

UNEXPECTED TWISTS AT THE TABLE

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



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Matthew 26:17-35
First Message
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We are well into February, which means that the holiday season is past us. Now, we might be able to remember the craziness of the holidays without too much post-traumatic stress. So think for a moment about the work that goes into preparing for a major holiday meal. I grew up with my parents hosting a lot of Thanksgiving meals. There was a great deal of planning and expectation put into a meal.

And sometimes things don't always go as planned.

I found a site online where someone asked others to contribute four words that were sure to ruin Thanksgiving. There were over one hundred entries. Not all of them were Sunday-morning-sermon-appropriate.

But some of them were. "My mother is coming." "There is no pie." "You are bringing him?" "I invited my ex." "I invited your ex." "Forgot my stretchy pants." "Making my own Tofurkey." "The toilet won't flush." And of course, the comment sure to bring division and debate, "Let's talk about Trump."

Big special occasions often turn out very different than we had planned or expected.

This morning we are starting a sermon series for the season of Lent that will focus on the last 18 hours of the life of Jesus. We've called this series, "The Final Hours," hoping to immerse ourselves in the drama that the Gospel of Matthew's story unpacks during these last moments.

The pace of the story slows down in this part of Matthew. The first two chapters describe Jesus' birth, followed by roughly 17 chapters of stories from his ministry over three years. Jesus enters Jerusalem and 5 chapters tell the story of that final week. And now, almost a full two chapters describe the time from dinner on Thursday to Friday afternoon. Two chapters for 18 hours.

This is the slow motion part of the story. The pressure is building. We know that something is going to happen.

There were high expectations leading up to one of the most important yearly celebrations of the Jewish calendar: the Passover.

What would happen? What would Jesus do? Where would all this end? Passover is where our story begins. With a dinner that doesn't go as planned. This morning we'll look at a unexpected twists at the table.

What happens when things don't go as planned? What happens when your life takes a sudden turn that you don't expect? How do you react when following Jesus doesn't work out like you had hoped? What happens when your carefully planned life is ruined by a few words?

Lent is a season of questioning and reflection. It is a somber time. During Lent, we have confused emotions of hope disappointed and expectations let down. For thousands of years, followers of Jesus have taken these 40 days as a slow march toward the worst disappointment that ever happened in the history of the world. We know the way this story ends. We know of the pain and death and humiliation of the cross.

Lent is like watching a train wreck in slow motion.

But we can watch because we also know that the worst thing ends up being the best thing. That horrifying death turns into astonishing life. Tragedy becomes victory. Mourning transforms into dancing.

And so during Lent, we grieve and reflect. We know the time will come to celebrate. We spend most of the rest of the year focused on the glory and beauty and meaning of the resurrection. But for this season, we slow down and consider the Son of God, mocked and crucified.

As we grieve, we are changed. The pain of those days helps us to understand the pain of our own day. The terrible death that Jesus endured gives us a new perspective on the challenges in our own lives. Those dark days help us to relate differently to the people around us as well.

This morning, the story of those 18 hours begins with the preparation of a special dinner. Let's look at these events and see how things did begin to happen, but in a very different way than everyone expected.

Preparing the Passover

I think the disciples were looking forward to this special meal with their teacher. It had been a crazy week—entering Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna, tables overturned in the temple, healings and sermons, and conflict with religious leaders. I imagine that the disciples were ready for the familiar comfort of the Passover tradition.

Matthew 26:17-19:

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?" 18 He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples." 19 And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

The disciples assumed that they were going to eat the Passover meal with Jesus. That is a bit of a curious thing. Passover was a family meal. There were special traditions for fathers and children. Several of the disciples were married so probably they had families. And yet they were in Jerusalem with Jesus, assuming they would celebrate the Passover together. This was their new family—this ragged band following Jesus. They were a family.

Jesus gives his disciples instructions to go find a "certain man" who would understand that he was supposed to host this strange family. Let's stop a minute and think about this man. The "certain man." What was his backstory?

Something must have happened to this man so that he knew what to do when the disciples approached him. Did he have a dream? Maybe a vision? Did God somehow let him know that he was supposed to host this meal? Or was he just really comfortable with spontaneity and he knew in the moment that this was the right thing to do?

I think the "certain man" was prepared in advance. I think he has his own story of how God worked in his life to get him to this point. We don't know his name. We don't know what he thought about Jesus. We don't

know anything about him. But he got to host the Last Supper. God must have been at work in his life leading up to this moment.

These days, I've been in the pattern of hosting Thanksgiving. I've done it for years and because my family loves tradition, we have our menu pretty well set. So much so that I have a schedule of things that have to happen that begins on Tuesday of that week: buy the groceries; set the bread out to dry for the stuffing; make the cranberry sauce so it can chill overnight.

Certain things have to happen in a certain order so that everything is ready at the right time on Thursday afternoon. The schedule ensures that all of those various events work together to prepare our house for a special meal at the right time.

Now think about God working in the history of the world. All of the preparation that led up to this Passover night. Jesus, the Son of God, celebrating the Passover on the eve of his humiliation and death.

The creation. The years of slavery. The first Passover night. The years of judges and chaos. The parade of good kings and bad kings and evil kings. The exile and the return. The centuries of foreign rule. The young lives of these disciples. Meeting Jesus. Following him. All the crazy life they experienced. Now here they were in Jerusalem, about to eat the Passover meal with the man that they believed would lead them out of slavery.

This is how God works. He has been working throughout history to make sure that his plans come to fruition. God has aligned everything over millennia to make sure that it all comes together. Each of our lives is part of that story. This church, in our 70th year, is part of that story. God has plans and they have been in place for a long time. Anticipate what God will do.

One of the great privileges of following Jesus is that we're not alone at the wheel. Our lives are not random events interspersed by accident and surprise. Everything isn't up to us so that it's our job not to mess things up.

What has led up to this day for you? How have you gotten here? Think about your past. Education. Relationships. Conflict. Failure. Hard work. Success. Surprise Tragedy. Unexpected Joy. What has God been doing to get you here? What is your personal history of laughter and tears that has brought to you here his morning?

God has been at work. God is at work. God will be at work. What will God do next?

We live in a culture which demands that we know our next move. Everything has a strategic plan. We're always supposed to be pushing farther and harder so that we can make it to the next peak. It's up to us to figure out everything.

But if you are a follower of Jesus, then you know the God who has been at work since the foundation of the world. It's not up to you to figure out everything. But we can look at our lives and ask what God has been doing. Where are things leading? What doors are opening? Which streams are drying up? Our question is not "What next?," but "What will God do next?"

Take some time. Reflect. Consider how you got here and where God might be leading you next.

A Betrayer Revealed

The disciples had a keen sense of anticipation for this night. However, none of them would have predicted what actually happened. It was supposed to be a meal remembering the deliverance that God brought to Israel generations ago. Instead, Jesus drops a bomb.

Matthew 26:20-25:

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. 21 And as they were eating, he said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." 22 And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" 23 He answered, "He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me. 24 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." 25 Judas, who would betray him, answered, "Is it I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said so."

Think back to those examples of four words that could ruin Thanksgiving. Jesus said six (five in Greek), but they definitely had the potential to ruin Passover. "One of you will betray me."

We'd already recognized that this group of disciples thought of themselves as a family. This was their new group. They were more loyal to each other than even their spouses, children, or parents. They were in

Jerusalem following a revolutionary teacher whom they thought would deliver Israel once again from the hands of her oppressors.

Then Jesus reveals that they aren't united. There is a spy in their midst. One of them is working against the others. Can you imagine how that felt?

During the Passover celebration, it was customary for the children in the family to ask a question. The dinner would begin with a child asking, "What makes this night different from any other night?" The father would then explain that this night commemorates the freedom from slavery that the Jews experienced when God led them out of Egypt.

But at this Passover, a different question is being asked. Instead of asking what makes this night different, they ask, "Is it I, Lord?" Instead of asking a question that focuses their attention on God's faithfulness to his people, they ask a question that identifies their possible betrayal.

It's remarkable that they would ask this. They might have asked "Who is it?" or "No way, Lord!" But they don't. They respond with self-doubt. I wonder if each and every one of them had considered betraying Jesus at some point. Most of them decided against it. But they thought about. And they are wondering if Jesus knew that about them.

Matthew tells the story so that we are at that table with Jesus. He knows our hearts. We hear the prediction. I think we are meant to wonder, "Is it I, Lord?" Will I be the one to betray Jesus?

Lent is a great time for self-reflection. To look inward and consider how I'm really responding to God. This is a time to question yourself.

This advice is different than the kind we receive in our culture. We're supposed to be confident, think highly of ourselves, and avoid deep questions. We're supposed to create a brand, cultivate our reputation, and promote our accomplishments. We are told: believe in yourself; trust your instinct; you have the answers.

But maybe we aren't trustworthy. Maybe we don't have the answers.

We think that we are all in agreement. After all, we're all worshipping together at church on a beautiful Sunday morning. But chances are good that one of you is being

unfaithful to your spouse. It's likely that one of you is cheating on your taxes. One of you is abusing someone you love. One of you is leading a double life that you think no one knows about. One of you is so focused on your own success that no one around you even matters anymore. One of you has lost your way. One of you will betray Jesus.

There are times when Jesus speaks into our heart and identifies some of those things that we need to look at. We can anticipate what God will do. But we also might ask how we will respond. What is really true of me? Where do I need to repent? Ask for forgiveness? Bring the truth to light?

With Jesus' announcement, the disciples are thrust into an intense period of self-doubt. They question themselves. But then Jesus seems to indicate that Judas is the one who will actually betray them. They are off the hook. It isn't them. Jesus wasn't actually talking about them. It was someone else.

Things can go back to normal now. What a relief. But they don't go back to normal. Jesus has a few more surprises in store for them.

A New Kind of Passover

First, Jesus surprises everyone by announcing that there is a betrayer among them. Then he surprises them in a different way by trying to change what the Passover means to them.

Matthew 26:26-30:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." 30 And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Passover celebration followed a kind of liturgy. There was a prescribed order to how everything was done. Matzah was broken as a symbol of the unleavened bread that was eaten on the eve of escaping Egypt. Breaking bread was normal. Four cups of wine were consumed at different parts of the meal. All of that was expected.

What wasn't expected was for Jesus to take the bread and say something new. "This is my body." The surprise came when he took the familiar "cup of blessing" and gave it new meaning. "This is the blood of my covenant."

My family has our share of traditions. One of them is where we go every year to cut down our Christmas tree. On a few occasions, I've suggested changing the location, for some variety.

That isn't met with any enthusiasm. Tradition must be preserved. Tradition must be maintained. Tradition happens the same every year. That's what makes it a tradition.

But Jesus takes the tradition of the Passover, which has been happening not just for a decade in one family, but for 15 centuries in every family that calls themselves Jewish. And he changes it. He changes tradition. He takes the symbols and he re-interprets those symbols to mean something else.

Or maybe it's more accurate to say that he adds new meaning to what was already there. He takes symbols that looked back to the freedom from Egypt and adds a new kind of freedom to the story. Now, these symbols point to forgiveness from sins. Freedom from the slavery of all of those things that make us ask, "Is it I, Lord?" This new tradition that Jesus begins at that table is about the sacrifice and forgiveness of a God who loves so deeply that he is willing to taste death for his beloved to have life.

With this new ceremony, our focus is shifted away from questioning ourselves to trusting in God. We remember what God has done for us. The many ways that God has been at work to free us from slavery. In the midst of all of our self-doubts, we remember what God has done.

A friend of mine in college once asked me why I wear a cross. In fact, he asked me why Christians are so focused on the gruesome story of Jesus' death. Why celebrate that moment of failure? Why do you remember the worst possible thing? Why are you so fixated on the gruesome details of a humiliating execution?

His question was not unique. In fact, this was one of the things that people asked in the first few centuries after Jesus' resurrection. There's an ancient 2nd-century document called "The Octavius of Minucius Felix." Isn't that a great title? It sounds like it comes from a Harry Potter novel.

It is a debate between a Christian and a Pagan, someone who follows the state religion of Rome. Several questions about Christianity are raised. One of them goes something like this, "The religion of the Christians is foolish, inasmuch as they worship a crucified man." It goes to reference rumors that "They are initiated by the slaughter and the blood of an infant... Thirstily, they lick up its blood." (Kirby)

Of course, that last rumor wasn't true, but you can see how it might have been a misunderstanding about the celebration of communion by the early Christians. They did drink blood, or at least, they drank wine that they believed was a symbol of the blood of their Messiah.

And this seems a gruesome thing to do. A strange kind of thing. Even an offensive thing.

But we remember the death of Jesus not because it was gruesome, but because it was costly. What God has done was costly. He paid our price. He carried our shame. He bore our guilt. We were bought with a price. A great and costly price.

The magnitude of the price reveals the magnitude of God's love. God has done something great for us because he loves us. Even when we betray him. Our focus is taken away from our own failure. We are reminded of God's faithfulness. We remember his death because it means life for us.

All Will Fall Away

So far our story has been a bit emotionally chaotic. We've anticipated, we've questioned, we've remembered. When the disciples learned that Judas was the one who would betray Jesus, they thought they were off the hook. But there is one more surprise. Not of a single betrayer, but of complete abandonment.

Matthew 26:31-35:

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' 32 But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." 33 Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." 35 Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same.

A moment earlier Jesus had invited his followers, "Drink of it all of you." Now he says "All of you will fall away." Before then, it was "One of you will betray me." Now it's "All of you will fall away." This is a warning not just of one bad apple in the basket, but of a completely rotten harvest.

I've coached a few of my children at different times in different sports. There are only a few things that you can really tell a team for a pep talk such as, "You can do it;" "Just relax;" "You're ready for this;" "Trust your training;" and "Have fun."

But this is not one of the things you should tell your team: "All of you will fail." When it matters the most, you will completely fall apart. None of you will succeed. You will lose miserably and end up as a disgrace.

Immediately after taking the previous meal of the Passover and reinterpreting it for their sakes so that they grasp the new thing God is doing for them, this is the pep talk that Jesus delivers.

Of course, Peter tries to correct Jesus. Professional tip: that's always a bad idea. He starts off by saying the others might desert him, but not Peter. Jesus gives him a more specific warning: he won't only fall away, Peter will deny Jesus three times. In response, Peter demands, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you."

Can you hear the exasperation in Peter's voice? Maybe he knows how close he is to denying his master and friend. Maybe he knows how fickle he is. Maybe he's trying to convince himself. But we know how the story ends. Peter does deny Jesus three times. And the rooster does crow.

So we're left to question ourselves again. What a few hours it's been. The anticipation of the Passover. The revelation of a spy. The mystery of a new ritual. And now an ominous prediction of mass failure.

But perhaps this is what we need. If there's only one betrayer, it's easy to let ourselves off the hook. When we question ourselves, it's hard to avoid the temptation to simply compare ourselves to the next guy. But when we're told that no one will be loyal, we have to face a new kind of reality about ourselves.

Be realistic. Admit our own weakness, own our need.

If January 1 is time for New Year's resolutions and commitments to try harder and do better this year, Lent is a time for recognizing our own limitations. And we

are limited. We are not as confident as we seem. We are not as together as we try so hard to appear.

You might walk into this room and see wealth and accomplishment and education and confidence. It might seem to you that everyone else is doing better than you. It might look like some people in this room are vastly excelling in life. But that's just the façade that we hide behind. No one is vastly excelling. No one is free from hurt and suffering and pain and confusion.

If you have eyes to see, then you would walk into this room and see lonely people. Broken families. Marriages with tension and misunderstanding. Parents estranged from their children. Individuals with hidden addictions. Insecurity and anxiety and fear and doubt.

Jesus invites us to face our own need. To come to terms with our own failures. To reveal that hidden truth that we're desperate to hide. Jesus exposes our weakness and failures, not to shame us or guilt us or humiliate us, but to free us from the tyranny of relying on ourselves. To open us up to the freedom and redemption of honest vulnerability.

When we own our need, it is his work that we are drawn to. Not our own. Once again, we reflect not on our own successes or failures, but on his incredible sacrifice for us. It is God's great love, expressed through his faithfulness that changes us. Not our own white-knuckled efforts.

Maybe you don't know Jesus. Maybe admitting your need sounds odd. But the story of the Gospel is one of strength from weakness; death from life. Maybe you do know Jesus, but you've managed to convince even yourself that you're strong and capable. You believe your own image. You've bought into your own brand.

Wherever you are, you can let down your guard. Be honest. Own your need. Stop and rest and settle into the trusted hands of Jesus.

Conclusion

Going into a big meal like Thanksgiving, we often have expectations. We think we know how things will go. We certainly know how we want them to go. Things

always seem to happen differently than we expect. But often something comes of it.

As Jesus enters the final hours of his life, all the expectations about what is supposed to happen are being violated. Nothing is how we would have guessed. But we have the sense that God is in it. All of this is part of his plan. All of it will come together.

Where are you this morning? What are the things that have brought you here? How is God leading up to this moment? Question yourself. What do you need to consider in your life? Remember what God has done. And own your need.

As we begin this preaching series during the time of Lent, we want to invite you into a season of reflection. I and others will be starting a reading plan on Wednesday that reads through the book of Matthew during Lent. We'd love for all of us to do it together. You can follow the plan on the YouVersion Bible app or the daily readings will be posted on our Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Whether you follow the reading plan or not, I'd like to suggest that you set aside some time this Lenten season to pray. Maybe a few minutes every day. Maybe during lunch one day per week. I'll be taking Wednesday lunches to fast and pray. Maybe you want to do the same. Or maybe something else entirely. Reflect on what you're reading in Matthew. Ask God what he's doing in your life. Maybe keep a journal and write down your reflections.

We've been sensing God's call as a church to bless those around us. Bless our city. Bless our neighbors. Be a blessing wherever we are. But being a blessing begins with our connection to Jesus. Lent is a great time to deepen that. Reflect. Remember.

This morning let the words of Jesus and the interactions of his disciples be your guide. We question ourselves but we fall back on the grace of God. We own our need and we look to Jesus. Even when we are faithless, he is faithful. His work restores and redeems us.

Endnotes

Kirby, Peter, "The Octavius of Minucius Felix." *Early Christian Writings*. 2018. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/octavius.html>