

**Fending off ‘Anorexia of the Soul’**

**John 13:1-35**

Maundy Thursday – April 5, 2007

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

Preached at Community Service at Fairlington United Methodist Church

We have a new worship service on Sunday nights at our Presbyterian Church building across the street, specifically geared towards people who didn’t grow up in the church, or have long left the church, or didn’t really care much about spiritual things until they reached a point when they realized they were hungry for something spiritual.

I often forget to alter the words I use or the way I explain something when I’m with people who come to the evening service.

For example, last week I referred to Palm Sunday (since it was Palm Sunday) and someone asked what I was talking about. “Is this why we were given these leaves?” she said. And later somebody asked me what “Monday Thursday” was all about. I had twice referred to “Monday Thursday” and she didn’t have a clue what I meant.

And I explained that I was talking about “Holy Thursday” or “Maundy Thursday” – the Thursday before Easter, when we remember the day that Jesus instituted The Lord’s Supper which is also called The Eucharist or Communion. Jesus shared his very Last Supper – which was a Passover dinner – with his disciples.

“Maybe you’ve seen the *Last Supper* painting by DaVinci?” I said to her. Yes, she had seen the Da Vinci painting, and of course, she had read, *The Da Vinci Code*.

Everything I told her about The Lord’s Supper is true, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But did you notice that in the John’s version of this night before his arrest, *there is no Lord’s Supper*. This is not the night of the Passover dinner according to John’s version of the story; it’s the night *before* the Passover dinner.<sup>1</sup> In fact the only person who gets to eat anything here is Judas.

Yes, the disciples are sitting at a table. And apparently they had eaten something or were in the middle of eating something.<sup>2</sup> But the focus of this story is the washing of the disciples’ feet and words about service. And we witness Judas leave the table after Jesus gave him a bit of bread dipped in a dish.

There are no “words of institution.” No “this is my body broken for you.” Instead Jesus speaks of betrayal and departure, and then of a new commandment:

***Love one another.***

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:1; in John’s gospel Passover begins on Friday instead of Thursday. Jesus, according to John, actually is crucified on Passover – see John 19:4.

<sup>2</sup> See 13:2-3. “And during supper” . . . Jesus “got up from the table . . .”

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” Jesus says.

Some of us might read this and say, “What’s so new about that commandment? And besides, we do this really well at our church. We love everybody in the congregation.”

But I don’t think Jesus is just talking about loving other disciples, other Christian friends. I think he’s talking about loving everyone. If we look over Jesus’ own life, we can see that he loved many people before they were followers.

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I don’t know about you, but I know lots of loving people who are not Christian. In fact, some of the most loving people we know maybe do not belong to a church, do not worship in a church community. Or maybe they are Jewish or Muslim or Bahai or Buddhist. Or maybe they do not consider themselves a part of any organized faith.

***So what do we make of these words of Jesus?*** That we will be able to recognize who Jesus’ disciples are *by the way they love one another.*

“Disciple” simply means “student” or “follower.” In my humble opinion - you can be a lifelong church member and not be much of a follower of Jesus.

And you can also be a dedicated follower of Jesus without ever being a part of the institutional church . . . but it’s very, very difficult. We all need to be held accountable. We need to be in community with each other. We need people praying for us and with us. **At least I’ll speak for myself:** *I am easily distract by life. I busy myself with all kinds of things and sometimes I feel like I’m drowning in life. There’s too much to do. Too little time. Too much juggling. And I find myself in need of spiritual food.*

Can any of you relate to that? This is Jesus’ message to us tonight. There is quite a bit of spiritual food, even if the only one eating tangible food is Judas.

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In last Sunday’s *New York Times*, there was a provocative article about high school girls in Newton, Massachusetts. The “amazing girls” they were called. These are girls who excel in many things and they are all competing against each other to get into college. They are high achievers in academics and the arts and languages and sports. They are attractive and creative, and yes, they are amazing.

One mother and her daughter were interviewed for the story *while sitting at table* in the family dining room, and the mother, reflecting on her daughter’s hard-charging

schedule said, “**You just hope your child doesn’t have anorexia of the soul.**”<sup>3</sup> I love this.

This term comes from a wonderful essay written by a psychiatrist in Fairfax County,<sup>4</sup> about the problem when we lose our desire for spiritual nourishment. Anorexia, of course, is the much too common disorder that involves an inability to eat, a loss of appetite for food.

**Anorexia of the soul involves an inability to find spiritual fulfillment, a loss of appetite for the holy.** As long as we still hunger for spiritual things, we will be fine according to the psychiatrist who coined the term who is also a faithful Jewish woman.

On this holy night, we remember the story of disciples who met at table with Jesus and were fed. But, according to the way John tells the story, only one received any tangible food. The others received a foot washing, an example of what humble service looks like.

One received a piece of bread dipped in something – perhaps wine.  
The others received a message about love.

One would receive thirty pieces of silver.  
The others would receive – at least eventually – The Holy Spirit.

What would we like to receive tonight?

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You will soon be invited to come forward to receive something. A small piece of bread and a sip of juice hardly make for a real meal if you’ve come physically hungry tonight. But the point is not to fill our stomachs. The point is to fill our souls. To fend off spiritual anorexia.

The point of our churches is to serve the One who feeds our souls so that we, in turn, might feed the souls of others and ultimately change the world to look more like God’s kingdom on earth. We pray it every Sunday:

*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

**Wholeness and spiritual abundance is not something to be saved for heaven. We are called to work towards this now, on earth.**

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<sup>3</sup> “For Girls, It’s Be Yourself and Be Perfect Too” by Sara Rimer, *The New York Times*, April 1, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/01/us/01girls.html?em&ex=1175918400&en=ef850779ef8983b1&ei=5087%0A>

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Ilsa Bick’s essay “Anorexia of the Soul” can be found at: <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=3065>

And so, if you have come tonight seeking spiritual sustenance, we pray that you will receive it.

And if you're not even sure why you came, we pray that you can taste the spiritual nourishment and you will want more.

And finally, we pray that we would be moved to follow Jesus, to love especially those whose souls are starving out there to the glory of God. Amen.