

Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2020
The Last Supper: A Place of Forgiveness
Luke 22:7–23

She had a tattoo. There, on the upper part of her back, just over the shoulder blade. At times, it looked more like a scar than a tattoo. It was only one color. This was before tattoos were fashionable. And it had been done in a back-alley garage at the risk of infection and scarring. A dark blue scratch making the shape of a crown. She didn't know which was worse, the tattoo or what she did to get it. There were many men, boys she should say, and petty crimes that made her worthy of bearing that scar and being a part of the gang. Only that was years ago and in another city. That was before night school and a promotion and relocation and a husband and a family. And now, here she sits at the Christian education committee meeting and they are asking her to offer an opinion about kids and the streets. One member already removed her child from Sunday School. "If you are going to bring kids from gangs into this program, then don't expect my child to stay around," she said. "Why do you think I bring my kids here? I want to give them a good upbringing." And as the meeting continued, she thought to herself, "If you only knew. If you only knew where I've come from and what I've done, you wouldn't even be asking my opinion! You certainly wouldn't be sitting here with me." Tonight, her world became a little smaller and all she could think was, "If you only knew."

We have moments like that, don't we? Moments when our world gets a little bit smaller. Oh, there may be no tattoo to mark your past, and your moment may have happened in a different social setting, but we all carry scars from the things we have done. Then, in a moment, our world becomes smaller as we find ourselves surrounded by people who don't know what we've done. We are intensely aware that we are alone here. Alone with our scars. We've had a failed marriage or broken a vow. We're a recovering alcoholic. In the fear of an unwanted pregnancy, we aborted our child. We have a parent we haven't spoken to for over a year. We've fought with our children for so long that we don't know how to begin again. Sin disrupts the lives of God's people and leaves its scars. Then, when we gather, we are aware of how radically different it would all be if the people around us only knew. Our back tenses up, a polite smile masks our face, and we open our mouth, all the while thinking, "If you only knew where I've come from, what I've said, what I've done, you wouldn't even be talking to me. If you only knew."

Today is Holy Thursday, a time when we remember our Lord's Last Supper and celebrate the Sacrament. As we do this, we gather in the presence of a God who does know. We draw near to worship a God who knows all about us. As you meditate upon our Lord's Passion and come to receive His body and blood this evening, my prayer for you is that you experience the wonder that He knows and that this table is a place of forgiveness.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, he is very clear to let us know that Jesus knew about Judas. Like a movie where you see one person and then another and then both of them together, Luke

joins Jesus and Judas in this account. First, he points to Judas. Luke tells us the Feast of Passover is approaching and Judas goes to the rulers to betray Jesus. This was the Passover preparation of Judas—betraying His Lord. Then, Luke points to Jesus. He tells us the day of Passover has come and Jesus sends Peter and John to locate the room where He will eat His Passover meal. This was the Passover preparation of Jesus—preparing a table for His disciples. Then, Luke brings Jesus and Judas together. Luke tells us that the hour of Passover has come. We have moved from Passover approaching to the day of Passover and now to the hour of the feast. Luke sets before us Jesus and Judas and the Passover table. And here is where Luke tells us that Judas is in the presence of a God who knows. At the Passover table, Jesus says, “the hand of him who betrays Me is with Me on the table” (22:21). “I know,” Jesus says. “Judas, I know.”

How did the disciples react to this knowledge? They had an argument. Luke tells us that the disciples began to argue among themselves. Which one of them was it? Here, at the conclusion of a religious celebration, the disciples are involved in an argument about sin. Typical, huh? Most rumors in churches rise out of similar questions. Someone talks about an unnamed member who once had an abortion, and everyone wonders, “Who is she? Who is he talking about?” Somebody says, “I would like to pray for someone here who is having marital problems” and the questions and the gossip and the quarreling begins. And soon, the spiritual work of God is set aside and everyone is digging around in everyone else’s closet looking for the certainty of sin that is present there. So Luke shows us disciples no longer looking to Jesus but looking among themselves. And that’s what happens. In the shadow of wrongdoing, we become engrossed in seeking out the certainty of sin.

But not Jesus. That is what is so amazing about this Last Supper. Jesus knows about this evil. He begins the meal by talking about His suffering, and He closes the meal by talking about His betrayal. Yet in the face of certain evil, Jesus does not try to keep Judas away from His disciples. He doesn’t turn His disciples against Judas, and He doesn’t run to another city in fear. In the face of certain evil, Jesus does the certain work of God. Yes, one will betray Him and another will deny Him and all will fall away. But in the midst of all that is wrong and weak and evil about human flesh, there remains one other thing that is true: God is alive. His love is certain. And this night, the kingdom of God is coming into the world. In the face of certain evil, Jesus offers certain forgiveness. “This is My body, which is given for you. . . . this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (vv. 19–20).

The freeing of Israel from slavery. That’s what the Jewish people remembered in the Passover. Tonight, however, Jesus calls His disciples to remember Him. He is their freedom. In Him is the new covenant. In Him is eternal love. In Him, sin, death, and the power of the devil are destroyed. In His body, He will bear the punishment of our sins on the cross. With His blood, He will claim us as His own so that the angel of death sheathes His sword. In this body and blood are eternal forgiveness, and as often as we eat this body and drink this cup we proclaim the benefits of the Lord’s death for all people until He comes.

There, at this Last Supper, we see the gracious work of God among His disciples. Here, in the Lord's Supper, we see the gracious work of God among us tonight. Yes, we come tonight with scars, with parts of our lives that we'd rather not remember. There are things we have done that make us say, "Pastor, if you only knew." For some of you, I do. For others, I don't. But for all of us, God knows. He sees and knows, and tonight we confess to Him the certainty of our sin. But tonight, God comes and proclaims the certainty of your salvation. In the death of His Son, He has forgiven your sin. In His body and blood, He comes tonight to assure you of the certainty of His love. Here, you are no longer known as a sinner; you are known and acknowledged as a child of God. Tonight, God prepares a place for you at His table. A place of forgiveness. Come. I invite you to experience the wonder that happens when God knows all about you: He chooses to know you only through the gracious work of His Son.

It's hard to express the beauty of this wonder. An artist once tried to capture it on a painting that would be used on an altar. Around 1500, in Alsace, there was a monastery church of the Order of St. Anthony. There Matthais Grunewald created what is now known as the Isenheim Altarpiece. It is a carved shrine, with two painted wings that open and close over a main painting, like doors on a cabinet. There are two views for which this altarpiece is remembered: one stands on the outside, when the wings are closed; the other stands on the inside, when the wings are opened. When the wings are closed, the altarpiece shows the crucifixion. This view could be described as gruesome. Christ is hanging on the cross, His body discolored by a greenish hue. His wounds are torn flesh covering an emaciated body. When the wings are opened, however, there is a radically different view. Here, the painting is of the resurrection. Christ bursts forth from the tomb in an explosion of color. His hands are raised in blessing. Behind Him, in orange and startling yellow, a sun rises against a brilliant blue sky. His body is wrapped in swirls of clothing: yellow, white, red, and blue garments. But most amazingly, the artist has placed rubies in His hands and His feet and His side. The wounds of Jesus have been transformed by the artist. They are precious jewels that shine with the brilliance of the resurrection. In that simple act, this artist has captured the wonder of this night. Christ's body will bear scars. These scars come from a punishment we will never know. But after His resurrection, these scars stay with Him. Only they are jewels, for they tell the world of a perfect love.

Today, we have a Savior who invites us with wounded hands to His table. With these wounds, He continually reminds us of a love that our God will never forget. These scars are the marks of a God who truly knows His creatures, knows their suffering, their sin, and the punishment of their death. But these scars are also on the hands of the risen Savior. He carries these with Him, after death. They communicate His perfect love. So, you see your scars. You wonder what would happen "if anyone really knew." Well, know this. God does know. But He knows you in love, because of the death and resurrection of His Son. For this reason, Jesus invites you to His table this evening. A place of forgiveness. He comes to feed you. To forgive you. To cover your scars with His wounded hands. To cover you with the wonder of His love. Amen.