

Comfort Food and Christ

Mark: *The Gospel of the Kingdom*

Mark 14:12-25

October 22, 2017

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We welcome you here to Columbia Presbyterian Church. And for those of you who are new, my name is John Song. I am the Pastor of Youth Ministries here at CPC. And first off I'd like to extend my gracious thanks to everyone who made last week's ordination so special and memorable. Thank you for all coming out. It's the end of an eight year long journey for me. Many have asked how did you wind up getting here? I actually was a band teacher in Howard County, where I taught music with a last name 'Song,' which was to the delight of many of my students. But as I left my position there and went off to seminary, to serving at my father's church, to being here, it's been about eight years of the testimony of the Lord's faithfulness. So, Pastor, what are you going to do now? In many ways feel like the dog that has finally caught up to the fire truck and I don't know what I'm going to do, but just preach the Gospel and try and go the best I can. So I covet all of your prayers as we all journey and stumble together on this walk, And we're walking in God's grace.

So thank you for the opportunity and the privilege to serve here this morning bringing the Word of God. Let's dive right into the text today. Now, if you're a regular attender here at the church, you may notice that we have the Lord's Supper out here today again. And for you Type A personalities in the room you'll know that we only celebrate the Lord's Supper during the third Sunday together and then the first Sunday in the evening service. Now you may be freaking out a little bit here if you are used to routine and schedule and any disruption kind of drives you a little bit—aargh! But your calendar hasn't gone wrong, nor is this *deja vu* all over again. Rather, the text of Scripture that we are preaching on this Sunday leads us straight to the Lord's table. And so the pastoral staff and the elders agreed that it would be kind of remiss if we didn't celebrate the Lord's Supper here while we're talking about the Lord's Supper.

You can open up your Bibles to Mark Chapter 14, Mark 14:12-25, together. As you're turning your Bibles there, there's a lot of ground to cover today as we talk about the Lord's Supper. And there's more ground, in fact, that we can cover, so I'm going to commend one book to you, for those of you who like to read one or discover more. It's called *Spreading the Feast* by Howard Griffith. This is a great book and excellent meditations on so much that we can't cover here today as we're talking about the Lord's Supper. That would be my one recommendation to you. So Mark 14:12-25.

¹² And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" ¹³ And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, ¹⁴ and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' ¹⁵ And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." ¹⁶ And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷ And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸ And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." ¹⁹ They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" ²⁰ He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. ²¹ 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."

²² And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." ²³ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. ²⁴ And he said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Let's pray together. Father, in an age where we long to find you, forgive us for trying to find in clever devices made by men, in our pleasure places that do not satisfy, and in our cheapening of you through worshipping creation rather than the creator. Father, we ask instead that we yearn for the simplicity of where you've commanded us to find you. Here amongst your people, amongst hearing your word, and participating in simple things like the Lord's table—this sacrament which points us to your Son, Jesus Christ, and his work on the cross for our salvation. We ask that this feast that we are about to have would lead us to him. In the name of Jesus we pray all these things. Amen.

Growing up as a second generation Korean American, I often woke up on my birthday with an unexpected meal for my mother. You see, she would make me this soup made out of seaweed and brisket, which, you know, as I first describe it doesn't sound quite all that appetizing, but I've grown to love that soup. You see, Korean mothers would give it to their children on their birthdays, because it was often the first meal that the moms would eat after giving birth to help with recovery. And giving the soup to the child was to show the child the mother's sacrifice of bringing the child into the world and celebrating another year of that child living and growing in maturity and love. It's really great soup. It's got this warm, silky texture and the meat is perfectly soft and chewy. And it just warms your heart and just wakes you up better than any cup of coffee ever could. It's great. That soup means it's birthday to me as I have it.

And for you, you might have your own food item of choice that reminds you of something special, something memorable. Comfort food is an incredibly powerful thing. I mean there's proof of this in this number—even the season that we're in right now. 478 million pounds of pumpkin, right, in 2014. That is the number that the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that was consumed in the United States alone. 478 million pounds of pumpkin pies, pumpkin cookies, pumpkin bagels. But strangely enough, prior to 2014, no pumpkin and pumpkin spice lattes at Starbucks. They didn't have any, right? Interesting. 478 million pounds of this orangey, goopy stuff that's produced for the sake of our collective taste buds, mostly eaten in the month of October. Why? There's something about comfort food. There's something about comfort food.

So we associate certain foods with certain seasons and experiences. It's really a tale as old as time. Every culture, society, family has some sort of tradition with comfort food. Some of you

associate road trips with Cracker Barrel, others with Waffle House. Some of you can't think of any eating anything else but turkey on Thanksgiving, while others shudder at the thought of eating fruitcake at Christmas. Right? Hot chocolate in the winter, cool iced tea in the summer. Cakes at weddings, hot dogs at a baseball game. These are all foods that remind us of something special. I'm making you hungry, right? This sermon won't go long so you can enjoy a longer lunch.

So as we understand as a culture and society to take time to prepare for these feasts. We notice that as we prepare for these moments where we come together, preparation is a huge deal for these events. I mean, ever notice that Christmas is getting a little earlier and earlier each year. Or that Thanksgiving is now just going back and backward because we're prepared for all these different feasts. I think it so much comes from the realization that important meals take a kind of preparation. Comfort food isn't made comfortably; it comes at a cost and expense of the one who prepares the meal for us.

In our text today Jesus is approaching the cross. And as he does so he wishes to share one last meal with his disciples as a part of the season that Israel was experiencing—their version of Thanksgiving. It was called the Passover feast, as Anthony just wonderfully shared. It was a feast for each family that became a staple holiday for the Jewish people. It was a feast of this meal that marked their deliverance from the hands of slavery from Pharaoh in Egypt, the remembering of the promise that God was faithful to deliver them.

Now Jesus himself knew the Jewish law and the custom to celebrate Passover. And as Jesus wanted to keep and fulfill the law, he knew that he needed a place for his disciples and his followers to share in this meal together. But there was a problem. Jesus is now a little bit too famous for his own good. He's a wanted man at this point in the story of Mark, and he needed to conduct this feast in a way that wasn't going to draw attention to him publicly. So he tells his disciples to look for a man carrying a water jug, which would have been a strange sight at that time, as it was typically and in that culturally only women who carried water jugs. Men carried wine skins to carry around wine and water. And that was supposed to be a sign, sort of a kind of a secret code, that this man was in on Jesus's plan. This man was going to make secret arrangements for them to be placed in a large upper room, big enough for the disciples and the followers of Christ to reside for this meal. Jesus even tells the disciples that there is this password phrase that [they need] to give to this man so that they know they can trust to be able to share this meal with them. This is high levels of security and high level levels of preparation.

Now why is Jesus taking the pains to prepare this meal in this way? Well, for one, this wasn't just going to be any regular Passover that he was about to share with his disciples. Jesus was about to institute a brand new meal for them, one that would carry on the mysteries of Passover into a brand new feast.

But first let's talk a little bit about the Passover feast that Jesus and the disciples are taking and the preparation of this feast. To us, we really don't think too much—if you've grown up in the church you don't really think about Passover too much, do you. Chances are you've never celebrated a Passover before, unless maybe you've gone to a 'Jews for Jesus Seminar' and they've done that whole presentation in front of you. To you, the most Passover has probably

ever meant to you growing up was just a day off school, if you went to the public school system. Or if you have a Jewish friend, Passover was a time where you would notice that they ate these very small pieces of bread. Maybe they had to have some ornate dishes on the table. You were probably wondering—as I was early on in my faith—what is, why is this such a big deal for the Jews?

For them the Passover was more than comfort food and an interesting dietary plan. It was a huge celebration of a reminder of Israel's history and their past. It was a retelling of the story of God's faithfulness. It was their retelling of their gospel. The whole house would be prepared exactly to how the Jewish law demanded, which included things like—this is true—cleaning the house of all the yeast. All yeast anywhere, it had to be cleaned, right? And then the cleanliness had to be checked by the head of the house. For many Jews it required travel to get back to Jerusalem, where they were supposed to lawfully celebrate the Passover. They had to purchase a lamb. They had to have that lamb approved at the forecourt of the temple, sort of like a Jewish Food and Drug Administration vetting the lamb purchases. It was just like our obsession with pumpkins at this time of the year. In a small city of Jerusalem there would be an estimated quarter of a million lambs that would be used for slaughter. An estimated traffic of about two and a half million people in an age where there are no cars or no airplanes. This, by the way, doesn't count the number of tourists that would be in town, the number of people who would be considered ceremonially unclean. This was a huge deal. Women and children, rich and poor, would all gather around this table.

And the ceremony would be this lovely family moment where the head of household would ask questions to the children and the children would respond. They would participate in the ceremony. You see, Passover wasn't just a meal, a formality. It wasn't just a routine. It was something special. You took the time to really prepare your heart and your mind to receive. It was something that stood out to the people of God, something that help them look forward to and help them to see the Lord. It was something that wasn't just piece-mealed together at the last second, but it was something that in the end would bring comfort and joy and life and encouragement to the Jewish people. Just like Christmas or Thanksgiving, this was a holiday that meant more than just spending a couple of bites together. But it warmed the heart. It was to remember how God passed over his judgment on the Jews and spared them.

So, Christian, my question to you this morning, before we even talk about the Supper and other mysteries of Passover together: How have you prepared yourself this morning? How have you prepared yourself for this feast? How have you gotten ready to receive this spiritual meal that Christ institutes to replace the Passover meal? Have you been able to quiet yourself down from the chaos and the noise of this world to enjoy this meal together?

Or maybe, you know, like me, maybe like Martha, you're just so busy with the activity of the Sunday and the activity of moving around and running around and making sure everyone's ready to go, that you forget the very object of the Lord's Day itself. Or maybe some of you here are just weary with life. You're hurting from every angle and turn. You can't even fathom how coming to church could be an encouragement to you this morning. Maybe some of you are distracted by the pains of your own sin or the sins of others. Maybe you're so distracted by a sandbox toys of this world that's keeping you from experiencing the true joys and comfort that are to be found when the people of God gather here to enjoy this meal.

No matter where you are, the good news is—the good news that this text teaches, the good news that the gospel teaches us—is that our Lord has prepared this meal for you. Our Lord has brought you all here together, and our Lord has taken pains to prepare this meal for us. So it is not your action and it is not your perfect readiness that makes this meal effective, but it is our faith in the Perfect One who prepares it for us. Do you believe this table is for you, believers here today? Do you believe, as members of the Body of Christ, that this feast is for you?

But what are the mysteries of this feast? What are the mysteries of this feast? Because you see, as we have our faith, and as the people of Israel had faith in what the Lord was doing in their lives in the Passover meal, the mysteries of the feast begin to unfold. And if you're new to Christianity, the puzzling nature of even why we spend twice a month to pass out a thumb full of bread and tiny cups of grape juice—that just might seem a bit mysterious and strange to you. You might even question why we choose bread and juice. I mean, why Welch's grape juice? Why not wine, right? We're Presbyterian, right? We should be able to enjoy, right? What is going on here? It's a feast after all. Doesn't the Bible say it's a feast? Why not enjoy it? Why do we do it this way?

But to focus too much on the physical elements of the feast would completely take away the meaning of what these elements were supposed to signify. Now, I'm sure that we've all done this at one point in time or another. . . I mean, I remember when I was much younger. I remember one time I went to a church service where they actually served a different kind of bread for the Lord's table. They served King's Hawaiian Bread—right?—for communion, right? And as I was looking around the room, you know, people were being very polite. And they were taking very small pieces and taking a small piece out and passing it around. You've got to understand, King's Hawaiian Bread is like the king of all breads. It is so good, right? It's sweet, it's fluffy, it's nice. If you microwave it with a little bit of butter it's just amazing, ah, it's so good. So it was my comfort food. So you know, as the bread was being passed around, I remember foolishly in my youth I just went for it. I just went in and just grabbed this large chunk of it off. And I tried to play it off, you know. I took a palm sized fist of it and immediately put my head down to pray, right. You know, as sort of just signaling to everyone else around me, you know what, I need more Christ today, you know. It was so selfish of me. Actually I just wanted more carbs. I just wanted that taste of King's Hawaiian Bread.

We all do this with the physical elements. We make more out of them than what we should, or we selfishly think that they mean more than what they actually mean. What I should've told my younger self is that there is a mystery to the elements that are just beyond the physical things that we see on the table, just like the Passover feast was for the Jews. You see, this feast consisted of foods that were not necessarily there because there were great, tasty foods to eat, but because of what they represented. Rather, they consisted of things like what we read about in Exodus 12 earlier in the service. Bitter herbs, unleavened bread, things like stewed fruit which represented the bricks of slavery that Israel had to make. Right? So these were symbols that went beyond way more than just their physical properties.

Every Passover celebration was a signpost with a cup of wine. It was taken four times during the meal, which served as sort of benchmarks for each part of the story. Four sections. They took the cup of sanctification, then they moved on to the cup of plagues, retelling the story of the

ten plagues of Egypt. And then they moved to this cup of redemption, to show God's faithfulness to redeem people. And then finally they ended off with the cup of praise, where they would sing Psalms 113 through 118, which we read in the service here today. It was a response of the people of God to the salvation of God. Every part of the Passover meal was to show and demonstrate the very real suffering that the people of God endured, but also shows them the real redemption that they had in Christ, that they did not even know about yet. It led the people of God to worship with the reception of the elements before them. So in other words, there was no sort of supernatural power in the physical food, per se. Rather, the food gave reassurances to the people of God. It gave them encouragement. It gave them life. It gave them comfort.

And it was in this moment, as Jesus was presiding over the Passover—he was the head of the household as the ceremony required, for his disciples—where suddenly we have a very dramatic moment in verses 17-25 of this passage. Jesus was leading them through the first section of the Passover, the cup of sanctification. And in this portion Jews would dip unleavened bread into a dish with a sauce that sort of closely resembles something like bitter horseradish—just pure horseradish. Now, if you've ever had straight horseradish—which I have not—but I have been told that it's quite harsh, it's quite pungent, and it's sort of to symbolize the bitterness of the slavery of Israel, this bitterness of the pains they went through. They tasted it and they felt it, and it was supposed to be a signpost of where they used to be prior to God's deliverance.

And it was in this portion of the meal. . . Jesus is sitting in this room and he declares that one of his disciples would betray him. Right? What a power... You've got to see the drama of this moment. This symbol in Passover which is supposed to represent the bitterness of the pains that the people of God went through, Jesus uses as a moment to describe the bitterness and the pains of his own betrayal.

Here we stop and take a look at the severity of this judgment that's being placed on one of his disciples. Jesus graciously does not call out this disciple by name, but we all know that it is Judas. And Jesus here in this moment is showing Judas grace in this moment of bitterness. Why? He is showing Judas and telling him what this rejection will mean for him in verse 17-20. And just as the Passover meal was a comfort to those who received it as a sign and a seal by faith, it was also a judgment for those who didn't partake in the Passover meal. So Jesus is pointing this grace out to Judas, that here's what's going to happen. I'm calling you to myself, even in this moment where I know what you're going to do to me. I know you're going to betray me. I'm still calling you to myself.

Now for certain, there is a mystery behind the necessary nature of Jesus being betrayed by Judas. It's a part of God's plan. And yet somehow Judas is still completely responsible for his response to Jesus. And this is the dance that we experience in the Christian faith. This dance between our responsibility—the very nature that we yes, indeed, we do have free will. But yes, indeed, God is sovereign, and he is at work. And the apparent tension of the mystery that is present here in this meal is still present for those of us here today. But we shouldn't—as often Christians do—pit human responsibility and the divine sovereignty of God against one another. J.I. Packer wrote in his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* that these are not at all in tension, but rather these two things work as friends. They are both working together. Packer

uses the analogy of light, for example. All the scientists in the room know that light is both a wave and a particle. And this is a great mystery. We don't know how that can both be consistent and happen at the same time. And yet you can't claim that science isn't science because there's an apparent antimony or apparent contradiction that exists in those two. Likewise, we shouldn't pit these two things against one another.

So we can't let the nuances of this theological debate take us away from the very real challenge that Jesus is giving to Judas and to all of us here today. Do we understand Christ for what he is offering to us? Will we accept it and believe it and trust in and have faith in it? Or will we, like Judas, trade Christ in for cheap offerings of this world? Will we, like Judas, live a life separated from him forever? Jesus puts it in Judas's hands, even though he knows what Judas will do and moves on into this Passover feast. He moves on to continue to unravel this mystery.

And so Scripture teaches us here at this moment he took bread and broke it and gave it to them, which was a practice that was done in the Jewish custom during the Passover with the bread. The head of the household would break this bread and give it to all that were around. Now they called this part of the Passover the *afrikomen*. They would have the bread—and it was unleavened—and interestingly enough, this unleavened bread was punctured with holes. This bread was baked in such a way that it would have burnt stripes to show the piercing of the Israelite people, to show the stripes of the affliction of the Israelite people as they were in slavery.

And some Jewish customs, even today, they have this bread separated and stored into a bag with three different compartments. And the head of the household takes the bread out of the second compartment, breaks this bread, and distributes it. This pierced, afflicted-with-stripes bread. Does any of this sound familiar? Jews today still don't know why they do this in this part of the *afrikomen*. They speculate that it might have something to do with the early fathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They sometimes think it has to do with three-fold distinction of the priesthood. They still think that this is a mysterious part of the Passover. They don't know why, how in this bag where there's three elements in it, you take out the second element, you break it, and distribute it...how this points to anything. It's still a mystery to them. But for us as Christians, we can clearly see the Trinitarian and also the picture of what Christ is. He was pierced for our transgressions, by his stripes we are healed. Jesus is the one who died, who was broken for you and I.

The Passover [is] not just being a memorial service for the people of God to remember the faithfulness of God. It's more than just a memorial service. Every component of the Passover was there to help us understand Christ: Christ as the bread, Christ as the wine, Christ as the Lamb of God—that roasted lamb that they would serve at the end of the meal. [Christ] who would be slain for the sins of all. The one who delivers us and the one who saves us from the bond of slavery—not just from Egypt but from sin, and brings us into new life through his death, burial, and resurrection. This is the power and the beauty of the feast.

So when Christ institutes the Lord's Supper here in verses 22-25 of this text in Mark, there is now a replacement of the Passover feast, an institution of a new meal. A New Testament sign and seal, the promise of the covenant of grace that Jesus introduces for the very first time here. Instead of unleavened bread to symbolize the bitterness of slavery, we're given the symbol of

the body of Christ to strengthen and to feed us in the faith. Rather than the wine to signify how God has redeemed his people from Egypt, Christ gives us a symbol through blood through this wine or grape juice, to show how he's fulfilled the story of the covenant, God's faithfulness to his people—past, present, future, forever. That he would forget their sins no more, as far as the east is from the west, and that he would just forget their iniquities. That he would be with his people, that he would continue to show his love and mercy despite our failures and our weaknesses. Every time we come to the table as a church we get to embrace and experience this together. This is the comfort of Christ in the body, in the blood, in this bread and grape juice.

We don't believe that we are carnally feasting on the actual body and blood of Christ, as others would believe. That would be a misinterpretation of this text. It would be like as though you were crucifying Christ every time you came to the Lord's table. Right? And we would have our disagreements and say no, you cannot keep crucifying Christ. Rather we continue on the tradition of the people of God in the Old Testament who celebrate Passover together. We continue with the tradition of the New Testament early church. That every time we gather here we're doing more than just the memorial service to remember Christ's death. We feast in the comfort of our strength, for those by faith receive it, and encouraged by the sight of other brothers and sisters around us in the church who are doing the same. Just as the Passover was never meant to be individualistic or only solely to be a reflection of the self, the Passover meal wasn't a one-person meal. You couldn't eat alone doing it.

So, too, we here gather together on the Lord's table, not to just simply ponder in ourselves and look inward and reflect on our own failures or maybe our possible worthiness to come to the table. But rather we're feasting with our fellow members of the Body of Christ and rejoicing in the good news of the Gospel together and awaiting the day when Christ comes back to drink again the fruit of the new vine when he returns to inaugurate a new heavens and a new earth, where all past bitterness, all the past slavery of sin of this mortal life will fade away forever. And we will get to feast eternally with our King.

This is what this meal reminds us of. So let's stop talking about it. Let's partake of this meal together. Let's pray, and then I'm going to invite the elders to come forward to participate in the Lord's Supper. Let's pray.

Father, we're about to partake of this meal, this wonderful encouragement, this sign and seal of the covenant of grace. A sign that points to you. A seal, as we take of these elements, to remind us that we belong to you. A seal that marks for each and every single one of us that we are held in your hands. That the promises of the covenant remain true. That for those of us who have stumbled into sin, that we are forgiven through the blood of Christ. That it is his work on the cross that redeems us. Lord, what a tremendous feast we get to participate in. Help us to see it. Help us to see beyond the mysteries here of these simple elements and to be strengthened as we partake of this meal together. In Jesus' name. Amen.