

The Great Sermon at the Lord's Supper

Chapters 14-17 of this gospel contain the "Last Supper Discourse." John did not include the words of the institution of the Eucharist in his account of the Last Supper, as was seen in all the synoptic gospels. We pointed out that he gave Christ's teaching about the Eucharist in his Bread of Life dialogue in chapter 6. Here John gives us Christ's profound reflection of his relationship to his Father and the Spirit. Around the table of fellowship, where Jesus celebrated his last Passover with his closest friends, he invited them to share in his relationship with his Father and the Spirit. That was the ultimate meaning of their Communion with him in his Body and Blood. His words to them are his words to us. The Great Sermon at the Last Supper was meant to be written on our hearts.

We Do Not Know the Way ...Show Us Your Father (John 14:1-14)

Jesus knew that within the next twenty-four hours he could be dead. His apostles still did not suspect this. People who know they are about to die will sum up a lifetime's worth of wisdom to pass on to their families and friends. Christ's Great Sermon at the Last Supper was delivered in this spirit.

He began his remarks with words about leaving. He tried to relieve their fears and anxieties about losing him forever. He asked them to trust him, no matter what happened. They must believe that he was leaving them to prepare a heavenly life for them. He would return and take them to himself. He reminded them that he had many times described for them the Way to this new Love and Life.

But did they know the Way?

Thomas spoke for them all by claiming they did not.

"Master...how can we know the way?" (verse 5).

Christ's witness, teachings, and miracles had not yet penetrated the hearts and minds of these eleven men who had been given the most extraordinary spiritual seminar in history.

For three years, by means of one-on-one personal encounter, as well as public sermons, dialogues, miracles, debates, dinner conversations, long talks on hikes, responses to problems and questions, the impressive example of his behavior, the powerful pull of his personality, and every other imaginable effort to reach them, Jesus had still only touched the surface of their souls.

This difficulty Jesus had with them would become even clearer in a moment when Philip would make a remark similar to that of Thomas. It will take the sign of glory – the sign of the cross – to open them up and rip apart the veil of their dull comprehensions. Even after that, it will require the continuing presence and power of the Holy Spirit to make this possible.

The process of Christian transformation is not a simple matter even when the best of all spiritual directors is available. That is as true for us as it was for our good friends at the Last Supper.

Jesus replied, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (verse 6).

The way is the way of the cross.

The truth is the fidelity Jesus witnessed to every person as well as the truths of his message that makes us free.

The life is love, the love that comes as a gift from the sanctuary of the Trinity.

The Way

The first name for Christianity was “The Way.” It implied both the life of moral virtue which Christians tried to witness and above all their commitment to discipleship. This meant revealing the glory-presence of God through living the sign of the cross. Lose the self. Take the cross. Follow Jesus. We Christians will always struggle with this Way. We will try to find substitutes. We will prefer a softer religion. We will want only Easter and not Good Friday. We will seek a pretty religion, not the blood, dirt, pain and evil smells of death that come with the cross.

Jesus made it clear that the Way would never be easy. He first walked that Way himself to show us how to do it. He did not promise us a rose garden without thorns. To imagine the Way without suffering is to corrupt Christianity. But to be lifted up on our cross is to be lifted up to glory, to be flooded with divine light and be transformed into a lifestyle that will provide us with the most extraordinary possibilities for happiness.

The Truth

Throughout his ministry Jesus insisted that his message was true. He spoke truths. He was not voicing opinions that could be disputed and proven to be inferior to other opinions. Jesus was not a relativist in the marketplace of ideas. He claimed that what he said was absolutely true. His message of truths has survived two thousand years of efforts to disprove them and reduce them to mere opinions that float away with the next wind of fashion.

Today's climate of relativism (There is no truth, only opinions.) is nothing new. Century after century, one or another form of it has surfaced again and again, always hoping to dislodge the truths of Jesus from influencing people's intellectual and moral lives. It is these truths that have liberated the minds of Christians and opened them to the inner freedom that is such a precious gift.

Lies enslave. Truths liberate.

At the Last Supper Jesus went further. He told the apostles that he not only had the truth – he was the Truth. By this he meant that truth should be more than food for the intellect. It must also be the iron that tightens our ability to be faithful to God, others and self. Truth is also the food for commitment, loyalty, and fidelity. This above all to your own self be true, to your friend be true, to your God be true. And then you shall never be false to anyone. A truth in the mind that never affects behavior will wither. Truth only gives us inner freedom when we act on it. The most obvious outcome of truth in the mind is fidelity in our behavior.

This is the wholistic view of truth Jesus brought to full flower at the Great Supper. Our society needs his vision more than ever. It is no great surprise that once it taught relativism – that truth in the mind is impossible to find – then fidelity in behavior became a scarce commodity. Modern culture, therefore, has become a desert scattered with the bones of broken commitments. Jesus tells us he is Truth. He is a living example of fidelity. He kept his promises. This is the total vision of Truth, the one that will do much to heal broken families, fractured friendships, and all the other kinds of chaotic relationships in our contemporary world.

The Life

Lastly, Jesus is the Life.

Only where there is Love is there Life. Someone once put a sign on his desk, "Died at 45 – Retired at 65." People who have ceased to love drift into a living death. The pervasive unhappiness of many people is largely attributable to the slow dying that comes from the loss of the capacity to love and be loved. Love is more likely to die when it has ceased to be a love that brings God into one's relationships with others, God, and self.

Jesus has already spoken of his new commandment of love, a saving love, a love that redeems one from all kinds of oppression, above all from sin.

Sin is death. Divine Love is Life. At the Lord's Supper, the apostles communed with the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. They had communed with Life, with visible Love. Eternal Life had entered their spiritual bloodstream. Jesus was not explaining to them what their experience meant.

The seemingly innocent question of Thomas about how to find the Way evoked from Jesus his remarkable revelation of himself as Way...Truth...Life. Another apostolic remark prepared for a further splendid revelation. Jesus said that no one could reach the Father except through him. Like the shepherd who laid his body across the opening to the sheepfold, Jesus was the gate to heaven and access to the Father. Philip was so excited by this that he enthusiastically said, "Show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (verse 8).

See Me – See Your Father

Sounding impatient, Jesus reminded Philip of all the months and years they have been together. In all this time, has not Philip understood what Jesus was doing and saying? (See above comment on the full range of teaching, example and personal contact Jesus used to open up his apostles to the power of personal change in mind, heart, feelings, soul and body.) There is a tone of exasperation in Christ's reply. And yet this situation drew from him a line that remains to this day a point for boundless reflection: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Verse 9).

Familiarity with someone does not necessarily produce an insight into that person. How often we say, "I really never knew her"... "He was always a mystery to me." Valuable as it is, the experience of a person does not automatically reveal who that person really is. Even loving spouses at silver wedding anniversaries have been known to say, "We are just getting to know each other."

This is even more true in an age where we believe that observing the outer behavior of a person is the key to knowing the inner core of that man or woman. Surveys of personality traits, examinations of sexual attitudes, profiles of administrative talents, IQ tests, reports of spending habits, compatibility quotients, emotional stability, and political choices still leave most of us in the dark about the inner mystery of the human person.

Philip had plenty of evidence about Jesus. But what he saw with his eyes only gave him sight, not insight. He liked Jesus, even loved him. One would have thought this would have led him to really know him. Long songs say, "To love me is to know me." But poets reply that love is blind and tragically lovers do not see. Still, love songs and poets are talking about romance and the bubbly, superficial emotion of inexperienced and untested love.

Sad as it may be to report, too many people are sluggish in their relating, even to their best friends. What passes for love is merely sloth for the partners in the relationship have made little effort to truly know one another.

Philip made Jesus painfully aware of how thin was the level of insight his apostles had in him. They had the benefit of superb instruction. They saw miracles performed with authority. They beheld actions that only a God could do – sins forgiven, secret thoughts revealed, death taking flight, eyesight created from the clay of the earth.

The most remarkable thing about Christ's reaction was that he gave them even a greater revelation to chew on. He did not take out the baby food and start over. Nor did he concede to their weakness and hint that, well, after all such a revelation is too much for people. If they did not think it was possible, then maybe it was not. Jesus rejected this approach. He did not fashion his teaching out of the mistakes and weaknesses of his listeners nor remake revelation to fit their dim perceptions.

Instead, Jesus let lightning strike the Upper Room. As good Jews they all knew that one would die if one saw God. Moses had to veil his face when talking to God. Even at the burning bush, he bowed his eyes to the ground and took off his shoes in fearful dread before the face of God. Firm voiced and deliberate, Jesus lifted his apostles to a new level of vision. They could look on him and live. In fact, they could only live by looking at the glory he was revealing. To have spiritual insight into him is to know the Father.

He is not saying that he is the Father, but that he is image of the Father. He and his Father are one. The Father who seemed to scare the prophets entered that Upper Room of affection and love in the middle of the most amiable moment of their liturgical year, the Passover. It has now become the celebration of the Eucharist, a friendship meal of sacrificial love. And the Father is there. Absolutely united to his Son. Jesus did not pat them on the heads with palliatives of watered-down teaching. He resolutely pushed them beyond their limited horizons.

Despite their blindness, he knew the peaks of faith of which they were capable and gloriously led them there. Stubbornly, he held their feet to the fire to mature them in belief. His affection was not the soft pastels of a greeting card, but the roaring and sumptuous primary colors of the sunrise. The Father was as available as the Jesus who sat before them.

Jesus Will Send the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-31)

Jesus repeated again that he was leaving them. If they loved him they would keep his commandments, especially the “new commandment.” He revealed to them that the Holy Spirit would become part of their lives. This spirit would provide them with the same kind of intimate presence they had known in their relationships with him.

The Spirit would bring back to their memories all he had said to them and open their hearts to the real meaning and possibilities of the Gospel.

In a sense he was telling them why they still did not appreciate who he was, what he said and what he taught. Until he was lifted up to glory on the cross and until the Spirit came, they would still flounder in their inadequate grasp of his ministry to them. The redemption would deliver them from their darkness and the coming of the Spirit would provide the insight so difficult for them to acquire up to this point. He did not want his impatience with Philip to frighten them. Nor should the passion cause them to lose hope. “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (verse 27).

Even if he flooded them with such ineffable revelations – insights presently behind them – he let them know he understood their difficulties. He treated them as adults, but always with compassion for the problems they had in believe in him and his message. They may not be able to take it all in that evening in the Upper Room, but when the Spirit came they would be granted the gift of insight and the courage to act on it.

Never intending to leave them without hope, he spoke of giving them his peace, that sense of inner harmony wherein one is reconciled to self, others, and God. His peace was different from the world’s peace which is more of a truce, an uneasy pause in life’s confrontations. The world’s peace is imposed by force. Christ’s peace is offered in freedom. The world’s peace requires security arrangements. Christ’s peace creates inner security that liberates one from fear, sin and death. This is experienced by us more clearly in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

After Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost the apostles will begin to assimilate the impact of these first words of the Last Supper Discourse. Jesus strove to allay their fears that night and share his inner peace with them. In the years to come his Holy Spirit will continue this work and much, much more.