

MEANING FOR LIFE IN A MEAL

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

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Many years ago, on Maundy Thursday, Theodore Parker Ferris shared some thoughts with his congregation at Trinity Episcopal Church at Copley Square in Boston. It is a magnificent building and congregation.¹ In fact, Will Clarkson's son Andrew is an active member of that church today.

Tonight, I would like to select some of Ferris's comments from all those years ago and apply them to Maundy Thursday 2003.

First, to get a sense of what Jesus' last supper with his disciples was like we might think tonight of Baghdad – an occupied city which, of course, is what Jerusalem was in Jesus' day. Jesus did not celebrate this meal in a palace at the center of power. It was a simple meal in an upper room in an occupied city.

It is curious that the meal has remained a lasting tradition among his followers. Of all the things that happened in Jerusalem that night who would have guessed this simple meal would be the one thing to stand up to the centuries?

You never know where the seeds of life are lying, except that they are lying all around us. If you have a meal it may become a sacrament of salvation. If you make a decision it may save or destroy a life. If you start an idea going it may change the course of human history. If you die it may accomplish more than if you had lived.

Some of you may be thinking: not me, I don't have that kind of influence or power. But really it could happen to any of us.

An old African American woman decides she is not going to go to the back of the bus. A Catholic sister sits down one day in a gutter in Calcutta and holds the hand of a dying person. A young intellectual learns how to spin his own cloth for his own clothes then marches across the nation ignoring the taunts of those in power, choosing non-violence.

You never know where the seeds of life are lying. This meal reminds us that the material of our lives, the stuff of everyday is of the utmost importance and significance.

So we come back to that question why has this meal lasted all these centuries? The first reason is that the meal is so much like him. Simple, direct, plain. When his followers wanted something to remember him, he did not give them a lecture he gave them something concrete and something to do – eat a simple meal.

Contained in the meal are two points and the answers to several questions. Point one: we are surrounded by God. Jesus begins the meal with a prayer and ends it by going to the garden to pray. Like his life our lives are surrounded by God.

Point two: Jesus offers his followers not a perfect body but a broken body. Not the idealized Greek body that was so emulated at the time but a body symbolized by the bread broken, torn and given out.

But more than these things the meal Jesus leaves his followers answers some of our most compelling questions about ourselves and about life. The meal condenses the meaning of life and death into comprehensible terms.

Does anybody really care about me? Can my mistakes in life be amended? Do I share anything in common with others? Is there anything of ultimate importance for me to do?

Does anybody really care about me?

The first words out of Jesus' mouth at the table to his followers are, "this is my body broken for you." We hear these words so often they become boilerplate to a ritual but imagine when they were first said on that night long ago. "My body broken for you." The incomparable gift of another's sacrifice for you and me.

Sometimes in the course of a busy day I find it hard enough to squeeze in one more phone call, let alone giving away my life. Jesus cares so much for us that he lays down his life.

The next question at the heart of our living is "can my mistakes be amended?" Call them sins, call them mistakes, call them poor judgement or miscalculations. Call them what ever you like they stick with us – those errors of living. We are well aware of them and we do not like them. We go to great lengths to silence the memory of them or the voice of conscience about them. But there is only one thing that works: forgiveness.

When Jesus pours out the wine he said to his followers, "my blood given for you for the forgiveness of your sins." In that statement religion is turned upside down. No longer do we earn God's love and forgiveness, God gives it to us freely.

There is less value in trying to explain how that works than there is in simply accepting and trusting that it does. Our sins are forgiven.

The next question the meal answers is: "do I have anything in common with my neighbor?" It seems sometimes that our society, our world is made up of so many different kinds of people who have little in common. From warring tribes to special interest groups vying for power and influence. There is so much that separates and divides us.

But the one undeniable fact is that each of us comes to this table empty-handed. Each of us has the profound need to fill our emptiness with something from outside of ourselves.

Ross MacKenzie from Chautauqua talks about worshipping in a small urban parish in Richmond, Virginia. It was made up of so many different people: rich/poor, young/old, black/white, educated/simple, healthy/sick. And the most telling moment of the week, he said, was when everyone came to the table with empty hands to receive the elements. Each of us – the powerful and the powerless – come to God with empty hands.

Finally, the last question the supper answers is, "is there anything for me to do in this world?" Some of us feel dis-empowered, without any influence. Some of us wonder if what we are doing makes any difference to anyone at all. Some of us think that in order to make any difference we will have to climb the social or civic or corporate ladder.

But again the simple meal and words of Jesus have an answer: “do this in remembrance of me.”

In other words, we gather here tonight not just to eat a meal and go back home. We gather here to eat a meal and go back into the world renewed, refreshed, refocused – remembering him.

I was talking to a graduate student the other day. She is putting her life together. Not just learning a skill and getting a degree. She is asking big questions, discerning God’s calling for her life.

That is what it means to remember Jesus. To not take your life for granted, to ask important questions that reveal where you need to go and what you need to do with the gifts you have been given. In other words, to live like Jesus.

I told that young woman even in her struggling, in her questioning she would change the lives of others. And I used myself as an example. I told her I was inspired by her courage and character not to take life and calling for granted.

You may have followed the proposals for reconstructing lower Manhattan. One design by Daniel Libeskind has been selected from among all the others. One of the intriguing features of his concept is that it exposes the wall that saved New York.

Well below street level is the massive wall which supported not just the Trade Center and surrounding buildings but also kept the Hudson River’s waters from flooding lower Manhattan on September 11th as it still does today.

The wall very much intact is the center piece of Libeskind’s design – not just new buildings to replace the old buildings but, more importantly, a memorial to the loss of life that took place there nearly two years ago.ⁱⁱ

It occurs to me this is what the Lord’s Supper we celebrate tonight is about. It is the foundation for our lives, made special by the loss of Jesus’ life and it continues to support and uphold the stresses and strains of our daily living.

This supper, like the wall that saved New York, is a memorial to Jesus but like that wall in New York it is also a working foundation for life. A living memorial.

So come to the table to partake in this simple meal that holds the answers to our deepest questions. The table at which we meet again the living presence of Christ in the elements we receive and then in the lives we seek to live. Amen.

ⁱ Theodore Parker Ferris, The Story of Jesus (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953) 52ff.

ⁱⁱ Joel Meyerowitz, “Saving the Wall That Saved New York,” The New York Times, February 27, 2003, OP-ED, A31.