

THE SUPPER, THE PREDICTION AND THE GARDEN MATTHEW 26:17-46

How many of you have seen the movie, “Field of Dreams”? For many people, it’s their favorite sports oriented movie and it’s become kind of a movie classic by now. The story involves a young, novice farmer in Iowa named Ray Kinsella who hears a voice out in the cornfield say to him, “If you build it, he will come.” Build what? Well, as it turns out, Ray builds a baseball field next to his farm house right out in the middle of nowhere. Who will come? A whole bunch of characters show up at Ray’s baseball field, but only at the end of the movie do you come to understand that “he” is Ray’s deceased father. He appears as a young man and he and Ray are able to restore a relationship that had become estranged and broken. “Field of Dreams” is a fantasy and sounds a bit crazy if you haven’t seen it. But it has a way of lifting your spirits in an odd sort of way.

“If you build it, he will come.” That phrase can be applied to Lent – this forty day period of time leading up to Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Christians all over the world reflect on the significance of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection during Lent. It’s a time set aside every year to discern where our walk with God has gotten a bit stale and ask Him to renew and refresh our faith. Your relationship with God is indeed a gift to you from God. You did nothing to earn or deserve it. But developing that relationship with God does require daily and personal effort. Like doing what? Like regular confession of our sins. Like repentance. Like worship – not just on Sundays, but throughout the week. Like exercising faith. If you allow the Holy Spirit to renew those kinds of attitudes within you, God will come. If you build it, He will come. If you build an openness and receptivity to God in your soul, He will most definitely come.

Last week we began our study of Matthew 26-28 which is an account of what happened to Jesus during the most important week in human history. If you believe that Jesus died and rose again for everyone, everywhere at every time, then you will agree with me that the events described in these three chapters are the most important in all of human history and experience. I’m calling this series of messages, “Pictures of the Passion.” Each week we consider three pictures or three images from these three chapters in Matthew. As we focus on those pictures, it’s my hope that we can be drawn deeper into who Jesus is and what He’s done for us. The first image is that of ...

THE SUPPER (v. 17-30)

We learned last week that this amazing week in Jesus’ life occurred during the Passover which was the greatest religious festival of the Jewish people. As Jews themselves, Jesus and the disciples prepared to celebrate the Passover Feast together. This Passover Feast, however, was unlike any that they had experienced previously. During the meal, Jesus took some of the bread, broke it into pieces and said, “... ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’” (Mt. 26:26 NIV) He then took a cup of wine and said, “... ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of

the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mt. 26:27-8 NIV) We recognize those familiar words and that familiar scene as the first Lord’s Supper or first Communion service. Jesus created a new meal of remembrance that very night. The purpose of the Passover Feast was to remember God’s deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt. The purpose of Jesus’ new meal was to remember God’s deliverance of His people from slavery to sin. The menu for the Passover Feast included Lamb. The menu of Jesus’ new meal is bread and wine symbolic of the body and blood of the true Lamb sacrificed for our sins, Jesus Himself.

What did Jesus mean by the phrase, “This is my blood of the covenant...”? (Mt. 26:28 NIV) That word “covenant” isn’t used much today. It simply refers to a very special relationship between two people or groups. Covenant relationships involve important promises that are made and then kept by both parties in the covenant. We have them today. For example, marriage is a covenantal relationship. So is a business partnership. The covenant Jesus is referring to here is the new and wonderful relationship that you can have with the living God through the shed blood and broken body of His Son. Again, why did Jesus have to die in order for you to enter into a relationship with God? The Bible says you’re a sinner and that the final result of sin is death. Death is the penalty for your sin. But God himself provided a substitute: Jesus. Instead of insisting that you pay the penalty for your own sin by dying for it, God allowed Jesus, through His death on the cross, to die in your place. As a direct result, you are now able to enter into a covenantal relationship with the God of the Universe. The picture or the image of that new covenantal relationship with God is Communion. Some Christian denominations or traditions observe Communion every day. In our church, we usually observe it on the first Sunday of the month. We’ll share it together next Sunday. But because part of the text for today’s message is about the very first Communion celebration, we thought we would observe it again this morning, too. Communion offers us a way to respond to today’s message.

Now, just before Jesus introduced the first Lord’s Supper observance, He predicted His betrayal. The disciples were devastated by this news. “They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, ‘Surely not I, Lord?’” (Mt. 26:22 NIV) It’s interesting, isn’t it, that Jesus chose to inject this sad, troubling news into the middle of what was supposed to be a joyous event - the Passover Feast. Perhaps it was to get Judas, the disciple who betrayed him, out of the picture before Jesus broke the bread and passed the wine. In His Gospel account, John tells us that Judas had indeed left the room before that first Communion observance. Perhaps Jesus wanted to spend these final hours with those whose hearts were sincere. The other eleven disciples had a weak love for Jesus, to be sure, but it was a sincere love, nonetheless.

“Surely not I, Lord?” Each disciple asked that question with a heavy heart. In one sense, of course, the answer was, “No.” Only Judas Iscariot literally betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leaders. But, in another sense, the answer is “Yes”

not only for the other eleven disciples but also for you and for me. How so? It was your sin and mine that required the death of Jesus if we were ever going to have a relationship with God. What really put Jesus on the cross and nailed Him there? It wasn't Judas' betrayal; it was your sin and mine. So, if at some point in today's observance of Communion, you ask - "Surely not I, Lord? Was it really because of my sin that Your body was broken? Was it truly because of my sin that Your blood was shed? Can it be that because of my personal rebellion against God that You, Jesus, had to die?" – the answer is "Yes." In the deepest sense, each of us betrayed Jesus and caused His death. All of us are guilty. "Surely not I, Lord?" Yes, in fact, it is you and it is me.

The way to begin and continue to have a relationship with God is so very clear and yet so many reject it. Jesus said this about Judas, "... 'It would be better for him if he had not been born.'" (Mt. 26:24 NIV) That's a hard word. May I say this to you today? To ignore and reject God's offer of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus is to make this life worthless and meaningless. Is there anything worse than rejecting God's grace and His free gift of eternal life? Wouldn't it better for someone never to have been born at all than to reject that greatest gift ever given? When you come forward to the Table at the end of today's service, reflect on the fact that, yes indeed, you share blame for Jesus' death. Admit it. Confess it. And then rejoice yet again in His love, His grace and His forgiveness. This is a picture of why your sins can be forgiven. This is an image of how you're able to enter into a new and eternal relationship with God. This is a symbol of how and why that relationship was restored and renewed. Here is a picture of how God's grace covers your past, cleanses your present and ensures your future.

A few years ago there was a big Vietnam veterans' parade in Chicago. Part of the commemoration was a mobile version of the Vietnam Wall memorial. Like the original, it bore the names of all the soldiers who had died in Vietnam. One newscaster asked a vet why he'd come all the way to Chicago to visit this memorial and to participate in the parade. The soldier looked straight into the face of the reporter and with tears flowing down his face said, "Because of this man right here." As the soldier talked, he was pointing to the name of a friend that was etched in the wall. He traced the letters of his friend's name in the wall. The soldier continued to answer the reporter by saying, "This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life for me." The sobbing soldier let the tears flow as he stood there tracing the name of his friend with his finger. It was hard for that man to get his heart and mind around the sacrifice of his friend, so he kept retracing the story. We have that problem, too. There is, of course, someone who gave his life for you and for me. I don't want to grow dull to the amazing truth that Jesus died for me, but, the fact is, I do. And that's one of the values of observing the Lord's Supper regularly. It helps me remember yet again.

THE PREDICTION (v. 31-35)

The second picture today of Jesus' passion is the prediction. Not only does Jesus predict that one of His closest companions will turn traitor against Him, He then goes on to predict that the other eleven will all turn out to be cowards! Jesus even says that their cowardice had been predicted centuries before by the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah. Now, you wouldn't expect Peter to absorb that kind of observation without a retort! And, of course, Peter never disappoints when it comes to putting one's foot in one's mouth! Sure, suggests Peter, these other lesser men might well cut and run, but that would only prove what Peter already knew – he was just better than those other guys! Why, not only would he, Peter, stand by Jesus in His time of need, but Peter was willing to die with Jesus to prove His loyalty and friendship. It would all be funny if it wasn't so incredibly tragic. Peter's self-confidence opened the door to the most humiliating personal failure imaginable in just a few hours.

Why did Jesus even bring this up – the disciples' impending cowardice and Peter's awful denial? What purpose did it serve to bring it up? Over and over again in the Gospel stories we see Jesus firmly in control. Nothing catches Him off guard – not His betrayal, not His disciples' failures, not His death and not His resurrection. He knows about and expects each event. Jesus was never surprised by anything that happened to Him throughout this amazing week. All that happened to Him happened because a sovereign God allowed it to happen. Here's a picture, then, of someone who was controlling the events around Him rather than being controlled by them. Jesus even says, "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." (Mt. 26:32 NIV) This was no tragic accident! Jesus wasn't a victim in some horrible drama. God wasn't on vacation during this week in Jesus' life. No, this was the plan and purpose of God Himself working itself out precisely as He intended. Jesus wanted His disciples and us to know who was in charge and in control from first to last.

Maybe there's yet another reason for this prediction. Put yourself in the shoes of those disciples. How would you have felt about yourself after abandoning Jesus in His greatest hour of need? How would you have felt about denying that you even knew Him? How would you have lived with your cowardice? Jesus knew all of that and more about His disciples in advance. But does He condemn them? Reject them? Write them off? Just the opposite. He offers them a word of grace and forgiveness in advance! And just like the disciples, Jesus knows you at your worst and still loves you and still wants a relationship with you. Why the prediction, then? Jesus wanted those men to know in advance that their failure was not greater than His grace. You should know that, too. We're no better than those disciples. Every time you sin you deny Jesus. Each of us has abandoned Jesus in some way in the past and we'll likely do it again in the future. Jesus knows us at our weakest, our most sinful, are most miserable and He still, loves you and me. No rejection. No bitterness. No condemnation. Just His love and an invitation back into a relationship with Him.

THE GARDEN (v. 36-46)

The supper, the prediction and, now, the garden. When Jesus and His disciples finally left that upper room in Jerusalem that night, I suspect everyone was in a very somber mood. Jesus had compared His body and blood to bread and wine. He had predicted the disciples' cowardice and His own death. By then, I imagine everyone had lost their appetite and might have had a bad case of indigestion. Alone with their thoughts and a heavy heart, each one followed Jesus through the streets and alleys of the city to a small, private garden located on the Mount of Olives. The name of the garden? Gethsemane.

What does this picture of the passion tell us? First of all, notice with me that Jesus has been overwhelmed by life's demands and perplexities. Just because Jesus was and is God and just because He was firmly in control of even these events in His life, doesn't mean that this was an easy time for Jesus. You think you have stress! I submit that Jesus knew stress at a level and to a degree that none of us ever will. Jesus knows what it feels like to get to the end of your rope. He knows what it's like to wonder if you can go on. Don't you hear that when He says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death...." (Mt. 26:38 NIV) This was no act. This wasn't just going through the motions to fulfill prophecy. Jesus was in agony. Who wants to die at age 33? Who wants to die nailed to a cross? None of us can fully appreciate how much the idea of death revolted the sinless Son of God. You're born with death already embedded in the DNA of your soul, but not so with Jesus. Added to that fact was Jesus' realization that He was going to suffer the spiritual effects of death not just for Himself but for everyone. The next time you feel completely overwhelmed by life and wonder if you're coming apart at the seams, I want you to remember that Jesus knows exactly what that feels like. Been there; done that.

Notice, however, what Jesus does with this unbearable stress, because it provides a pattern for us. Jesus takes it to God. He's completely honest with His Father about how He feels. He makes it plain that He'd rather not have to go through with this if at all possible. But in that honesty, you also see perfect submission to God's will. "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Mt. 26:39 NIV) He never questions God's love or goodness – as sometimes we're tempted to do – even in the midst of the most unimaginable agony of mind and heart. One of the great mysteries is that even Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, had to learn to submit to and obey the will of God, His Father. Even Jesus had to accept what He didn't want to accept and to obey His Father when the alternative seemed far better. The Bible says, "While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could rescue him from death. And God heard his prayers because of his deep reverence for God. Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. In this way, God qualified him as a perfect High Priest, and he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him." (Heb 5:7-9 NLT)

You will never be asked to die on a cross for the sins of all humanity. But you will have moments of great personal agony. Each of us will have times that seem just unbearable and unthinkable at the moment they occur. Every one of us will have seasons of life when we can say with Jesus, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." When that happens – not if, but when – what should you do? Like Jesus, be completely honest with your Father in Heaven. It's not wrong or unspiritual to shrink from any kind of pain in life. And then, like Jesus, submit it all to the will of God. And make your submission to God bigger than your honesty before God. My friend, there are some things in life that God will allow you to go through that you may never understand this side of Heaven. When that moment comes, like Jesus, look your Father in the face and say, "My Father, not as I will, but as You will."

The Garden of Gethsemane, the place we read about today where Jesus prayed the night before He died for us, is really a grove of olive trees in the city of Jerusalem. Olive trees are about the most gnarly, twisted, lumpy trees out there. But artisans have found ingenious ways to make beautiful works of art out of the most unshapely, ugly chunks of olive wood. At olive wood factories, an artist will take an unsightly chunk of olive wood, bolt it firmly to a giant lathe – and then when he's sure it won't move even a fraction of an inch - he turns on the power. Blades and buffers start to do their work. Right before your eyes, a gnarled, ugly piece of wood becomes a work of art. It's a work of transformation. There's artistic transformation and there's spiritual transformation. Each of us start out life looking like a chunk of olive wood spiritually – gnarly, twisted, unshapely, downright ugly. When you give your life to Jesus, God begins to apply the blades and the buffers of life to cut here, to shape there, to smooth here, to buff there, and – ultimately - to transform you into a spiritual work of art. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it hurts a whole lot. But the end result is beautiful beyond description and it lasts forever.

Look with me at the cross. As hard as it is to grasp, Jesus Himself submitted to that same shaping process that the Bible says we go through. He learned obedience from the things that He suffered. When those times come in your life and mine, may we – like Jesus – be completely honest with the Father, but – above all and in all – completely submissive to His will. "Yet not as I will, but as you will."