

Follow: Learning from Matthew to Live Like Jesus
 Faith UMC Lent Bible Study, 2025
 Week 6

Matthew 26:26-35

26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' ²⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

30 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

31 Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

"I will strike the shepherd,
 and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

³²But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' ³³Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' ³⁴Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' ³⁵Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And so said all the disciples.

Matthew 28:9-10

⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Community of Healing

The Last Supper is a story of deserters. Not *desserters*, as in people who eat their cake before dinner, but deserters like soldiers who go AWOL, Away Without Leave, soldiers who abandon their brothers-in-arms in their moment of greatest peril, leaving their brothers to die because they didn't have enough backup. The Last Supper is a tale of twelve brothers who walk out on their captain when the bullets go flying, leaving the captain to take the bullet for them and die a lonely death. While the brothers bail on their captain, the captain takes the fall for them, literally, and pays for their every breath afterward with his own life.

What makes this tale even more dramatic is what the captain does before his brothers bail on him: he forgives them in advance. The captain preemptively forgives his brothers, and when they flat-out deny they will need forgiving, he tells them they will reunite soon, when the captain returns from the dead, in Galilee where the mission first began, and they will return to being

brothers-in-arms. Not only are the deserters forgiven before they ever walk out on the captain, but they're also promised restoration to the community they abandon. The deserters will demolish the community that the brothers and the captain had enjoyed for years, but the captain sees the day coming when the community will be restored and stronger than ever, because the community, like metal broken and reforged, will be strengthened by the stronger-than-death force of forgiveness.

The Last Supper is an epic of worst moments forgiven *and* broken community repaired, all thanks to a captain no one deserves but from whom everyone benefits. In Jesus, there is forgiveness of sins for the sake of restoration to community. Or in plain talk: because of Jesus, we are released from our worst moments so we can be friends with the people we stabbed in the back.

I began to read the story of the Last Supper differently – as a tale of forgiveness for the purpose of returning to community – after I met a young man whom we'll call Devon. I met Devon during one of my seminary internships.

My seminary required two internships in churches or non-profit agencies in order to graduate, but they would pay for up to three internships, so of course I did three internships. My third internship was with a wonderful United Methodist church in the most diverse and densely populated neighborhood of Houston, the same church I would later serve as pastor after I graduated. This church birthed and housed a gang ministry called Houston reVision. reVision worked with “kids on the edge” as they called them, kids who were caught up in gang life or who were at risk of being caught up in a gang, and many who wanted a way out. One of these kids was Devon. Devon was picked up and locked up. My mentor pastor, named Justin, thought it would be good professional experience for me if I shadowed him on a trip to visit Devon in juvenile detention.

The most noteworthy thing about Devon was that there was nothing noteworthy about him. His skin was coffee with heavy cream. He wore the same khaki uniform as all the other kids on the cell block. They were *kids*, after all, kids in cages. Devon told us he missed his mother

and his siblings. The food in prison was okay, the books were better, and he wanted a Bible. We didn't have a Bible on us, but we did give him a book of prayers as a gift from the church.

During the car ride back to church, I asked Justin why Devon was in prison. He said Devon was arrested for armed robbery. Devon told the reVision staff, who told Justin, that he wasn't carrying a weapon. The police were responding to a 911 call made by someone who thought they saw intruders breaking into a house across the street. They were right. No one was in the house, thank God, except Devon and three of his buddies, three brothers-in-arms from the same gang.

Devon was the only one who was caught. The others ran for it and got away. That meant Devon was most likely guilty of the robbery and the prosecution would likely charge him for the *armed* robbery piece, too, even though he wasn't armed. Devon was guilty by association. There was also a good chance that Devon, at age 17, would be tried as an adult and face over a decade in prison alongside grown men multiple times his age.

When I think about Jesus at the Last Supper, I think about Devon, though with the crucial detail that Jesus was innocent. Here was a young man who thought he had brothers, friends as close as blood, but these so-called brothers run for it at the first sign of trouble, leaving Devon, and Jesus, to take the fall. These so-called brothers managed to escape, but their escape wasn't free. Devon, and Jesus, paid the price for their desertion.

Imagine if, one day much later, when Devon is in his late-twenties to early thirties, he is released from prison and he manages to find the so-called brothers who betrayed him. He might turn violent on these brothers, or he might curse them to hell and back. Or maybe, if he's Jesus, he meets up with them at the same apartment complex they haunted as kids. He pulls the deserters into a tear-dripped hug and calls them "brothers" once again. He forgives them. He releases them from their moment of weakness. He chooses to restore the community that their act of betrayal destroyed. Only now is the sin that destroyed the friendship destroyed, too. Forgiveness leading to reconciliation, release from mistakes leading to restoration to community: that is the story arc of the Passion of Jesus Christ.

The final marker of a life that follows Jesus is a Community of Healing. Followers of Jesus participate in a community where everyone is a sinner, everyone needs forgiving, and everyone does the forgiving. The result is a stronger-than-death community, forged like hot metal by the powers of forgiveness, for everyone in this community knows Jesus forgave them before they could ask for it, and therefore, they extend forgiveness to everyone else. This a community of healing, where the forgiven are both in the process of being healed and the healers themselves.

Let's close our study of the Gospel of Matthew by following Jesus to the Last Supper, then to his betrayal, arrest, mock trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. It's a story arc of preemptive forgiveness, followed by worst moments, followed by the coronation of a king, followed by restoration to a community of healing healers.

Devotion

The phrase “when Jesus had finished saying all these things” marks the end of the fifth block of teaching in Matthew and the close of Jesus’ teaching ministry on earth (Matthew 26:1). Jesus tells the disciples that Passover will begin at sundown on Thursday night and reminds them, once again, that he must be betrayed and crucified (Matthew 26:2).

Meanwhile, the high priest in Jerusalem, named Caiaphas, calls a meeting of the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:3). The Sanhedrin is the assembly of the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem with the legal authority to condemn people to death by handing them over to the Roman government for capital punishment. Already in Matthew 26, we see a comparison of two closed-door conspiracies: the first is led by Jesus, and the second by Caiaphas. The first conspiracy is a mission to save the world from sin and death; the second is a plot to murder Jesus before he makes too much trouble for the Sanhedrin.

The scene switches to the house where Jesus stayed overnight after he preached all day in the Temple: to the house of Simon the leper in a suburb of Jerusalem called Bethany (Matthew 26:6-13). An anonymous woman pours expensive perfume over Jesus’ head. The perfume was

probably the woman's dowry. The dowry, or bride-price paid by the husband's family to the bride, didn't have to be paid in cash. Usually, the dowry was a valuable family heirloom like an alabaster jar full to the brim of the most expensive perfume. In giving the dowry, the groom's family transfers wealth to the bride as a safety net in the event her husband dies and she loses her source of income. The dowry was an ancient life insurance policy.

Imagine emptying your life savings, let's say in the amount of \$100,00, all the money you have in the world and your only safety net if you lose your job or your spouse, and you toss the cash on the head of Jesus. The disciples are irate at what they interpret as a waste of money. "Just think of the number of hungry people we could have fed with that money!" Let's admit it: the disciples make a good point. But Jesus interprets the woman's action as a "good service" for him (Matthew 26:10). In anointing his head with oil, the woman prepares Jesus' body for burial pre-mortem. For Jesus, the anointing isn't wasteful; it's love.

As a pastor, I've officiated at many funerals where I knew the family couldn't afford the expense of the funeral home's services, but still, the families came up with the money somehow. I've seen families start GoFundMe fundraisers to pay for the funeral. I remember when my former church lost a high school junior named Gene. Gene's dad had walked out on the family years before, leaving Gene's mother to support herself and her six children (now five) on the wages of a hotel housekeeper. Gene was active in our youth group, and the parents in the youth group raised well over the \$10,000 funeral home bill. It was a miracle. Of course, nothing would have been more valuable to Gene's mother than to have Gene alive and well, but the fact that she didn't have to borrow money to pay for the burial meant Gene's death wouldn't bankrupt the family.

You could call expenses like this "wasteful" like the disciples do. Why start a GoFundMe or a church fundraiser to pay for someone's funeral? The person is dead, after all. Why not use the money for the living? It's a fair question. The only possible reply, a reply that I must confess is not fiscally logical, is that this is what love looks like. Love looks like paying for a high school junior's funeral so his mother doesn't have to take out a loan. Love looks like asking everyone

you've ever met to help you crowdsource the funding for your cousin's burial. Love looks like pouring expensive perfume on a young man doomed to die.

The woman who anoints Jesus is devoted to him. The word "devotion" comes from the Latin word for "bound by a vow." In anointing the head of Jesus, she is binding herself to him with an unspoken, fragrant vow. Now, forevermore, she belongs to Jesus, and Jesus belongs to her. We're supposed to see the symbolism of marriage, especially in the transfer of her dowry as a way of making this vow. This woman is special because she represents what a relationship with Jesus should be for *all* disciples. We don't simply believe in Jesus; we are bound to him in an everlasting relationship, like a bride to a groom.

Following Jesus is more than a philosophy or creed, and it's certainly more than taking a side in a political or cultural battle. Following Jesus is about being part of a community of concentric circles: at the center is your community with Jesus, then the circles go outward in ever-expanding circles of love for all. Every follower of Jesus has to ask ourselves: is my relationship with Jesus at the core of everything else? Am I keeping my vows to him? Am I devoted to him above all else?

Or am I not? The very next passage is the story of Judas switching sides in this cosmic conspiracy. Instead of being part of God's mission to save the world, he switches over to the dark plot to murder Jesus. Judas sells out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:15). Why did Judas do it? Entire libraries of theology have been written on the subject. Was this part of Jesus' plan all along? Or was Judas a free agent? We'll never know, not on this side of heaven, but what is clear is what the betrayal of Judas means: he severs his devotion to Jesus. No longer is his relationship with Jesus at the core of his life. He broke his vow.

The life of a Christian is a spectrum with the woman at Bethany on one end and Judas on the other. On one extreme is total devotion to Jesus, and at the other is total removal of Jesus from the core of your identity. Where are you on this spectrum? Be honest.

New Community

The time has come for the Festival of Unleavened Bread, a seven-day Jewish celebration in remembrance of the exodus from slavery in Egypt and always begun on Nisan 15 in the Jewish calendar. Let's remember that in the Jewish calendar, the day begins at sundown. On the morning of Nisan 14, Jesus tells the disciples to search for a man who will host Jesus and the disciples in his guest room that night, which technically begins Nisan 15, so they can eat the Passover meal together (Matthew 26:17-19). Still today, the Passover meal is only eaten with family. An invitation to a Passover meal is a big deal: it's like you're being invited to an intimate family reunion. Jesus chooses to eat this family meal with the people he claims as family, these twelve friends, his brothers.

Let's also remember the significance of the Passover meal. In Exodus 12, God commands the Israelites, now emancipated from slavery in Egypt, to remember their liberation once a year, every year. The Israelites were to slaughter a lamb and paint the doorpost of their house with the blood of the lamb, just as the Israelites did when the angel of death swept over Egypt to claim the firstborn; Death saw the blood and "passed over" that house. During the Passover meal, the head of the family remembers the events of the exodus and uses the food on the table as props. The bread, wine, meat, and herbs all have symbolic meanings pointing back to the epic story of God's liberation of God's chosen people from bondage. The meal, then, calls Jews back to their origin story: once we were slaves, then God acted, and now we're free.

Let's summarize these layers of meaning. Passover is about *liberation* from captivity, *escape* from death, *reunion* as a family, and *constitution* as God's chosen people, a nation set apart, blessed to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

What Jesus does in the Last Supper is reinterpret the symbols of the Passover to be about the new community of the church. The bread of the Passover meal is his body, and the wine is his blood. They represent liberation from *all* captivity: from the powers of sin and death in this life, our tendency not to love people, and the active evils and oppression of our world. The Last Supper represents our escape from death itself: yes, we will die, but death will be nothing more than a closing of the chapter, the last period on the last page before the next chapter begins, for

the eternal life of Jesus will be *our* eternal life, too. The Last Supper is a family reunion: all the followers of Jesus gather at the table of the Lord, where he alone is host, as sinners who need grace and who need to extend grace to others. Though the world likes to divide person from person and group from group, the Last Supper achieves a fundamental unity in the body of Christ, for we all partake of the same Jesus, benefiting from the same grace. The Last Supper constitutes a new people, a new movement of the human race. As a national Constitution makes a nation real through pen and paper, so does the Last Supper make the church real through his body and blood.

Ultimately, what the Last Supper means is community: community with God through the giving of his Son, and community with one another as people who practice sacrificial love of one another.

Let's call attention to two more details about the Last Supper story: first, Judas eats Communion. Jesus serves Judas a handful of grace. Jesus *knows* Judas will betray him. Jesus tells Judas to his face that he knows (Matthew 26:25). But still Jesus serves Communion to Judas. Here we see the first fundamental step in the story arc of the Passion of Christ: preemptive forgiveness. All people, meaning every human being who has ever taken breath, has the preemptive forgiveness of Christ. In the United Methodist church, we call this prevenient grace, the grace that goes before you, before you know a thing about God and well after you turn away from God. Prevenient grace means you have Christ's preemptive forgiveness. All you've done and neglected to do, it falls under the same category as the betrayal of Judas: it's already forgiven. Take heart- you were forgiven at a Passover meal 2000 years ago. Be free, knowing you've already been set free.

Then there's a second crucial detail: every disciple says they will never deny Jesus (Matthew 26:35). We could make a big deal out of Judas' betrayal and Peter's determination to stick close to Jesus no matter what, but in the end, all twelve disciples say they will follow Jesus to hell and back, and all twelve will fall short. All twelve will desert him like brothers-in-arms deserting their captain during a firefight. The captain will stay true; the so-called brothers will flee.

Here we see the beginnings of the second major story arc of the Passion: our worst moments. We'll find the disciples in the worst moments of their lives yet, and Peter in greatest detail.

We must take these worst moments seriously. These moments are the worst moments because they make us *look* the worst and because we caused the worst *harm* to people. The worst moments are the times our actions or inactions hurt real people, or the times when we turned our backs on the people we love, when we continued the cycles of violence and abuse in our families, when we added to the suffering of the world, all the way down to the little worst moments like gossip about a colleague, raising your voice too much at your kids, adding to the divisions in our culture with a heart of wrath against those on the "other side": it's all a worst moment, some big, some small, but a worst moment nonetheless.

We all have these worst moments. Let's confess them and call them real. For us *not* to confess our worst moments would be a betrayal to the people we hurt in our worst moments. They deserve the basic dignity of our admission of guilt. Let's also remember that our worst moments are the second step in the story arc. First comes preemptive forgiveness. We are forgiven, then we are sinners, *in that order*.

Betrayal

The Passion narrative picks up speed. The following events happen in a matter of hours, beginning with nightfall on Thursday evening. What these events have in common is *betrayal of Jesus*. It's easy to say, "I've never betrayed Jesus. I didn't sell him out like Judas. I didn't deny knowing him like Peter." But we all betray Jesus, and most of us do it everyday. Let's find ourselves in the betrayals of Thursday night.

First is the betrayal of *sleeping on the job*. Jesus leads the disciples down the mountain on which Jerusalem sits, walks across the Kidron Valley to the east, and begins the climb up the Mount of Olives. It's called the Mount of Olives because of an ancient olive grove on top of the mountain. At the bottom was a garden called Gethsemane (in Hebrew, "olive press") where the

olives were squished to make olive oil. Jesus must have taken the disciples to pray with him in the garden of Gethsemane several times during Holy Week, for Judas expects Jesus to be there on Thursday night. The one thing the Sanhedrin didn't know was where to find Jesus once Jesus left the Temple. Judas sells this information to the Sanhedrin for thirty pieces of silver: you'll find him in Gethsemane. We should remember a prophecy from the prophet Zechariah that the Messiah would stand on the Mount of Olives and enter Jerusalem from the east (Zechariah 14:4). From Matthew's perspective, all of the Passion narrative is a fulfillment of prophecy.

Jesus took eleven disciples (Judas is busy elsewhere) into the garden of Gethsemane, and an inner circle of three – Peter, James, and John – deeper into the heart of the garden. Then, Jesus goes even deeper by himself. Jesus prays a prayer of surrender: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” (Matthew 26:39). Two things about Jesus become clear: first, Jesus does *not* want to suffer the humiliating defeat and excruciating pain of crucifixion, and second, Jesus puts what God wants above what he wants. Jesus is *brutally honest* with God: “Father, I don't want this! If it's at all possible, don't let this happen.” But at the same time, Jesus approaches God with *brave humility*: “God, not what I want, but what you want.” Is this not what real faith looks like? Brutal honesty joined with brave humility. A follower of Christ goes to God with brutal honesty about the deepest, darkest, and most painful truths of the heart, and then, surrenders with brave humility to God's ultimate will.

Jesus returns to Peter, James, and John and finds them fast asleep! And not just once, but *three times* Jesus finds them sleeping on the job. Jesus was laying his heart bare before God, and here are the disciples taking a snooze. The sleeping on the job is an act of betrayal.

We know what we're supposed to do as a follower of Christ: feed the homeless, pray for your enemy, forgive your spouse, give sacrificially, show up to the house of the grieving (just to name a few). But how often do we actually *do* it? It's more likely that we sleep on the job, meaning, we simply stay home or busy ourselves with to-do lists, emails, and pointless hurry. In these times, we betray Christ. We're not actively betraying him so much as betraying him by acts of *omission*: we could be using this time to love God and love neighbor, that's our job after all,

but we look back on our lives and find that we simply didn't do it as much as we could. We slept on the job.

My fourth seminary internship, this one unpaid, was as a chaplain at Duke Hospital. I was on-call for a 24-hour shift. I received a page (remember pagers?) from a pediatric ICU. A twenty-three-year-old patient was actively dying, succumbing after a long battle with cystic fibrosis. I had visited with the patient earlier that day. She was alert and looking healthy. Now she was struggling to take a breath and sedated on morphine. It was almost time. What made the scene truly horrible was her parents. Her mother and father were at her bedside. It was 2:30 in the morning. They were keeping vigil over their dying child. As the heartbeat line on the monitor flattened, no more peaks and valleys, no more signs of life, the father shouted into the night: "Here it comes!" He was *not* going to bail on his child, not now, not like this.

Like a father at the bedside of his child, we stay close to Christ. We stick with him through the peaks and valleys of life, in every situation where love makes demands of us and we stay true. We stay awake to his presence and calling on our lives, which means we keep our integrity as Christ-followers as much as we can, wherever we can, to whomever we can. We sleep on the job when we fall short of our integrity to Christ and to who Christ calls us to be. It's an act of betrayal, as tough as it sounds, and we all do it.

Then there's *scattering for cover*. Judas leads a mob to the place he knew Jesus would be, because Jesus is Judas' best friend in the world and best friends know where the other friend is likely to be when they're stressed and scared. The crowd with "swords and clubs" is not the police; they're an angry mob riled up by the "chief priests" and "elders," who no doubt told them that Jesus will make their life worse if he's allowed to live (Matthew 26:47). Judas sells out his best friend with a kiss on the cheek. His betrayal is as heartbreaking as their relationship is close-or, it *was* close. The mob lays hands on Jesus, and one of the disciples, thinking the time for armed revolution against Rome has finally begun, draws a sword to defend his captain. But Jesus says no: "Put your sword back in its place" (Matthew 26:52). The Messiah will conquer humanity's oldest foes, sin and death, with a force mightier than any sword, bullet, bomb, or drone. The Messiah will conquer with the cross, the ultimate symbol of humiliation and defeat.

As Jesus is led away from Gethsemane, the disciples “fled” (Matthew 26:56). They scatter like insects when the lights are turned on.

We betray Jesus when there’s an opportunity to do something brave for Christ, but the fear sets in, and instead of persevering, we scatter for cover. We don’t push through the hard; we run and ride. The brave thing in front of you probably isn’t taking a vocal stand for your faith. It’s likely a choice between the right thing and the easy thing. Rather than an act of omission, as with sleeping on the job, this form of betrayal is an act of *commission*: we know the choice between the easy thing and the right thing, and we choose the easy thing.

We love Christ when we choose the right thing, and usually the right thing comes with a cost- a cost of time, reputation, money, strength, or comfort. But sometimes the motivation of self-preservation is too strong. We don’t want to pay the price that comes with doing the right thing, so we choose the easy thing instead- this is scattering for cover.

Years ago, one of the housekeepers at my church was struggling to move a tall stack of chairs. We were cleaning up after a service event. Dozens of church members had packaged meals of rice and beans, to be given to local pantries. Our housekeepers worked for a separate company. They were lovely people. None of them spoke fluent English, and most of the church passed them in the hallways without making contact. One of the housekeepers was using a furniture dolly to move a stack of chairs, piled eight high, into the storage closet of the fellowship hall, but she was struggling. For whatever reason – maybe she had hurt her back, or she couldn’t figure out how to use the dolly – she couldn’t move the stack of chairs. I watched her struggle. I thought, “Should I help her? I don’t want to embarrass her in front of all these people. Maybe she doesn’t want to be seen as weak.” Clearly, many other people thought the same thing, for the fellowship hall was full of people chit-chatting after a fun service event, and here was a woman in trouble, surrounded on all sides by able bodies, but no one was stepping up to help. In the end, another housekeeper came to her rescue.

While it’s true my church had served Jesus that day by feeding the hungry, we also betrayed Jesus that day because there was a clear right thing to do – help this woman! – but we

all, probably to avoid the discomfort of the encounter, chose the easy thing to do. We scattered for cover. We do something like this everyday. We see the right thing to do, but like the disciples who pursue a different agenda from the *one agenda* they knew was right – stick with Jesus! – we choose a path that feels easier. I know in my life, the easy thing is the people-pleasing thing, the feel-good thing, and the least-resistance thing. When I choose those paths over the path I know deep down is the right path, I betray my Jesus with a kiss.

A third type of betrayal against Christ is *striking with violence*. This type of betrayal causes the most human damage. It's making deliberate choices that result, directly or indirectly, in real people getting hurt.

The mob takes Jesus to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, where the Sanhedrin has gathered (Matthew 26:57). The Sanhedrin give Jesus a false trial. It's a false trial because the verdict against him has already been decided. They agreed before the trial began that Jesus was guilty of blasphemy, or claiming to be God himself, which was punishable by death. The Sanhedrin holds a trial so they can say to the public, "Look, we gave this guy his day in court, and found him guilty," when his guilt was pre-determined. Jesus isn't innocent until proven guilty; he's guilty until proven crucified.

Jesus doesn't fall for any of the Sanhedrin's tricks, so Caiaphas asks him point-blank: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God," to which Jesus replies, "You have said so." (Matthew 26:63, 64). Jesus admits it. He's God's chosen king, God come to earth to rule, and with this confession, the Sanhedrin has all the evidence they need to execute Jesus. They spit in his face and slap him (Matthew 26:67). They begin to torture Jesus before the official torture begins.

Meanwhile, Peter is committing a different form of violence. Peter is in the courtyard outside the high priest's house. It is within Peter's power to kick down the door and rescue Jesus. One would think, given the overall tenacity of Peter, the most headstrong of the disciples – the only one who stepped out of the boat to walk on water, the only one to identify Jesus as the Messiah – that it's in Peter's character to rush into the house and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with

his captain, even if it meant a fight to the death. But no. Peter denies ever meeting Jesus, and he does this three times. He's almost caught on the third time, because a bystander in the courtyard recognizes the Galilean accent of Aramaic, the same accent in Jesus' voice, but Peter says, "I do not know the man!" (Matthew 26:73-74). Peter's betrayal is a strike of violence. He doesn't punch Jesus or spit in his face, but his denial enables these acts of violence. Peter isn't the sinner who causes physical harm; he's the sinner who enables the people doing the physical harm.

In the end, we're all Peter. We're all sinners who enable the people who do physical harm. We buy products from companies that exploit child labor. The airstrike against nameless people around the world is funded in part by my tax dollars. We continue scrolling on the same social media apps that reinforce anxiety and depression in young people. We stay silent when we hear office gossip, and before we know it, the victim has resigned, vanished like a ghost. We repeat similar habits of addiction, whether to substances or to work, that we received from our parents, and these habits will have consequences on our children and their children. Like Peter, we're not the ones who slap people or spit in their face, but our actions and inactions have downstream negative consequences for real human lives. Lord, have mercy.

The story of the Passion is the story of the ripping apart of human community. All of us will find ourselves in these acts of betrayal against Christ *and* our neighbor, sleeping on the job (sins of omission), scattering for cover (sins of commission), and striking with violence (participating in relationships and systems that keep violence in circulation). The effect of our betrayal is the crumbing of human relationships. The human community continues to fall apart, and it's our part to admit that we played a part. A follower of Christ admits the reality of our betrayal, for the first step to recovery is admission that we need help.

The King and his Kingdom

Now begins the third act of the story arc of Jesus' Passion: the coronation of the King. Jesus is crowned the king of humanity, and his throne is the cross.

The Sanhedrin hands Jesus over to Pontus Pilate, who was the Rome-appointed ruler over the province of Judea, including the city of Jerusalem (Matthew 27:1-2). Pilate is a kind of king.

He's not the emperor, but he governs Judea with all the authority of the emperor, making him a rival king to Jesus, like Herod the Great was a rival king to the baby Jesus in the beginning of Matthew.

Pilate himself interrogates Jesus and asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (Matthew 27:11). Jesus doesn't deny it. Unlike Caiaphas, Pilate is not bothered by Jesus' claim to be a king, probably because Pilate doesn't see Jesus as a threat. Jesus is a peasant with no money, no army, no weapons. If it were to come to mortal combat between these two rival kings, Jesus doesn't stand a chance, or so Pilate thinks. Here again, the powerful of the earth underestimate the greatest power of all: the power of love, which is the power of God.

A crowd, more like a mob, yet again stirred up the chief priests and elders, has assembled outside Pilate's house to demand Jesus' execution (Matthew 27:15). Pilate gives them a choice: you can set one of two people free- Barabbas or Jesus. Pick one. What Pilate is really doing is leading the crowd through a kind of psychological torture. The crowd thinks they're setting someone free, but they're not; they're choosing which man they will murder.

We shouldn't miss the crucial detail of Pilate "sitting on the judgement seat" (Matthew 27:19). Pilate thinks he is the king in charge of this situation, and as king, he is executing justice. Pilate is the judge in the judgement seat, and the crowd in front of his door is the jury. Together, they condemn Jesus to death through the most horrific tool at their disposal: crucifixion.

But from God's perspective, the judgement seat isn't where justice starts but where the guilty party sits in judgement. Pilate is on the *receiving* end of judgement, not the giving end, and his judgement seat is where he sits in judgement before God. It's in Pilate's power to do the right thing: set the innocent man free. But Pilate, like Herod Antipas earlier in Matthew, is a feckless and spineless little man. He fears the crowd, and out of his fear, he gives the crowd what they want: Jesus, nailed to old wood.

If Pilate is sitting in judgement instead of giving judgement, what does that make the crowd? The crowd is Jesus' kingdom. Jesus is the rightful king over these people, and what do

they do to him? “Let him be crucified!” (Matthew 27:23). Jesus is king over the human community breaking apart before his very eyes.

After Pilate washes his hands of guilt, Jesus is taken behind the walls of Pilate’s palace, where Pilate’s soldiers beat the daylight out of him (Matthew 27:31). The soldiers are like Jesus’ royal court, except instead of serving their king, they punish their king. They put a scarlet robe on Jesus, scarlet being one of the colors of the Roman emperor. They coronate him, not with a crown of gold and jewels, but with a spiral of spiky thorns. They put a scepter in his hand, not made of precious metal, but made of wood; Jesus is the carpenter’s son, after all. Then they mock-worship him: “Hail, King of the Jews!” (Matthew 27:29).

Pilate is the false king. The crowd in front of Pilate’s house is the false kingdom. The cohort of soldiers is the false royal court. The scene represents the entire human community gone wrong. We serve the false kings of the earth: the politicians and personalities that gather huge crowds but don’t live up to God’s ways. We find our identities in false kingdoms: the tribes, parties, and us-versus-them groups that don’t find their identities in God’s love. We surround ourselves with people of the wrong values, like signing up for a royal court where everyone thinks they’re a soldier but, in truth, everyone’s a fool. The human community needs total renovation. The human community needs a new king.

“King of the Jews”

The coronation ceremony for the current king of England, Charles, was on May 6, 2023. The coronation ceremony for the King of the Universe was on Nisan 15 in the Jewish calendar, somewhere between 0 and 4 AD.

Charles was crowned with the St. Edwards crown. The St. Edwards crown is five pounds of solid gold, embellished with 444 precious gemstones like sapphires and rubies. Jesus wore a crown of thorns, intended to humiliate, not honor.

Charles was anointed with holy oil in a beautiful cathedral called Westminster Abbey. Jesus was anointed with oil in a leper’s living room.

Charles was given the golden scepter that belonged to his mother, Queen Elizabeth II. The soldiers gave Jesus a wooden stick after they beat him with it.

Charles' coronation ceremony had over 2000 people in attendance. It was the Who's Who of Earth- presidents and prime ministers, celebrities, the rich and the powerful from around the world. Jesus had a few dozen Roman soldiers who used Jesus as a punching bag.

Charles rode to and from his ceremony in the Gold State Coach. The Gold State Coach is a horse drawn carriage, and every inch is covered in gold. Weighing four tons, it takes eight horses to pull. Jesus walked on foot to the site of his throne, a hill called Golgotha, while carrying a wooden crossbeam on his shoulders, and when he couldn't carry it a step further, an innocent bystander named Simon carried it for him.

The nailing of Jesus to the cross is nothing short of the King of the universe taking his throne. Jesus is the opposite of what we think a king should be: humble, poor, mocked, defeated. The two bandits (insurrectionists who were captured by the Romans before they could make too much trouble) who hang on crosses on either side of him, shouted insults at him. Passersby, normal people, along with the leadership in Jerusalem, they all insulted him, for the victims of the cross hung suspended only a few inches from the ground, so that people could yell at them, spit in their face, even hit them. No one would think that this peasant from Nazareth dying a slow, horrific death is a king. But the sign above his head, the sign immortalizing the crime he committed, shouts the truth to the world: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." (Matthew 27:37).

One insult stands out from the rest: "He saved others; he cannot save himself." (Matthew 27:42). Theologically, the insult is correct. Jesus is the savior of others. Jesus is the savior of *all* others. But his salvation comes at a price. He *cannot* save himself. He cannot, not because he's not able, but because the salvation of humanity with love and by love cannot be accomplished by any other means. Were Jesus any other Messiah, perhaps he could have saved himself and lived. But the Messiah of perfect love has no interest in self-interest. Jesus embodies perfect love,

perfect self-giving for the benefit of others. For the salvation of others to be real and authentic, salvation must look this way: like love is giving all of itself away, to the point of death.

Jesus dies at 3:00 on the Friday afternoon of Passover, now known as Good Friday. Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). The third arc of the Passion narrative ends with this cry of dereliction. The King of the universe feels like his community with God is shattered. Not only is the human community broken, but community with God is broken. How could things get any worse?

Beginnings of Restoration

But as soon as it looks like all hope is lost, God begins to restore the community that was broken, the community between God and people and between people and people. The fourth arc of the Passion narrative – the restoration to community – begins as soon as Jesus dies.

Beginning in Matthew 27:51, strange things take place in the wake of Jesus’ death. The curtain in the Temple tore from top-to-bottom. The curtain was several stories tall and several inches thick. The curtain separated the Holy of Holies – where the very presence of God was supposed to dwell – from the rest of earth. God tears the curtain from the top-down like tearing a phonebook in half. God is ending, forevermore, the old way of relating to God, where humans had to approach God through other humans, namely, the priests. Now, humans may enjoy community with God unmediated. There is no separation between God and people. God has left the Temple for good.

Then, several of the dead who were buried outside of Jerusalem were seen walking in the city (Matthew 27:52-53). This “little resurrection” is a forestate of the ultimate restoration of community: one day, Jesus will return and resurrect the dead, and not even death will separate us from God and one another! The *unravelling of the unravelling* of community is picking up speed.

There was a centurion, like a commanding officer in the military, who presided at Jesus’ resurrection. When the centurion and his troops felt the earthquake after Jesus’ death, and when they saw dead people very much alive, they said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Matthew

27:54). The centurion and his troops are Gentiles, not Jews, but that doesn't stop them from making a correct confession of faith in Jesus. They, too, are a foretaste of the future, when all people, not just a few, will be restored to community with God through faith in Jesus. All of humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, will be brought into the fold of community with God and with one another, under the reign of the Crucified King.

It turns out not every disciple of Jesus abandoned him. Several of the women were there at the cross, including Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and the mother of James and John (Matthew 27:56). Then there was Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who owned a tomb carved into the side of a mountain, just outside of Jerusalem. Joseph takes responsibility for Jesus' remains, wraps Jesus in a burial shroud, lays Jesus in the tomb that was waiting for Joseph and his own family one day, and rolls a stone in front of the tomb, to avoid anyone desecrating Jesus' body (Matthew 27:57-60).

The women and Joseph are the beginnings of the church restored. The church of Jesus Christ was completely demolished when Peter and the other disciples ran for it, to save their own necks. But now the church, the community that gathers in the name of Jesus to accomplish the mission of Jesus, is being reassembled piece by piece, one person at a time.

A chaplain named Kate was responding to the death of a little boy named Andy. Andy's best friend in the world was his cousin, Nina, who was five years old. Nina wanted to see Andy, as in, visit Andy's remains in the hospital. Nina's mother wouldn't have it, and neither would the police standing guard over Andy's hospital bed. But Nina insisted. Nina's mother asked Chaplain Kate for advice. Should she let her little kindergartner see Andy in this state? Kate said, "Yes, Nina could be trusted with this." Nina visited with Andy. She put a plastic toy telescope in his hand so he could see everyone from heaven. She said, "I love you, Andy Dandy. Goodbye." Kate ended her story, told on a podcast from The Moth, with this: "You can trust a human being with grief... Walk fearlessly into the house of mourning, for grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy. And after all these mortal human years, love is up to the challenge."¹

¹ Kate Braestrup. <https://themoth.org/stories/the-house-of-mourning>.

The women and Joseph are like little Nina: what they want more than anything is to love their friend, even if their friend is dead. The human community is restored by this kind of love: the love of God made real in the love of these women, the love of Joseph, the love of Nina. We find the church coming back to itself, and followers of Christ returning to our deepest identity, when we rediscover the love of these disciples who care for Jesus in his death. This is the love of the house of mourning, the love of grief squaring up to our oldest enemy, and love is up to the challenge.

The Community of Wounded Healers

There was a pastor and theologian named Henri Nouwen. In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, he writes,

Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, ‘How can we hide our wounds?’ so we don’t have to be embarrassed, but ‘How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?’ When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”²

Jesus walks out of the tomb to assemble a community of wounded healers called “church.” The disciples are the wounded. They turned their backs on Jesus and abandoned him in his moment of greatest need. It’s not hard to imagine their embarrassment, their shame. They can’t look at themselves in the mirror.

But what if their shame is replaced by healing? The healing would have to come from love, namely, the love of the person whom they wounded. If the person they wounded can love them back, and if they can receive that love, then their source of shame can be turned into a source of healing. This healing would be directed first at themselves, and then to others. This is the power of wounds being treated by unconditional love. Love has the power to transform our

² Henri Nouwen. *The Wounded Healer*.

wounds into sources of healing for ourselves and other people. We find this love in the love of Christ, who forgives us and accepts us as we are.

Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” visit the tomb on the first day of the week, that is, Sunday morning after Passover (Matthew 28:1). The Sabbath day, which began on Friday night after Jesus died, interrupted the customary burial ritual for Jesus. On Friday at sundown, the women had to return home and cease all work, and burying the dead was considered “work.” Now the Sabbath is ending and the funeral can continue. The Mary’s show up to pick up the funeral where it left off.

But Jesus interrupts a perfectly good funeral. The Mary’s see an angel rolling away the stone. The angel says,

Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.” (Matthew 28:5-7).

The angel has a message *for the eleven disciples* who betrayed Jesus. Yes, the angel announces the resurrection, but that’s only half the message. The other half is for the guys who walked out on Jesus. “Jesus will meet you in Galilee,” the angel is saying, “where he first called you, where the mission began.” The message means, Jesus wants to have a reunion. Yes, the disciples betrayed him, and yes, the disciples have a lot of explaining to do. But the betrayal isn’t the end of the story. Jesus wants to make peace with them. Jesus wants to start the relationship over again. Jesus wants to restore them to community. Jesus wants to forgive them and reconcile with them.

Forgiveness is a powerful thing. Forgiveness, if we can accept it, can restore us back to the relationship that we broke in our worst moment.

There's a theologian named Miroslav Volf. He researches forgiveness. He says what Jesus introduced into the world was the belief that God unsticks the deed from the doer. God sees what we've done, our worst mistakes and moments, then God unglues what we've done from who we are. God doesn't measure who you are by what you've done. God simply accepts who we are and teams up with us to clean up the messes we've made.³ We can use give this gift on ourselves first. We accept God's unconditional love exactly as we are, then we unstick what we've done from who we are in Christ. Then, we can do extend this gift to others: we unglue what a person has done from who they are, and we love the person and help them make amends for their mistakes. If we can extend such a gift to ourselves (I know that's hard) and to others (I know that's hard, too), then we return to community with God, knowing God loves us *separate and apart* from anything we've done, and community with others, knowing we love people *separate and apart* from anything they've done.

Desmond Tutu was Archbishop in South Africa during the fight against apartheid. He tells the story of a court trial for a young man who killed another young man. The man actually dragged the other man behind his car. The mother of the man who was killed came to the trial. She took off her shoe and threw it at him. The judge called for a recess, and afterward, the mother walked up to the young man and said two words, "My child." She realized the man in front of her could have been her son, had life turned out differently. *My child*. She forgave him. The man still went to jail. There were consequences, but the mother released herself, and him, from what he did. In the Book of Joy, Tutu says, "Without forgiveness, we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound to the chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped. Until we can forgive the person who harmed us, that person will hold the keys to our happiness, that person will be our jailor."⁴

Forgiveness means we take back the keys to our own happiness. We set ourselves free from the other person and what they did. But forgiveness does something even more powerful: it restores people back into community. Because of the mother's forgiveness, she can enter into a

³ Miroslav Volf. <https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/the-happiness-lab-with-dr-laurie-santos/happiness-lessons-of-the-ancients-forgiveness>

⁴ Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy*.

new relationship with this man who committed a horrific crime. Now she can see this man as “her child.” Should there be consequences for what he did? Yes, of course. But can this woman move forward in peace because of her forgiveness, and is the world a bit better off for it? Yes, absolutely.

My wife, Brandi, is also a pastor. She tells the story of two members of a former church. Let’s name them Jeff and Dale. Jeff was liberal, Dale conservative. Jeff wanted the church to be more inclusive and vocal on justice issues. Dale wanted the church to take a stand for traditional family values. Jeff and Dale both served on the church council, and their arguments were legendary. It was the first Sunday of the month, a Communion Sunday, and Brandi was presiding at the table. She put a piece of bread into Jeff’s hand. Jeff dipped the bread into the cup of juice, then he walked to the Communion rail, where he knelt and prayed. The next person in the serving line was Dale. Brandi served grace to Dale, and he, too, walked to the Communion rail and knelt. The kneeler was long, and Jeff was the only person kneeling, but Dale chose to kneel right beside Jeff. There they stayed, two disagreeing and different men, knee to knee, equally sinner and equally forgiven. The best part was, as Brandi said, the rest of the church saw the two men kneeling together, for their mutual grudge was well known. The church *saw* them making amends. It was restoration to community, clear as day. The differences and disagreements remained. What changed was the relationship: the relationship that was broken was restored, by the power of equal forgiveness.

As if to confirm what the angel said to the women, Jesus shows up outside the empty tomb and says, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (Matthew 28:10). Imagine being one of the twelve disciples and hearing this report from the women. “I walked out on him, and he still wants me? I betrayed him. I stabbed him in the back. But he wants me? I left him to die, and he *still* wants a relationship with me?” This is the power of forgiveness married to reconciliation. Jesus lets the disciples off the hook *for the sake of* restoring community with them.

We, too, as followers of Christ, are in the same boat. We take our place as the forgiven, restored to vertical community with the God of heaven and earth, and restored to horizontal

community with the rest of the human species. Let us live as if that were the case, for in truth, it is.

The Roman guards in front of the tomb, who feint when they see the angel, conspire with the priests and the elders on a cover story (Matthew 28:11-15). “The disciples came and stole his body!”- so the story goes. But the disciples know better.

The eleven meet up with Jesus in Galilee for a relaunch of the Kingdom movement (Matthew 28:16-20). Some worshipped Jesus, while some doubted; they’re a mixed bag, and so are we. Jesus commissions them to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. But let’s not forget to make a big deal out of the promise at the end of Matthew. Jesus says, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20).

The presence of Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God with us, is the very glue of human community- with God and with one another. There is no removal of Jesus with us. There is no unsticking Jesus from us. We have his unconditional forgiveness and his call to unshakable relationship. As followers of Christ, we receive the healing that comes with being forgiven and accepted, then we extend that healing to others. We’ll deny him time and time again, which means we have the opportunity to be healed time and time again, if we accept the love of Jesus time and time again. This is our task, to be the healers in healing under the leadership of Jesus, until the end of the age.

Leader Guide

Ask someone to read Matthew 26:26-35 and Matthew 28:9-10. Ask if there are any initial questions or inspirations in reaction to the text.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the introduction to the lesson, David shares a story about a gang member who was caught by the police and left to take the fall for his friends. How is this story similar to what happens to Jesus? In other words, how is the story of the Last Supper a story of desertion?

2. When the woman in Simon the leper's house anoints Jesus with perfume, the disciples call it wasteful. They argue the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But Jesus calls the woman's action a "good service" because she is anointing his body for burial. Would you agree with the disciples? Or why not? How is the woman's action an act of devotion to Jesus? Also, when have you seen people rally to pay for someone's funeral? How was the fundraiser an act of devotion?

3. David says this at the end of the first section: "The life of a Christian is a spectrum with the woman at Bethany on one end and Judas on the other. On one extreme is total devotion to Jesus, and at the other is total removal of Jesus from the core of your identity. Where are you on this spectrum? Be honest." What does this mean? Where do you find yourself on the spectrum? What does it take to creep closer to the devotion side of the spectrum?

4. David points out four themes of Passover: liberation from captivity, escape from death, reunion as a family, and constitution as God's chosen people? Where do we see these four themes in the Last Supper? Why is the Last Supper fundamentally about community with God and community with one another?

5. David says this at the end of the second section: "We all have these worst moments. Let's confess them and call them real. For us *not* to confess our worst moments would be a betrayal to the people we hurt in our worst moments. They deserve the basic dignity of our admission of guilt. Let's also remember that our worst moments are the second step in the story arc. First comes preemptive forgiveness. We are forgiven, then we are sinners, *in that order*." What does David mean by "preemptive forgiveness?" Where do you see preemptive forgiveness in the Passion story? Why is it essential that we remember that God's forgiveness comes before our sin?

6. Turn to Matthew 26:39 and read Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. How is this prayer, as David says, "brutal honesty joined with brave humility?" How is this prayer a summary of what faith in God is all about?

7. David finds three kinds of betrayal in Matthew 26. Sleeping on the job means sins of omission, or simply choosing not to do the right thing. Scattering for cover means sins of commission, or choosing the easy thing over the right thing. Striking with violence means participating in relationships or systems that hurt real people. Find a real-world example of each of these forms of betrayal. Also, why are these betrayals against Christ? What does Christ have to do with it?

8. How is Pilate a false king? How is the crowd in front of Pilate's court a false kingdom? And how is the cohort of soldiers in Pilate's palace a false royal court?

9. Not every disciple abandoned Jesus. There were women disciples who stuck close to the cross, and Joseph of Arimathea claimed Jesus' body and laid Jesus in his own tomb. How are these disciples signs that the church community is being restored in the wake of Jesus' death? Also, how are the tearing of the curtain, the resurrection of the dead, and the faith of the centurion signs of restoration to community, both to God and to one another?

10. Imagine being one of the eleven disciples who betrayed Jesus. The women tell you the message that the angel and Jesus told them at the empty tomb: Jesus is risen and he will meet you in Galilee. You betrayed Jesus, but Jesus still wants a relationship with you. How do you feel?

11. The Easter story is a story of universal forgiveness and restoration to community with God and one another. Who are you struggling to forgive? What step can you take on the road to forgiveness? What does "restoration to community" look like for you and this person you're struggling to forgive? (Hint: the restoration to community doesn't have to be pretty, perfect, or pertaining to life on this side of death.)