

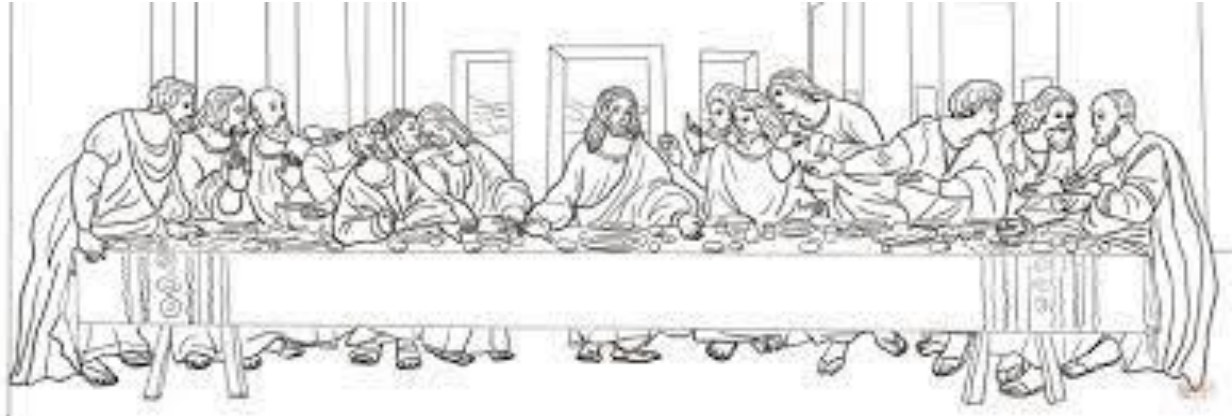
COME TO CHRIST'S TABLE

A sermon for Palm Sunday with Holy Communion

Matthew 21:1-11, 26: 26-30; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; John 13; & Corinthians 11:23-26

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Today as Palm Sunday falls on the first Sunday of April, our church's regular time for Holy Communion, we are aware of not one, but two events in Jesus' life. Remembering both Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his Last Supper, let's begin with the version of the Last Supper we probably know best, Leonardo DaVinci's famous painting. This fresco has been duplicated, adapted, argued over, and served as the foundation of some pretty good jokes. Our videographer's favorite comes from *Mel Brook's History of the World, Part 1* (1981) where Jesus calls out, "Hey everyone, get on this side of the Table if you want to be in the picture."ⁱ

Have you ever seen the original painting with your own eyes? I have not. But Rick Steves did make a great fifteen-minute documentary of this great fresco in its original setting for those of us who arm chair travel.ⁱⁱ Da Vinci painted this great work as a mural on the wall of a monastery dining room at Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie (Church of Saint Mary of Grace) in Milan, Italy. Today, due to bombing during World War II, only the wall with the Last Supper survives, but when Da Vinci was commissioned to paint that dining room in 1498 Christ's last supper was one wall of a mural that covered all four walls and the ceiling, giving diners the impression of dining with Christ in a mulberry grove.ⁱⁱⁱ "Tromp l'oeil" is the technical name of this art form; originally from French it translates into English as "fool the eye." Tromp l'oeil leads viewers to see something that is not there. Da Vinci took a plain, square room where Christians often ate together and elevated every meal to be a reminder of

our sacrament of Holy Communion. After all, when Jesus instituted the sacrament, he was seated in a dining room not a sanctuary.

By placing Christ in the middle of the painting and using applied geometry, Da Vinci combined every New Testament account of the Last Supper so diners experience a room where Christ ate with them. The light and shadows on their faces seem to come from the real windows of that square room. The ceiling lines extend the room's ceiling lines so we see the room as rectangular rather than square. The view through the painted windows behind Jesus was the view a diner would have seen if those windows were real.

Only Christ, the bread, and the cup are more important than the table. But Da Vinci's table is not a historical representation of the table where Jesus Christ first said, "Take, eat; this is my body. . . this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28, New Revised Standard Version/NSRV.) The table in Da Vinci's painting is the same kind of plain tables the monks sat at as they ate. Christ's table appears where the head table would have been at an Italian banquet in 1498. Da Vinci has taken the five New Testament accounts of the Last Supper,^{iv} and combined them as if the Last Supper had happened in this monastery dining room on the day he first applied color to plaster. Da Vinci's masterpiece still invites viewers to share Holy Communion with Christ at every meal.

Leonardo Da Vinci recognized something we do not often discuss, that this dinner with Jesus may have included more people than just the Apostles. "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," says New Testament Scholar Amy-Jill Levine.^v Who else may have attended that first Holy Communion? In the four gospels, two of the apostles are named, both Judas and Peter because their life stories and Jesus' life story have an important shared experience that night after supper. Luke mentions John in his gospel, but no other apostle is mentioned by name in any gospel. Nor is the host named, a person Jesus seems to already know. (See Matthew 26:18.) At other similar dinners, women attended. (See Matthew 26:6-13.) Never does the Bible say only the Apostles were there. We insert this assumption that based on post Dark Ages (5th to 14th century) European dining traditions captured in paintings since the Renaissance (15th to 18th centuries). New Testament scholars, biblical archeologists, and historians all believe that the ancient dining room Jesus borrowed to host this meal would have been a large room, a place where Jesus and the twelve could be seated at a head table with room around them for others to join them.

But who could those other guests have been? A good, educated guess would be that most of those guests had welcomed Jesus with palm branches when he entered

Jerusalem riding a donkey's colt. (See Matthew 21:1-11) Perhaps Nicodemus or Joseph who in a few days would bury Jesus' body were there. (See John 19:38-42). Martha, Mary and Lazarus may have come from nearby Bethany. (See Luke 10 and John 11.) It is hard to imagine others there without including Mary of Magdala, who is present at both Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection in every account. Was Judas the only traitor present? Did only Peter deny knowing him? We will never know.

There is so much we don't know, but there are key facts that are truly important. Jesus Christ was there. On his supper table were both left over unleavened bread that reminds Jews to this day of their exodus from Egypt (See Leviticus 23.), and the cup of wine meant for Elijah should he return. (See 2 Kings 2.) Jesus took those important foods meant to help Jews remember their faith ancestors, gave thanks to God, and gave them to everyone present with new meanings. The bread Christ broke and shared became his body broken for us. The wine in Elijah's cup became for us his blood shed on the cross, the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. Our Christian altar is the cross. Our communion table is where we meet Christ again and again through this sacrament. From the past, Christ instituted the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion to sustain us until he returns.

Today, in our sanctuary we have a Communion Table built to resemble an ordinary dining room table. For us, this is Christ's Table. It is not an altar; it is the table dedicated to the meal Christ left with us. Christ's meal by divine purpose and holy mystery reminds us that we are invited by Christ to share his sacrifice with him. As often as we can, we do so in a setting that helps us experience sharing his bread and cup not just with Christ, but also with each other and Christ's followers in every place and every time, from the first century dining rooms where the church first met (See 1 Corinthians 11:17-34), through the Dark Ages to a Renaissance monastery dining room in 1498, to our sanctuary in Hudson, Wisconsin today, Palm Sunday, 2 April 2023.

Friends, let us join Christ and break bread together with those everywhere and every time who have welcomed Christ waving palms. Amen.

ⁱ John Ramstad whenever anyone brings up this painting in conversation.

ⁱⁱ Classroom.ricksteves.com, accessed on 2023.03.30.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sala_delle_Asse, accessed on 2023.03.30.

^{iv} In order of composition, Da Vinci drew on these 5 scriptures: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Mark 14:22-25, Matthew 26: 26-30, Luke 22:14-23, & John 13.

^v *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week*. Amplify Media, Nashville. 2022. Viewed on 2023.03.28.