have them learn another story, somewhat longer, and tell it to a group of four. And after some time, the students will be able to tell long stories with real skill and confidence, either in congregational worship or in storytelling occasions of various kinds, such as visits to hospitalized church members.

Every time a story is told becomes a sacramental occasion. It is a sign of the presence of God in the midst of the community. But those signs are of particular delight and joy when the storytellers are persons who are not normally expected to tell stories. Storytelling is the language of the people. Each person's gift to the storytelling tradition is distinctive and precious. And the celebration of those gifts in the life of the family and the community is a joyful thing. It is a source of covenant renewal.