

## Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 2022 - Dinner with Friends

We've all gone to them. Dinner gatherings that somehow go a little sideways.

You have been there, too, I expect.

Someone's had a little too much to drink and says something inappropriate. Roast duck that is almost raw. Someone sits on a chair that's not strong enough to hold their weight and the chair breaks, and someone makes a bad joke that causes the chair breaker to leave the room in tears. The person who decides this is the time to share their political views in florid detail. Dinner parties are messy sometimes.

To paraphrase Tolstoy, happy dinner parties are all alike, but every unhappy dinner party is unhappy in its own way.

So this dinner party with Jesus, this last supper: is it a happy dinner party or an unhappy dinner party?

The disciples have made it to Jerusalem, where Jesus was hailed as a King. The crowds celebrated his arrival. Now they are having dinner together. We know nothing of the menu, nothing of who prepared and served the meal. If they had gotten food poisoning, we might know more, but there is no word of that. If the wine was corked, we might have heard of that, too, but there is silence on that.

Everyone is together and for now there is no bickering or fussing, just a nice intimate meal among friends.

Jesus has started this one a little differently than we might expect: he's washed their feet. It was the custom that guests be offered a wash-up of hands and feet after a dusty trip, so they would be refreshed for their meal, but it was usually the servants who did the washing. Jesus doing it was unusual, and Peter protested, but relented.

And the meal proceeded.

The Gospel reading tonight skips over the details of the dinner itself, and the awful moment when Jesus revealed that one of them would betray him, and the questions surrounding Judas' departure to do that deed. That would definitely cause it to be an unhappy dinner party, but somehow, things moved on. They settled down, poured another goblet of wine, and relaxed.

As was often the case, Jesus took the opportunity to do a little teaching, but this time it was all about something they didn't want to think about: his imminent death. He'd talked about it before, and I expect that at least one person rolled his eyes – he's on THAT again! – but said nothing.

Did those words make it an unhappy dinner party? Who knows? How much did they choose to pay attention when Jesus was talking in this strange elliptical fashion about being here among them only a little while longer?

But I hope that they paid attention to the very last bit: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

No more bickering about which was the most important. No more imagining royal standing when the hated Romans were tossed out. Just loving each other. Perhaps the hardest commandment of all.

Was it a happy dinner party in that moment, when they imagined a community built on love? Or was it finally dawning on them that Jesus was deadly serious and he was giving them instructions for what they should do after he was gone.

Such a strange dinner party. Moments of camaraderie and pleasure. Moments of anxiety and anger. Moments of confusion as well as clarity, a dark clarity.

I wouldn't call it a happy dinner party. I wouldn't call it an unhappy one, exactly. Maybe the best descriptor would be heart-breaking.

Heart-breaking.

When one knows something is changing in difficult ways.

When one knows that one will not be with all the rest of the diners again.

When one knows that one cannot know what will happen next.

This season of Lent, I've been using as a final blessing a benediction offered by Henri Frederic Amiel: *Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who make the journey with us. So be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. And the blessing of God, who made us, who loves us, and who travels with us be with you now and forever.*

It feels in a way like a paraphrase of Jesus' words at that heartbreaking dinner party. We have the blessing of knowing in advance how the events of this week end up, but in the meantime, as we gather with each other, we might mind the words of that blessing, and the words of Jesus that preceded them: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

We don't know when the next dinner party will be, or who will be there, except for one special guest: Jesus. Whether we sense his presence or not, he will be there. So love one another. It will ease the heartbreak and turn us toward hope.

Amen.