

The Threat From Within

As anyone who has ever planned a wedding will tell you, careful planning is essential when it comes to pulling off the perfect meal. Care must be taken not to seat Uncle Andrew at the same table as cousin Arnold. Remember what happened at the family reunion last year? And Aunt Jennie, remember, is deaf in one ear. Don't seat her by that fellow from Seattle, who speaks in a whisper. And for heaven's sake, don't serve more than one glass of wine to cousin Geoffrey. Once he gets going, he's sure to end up reciting those terrible bawdy limericks. One must have a plan.

The instructions given in the Book of Genesis for the eating of the Passover meal are extremely detailed, but not for the sake of perfection.

When? On the 14th of Nisan, the beginning of months.

What? A lamb without blemish, a year-old male, roasted, not boiled, served with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

How? **"With your loins girded, you sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand."**

And one last instruction: **"You shall eat it hurriedly."** Not leisurely. Not a banquet but a drive-through, a meal for people on the move.

These detailed instructions are, of course, reminders to Israel of the origins of Passover. The seder meal arises from crisis, from the days when Israel was in slavery and on the verge of either liberation or extinction. It is the meal of the close call, the near miss, the passing over by the angel of death. The cruise missile whistles past your house and lands on the house of your oppressor. Your future is entirely and utterly in the hands of God.

Smear the blood of the lamb upon your doorpost and pray the angel of death has good eyesight. **"When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall embrace it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."**

Threat. Crisis. The promise of liberation and the very real possibility of disaster. These are the bitter herbs that season the seder meal of Passover.

The meal we remember tonight is, of course, rooted in the Passover seder, but it is not a seder. Neither is it a simple re-enactment of the meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples in the upper room. Most Christians call it by its Greek name: the “Eucharist,” a word which means “thanksgiving.” But even that term needs unpacking. Thanksgiving for what? For a memory? For a symbol? For a crumb of bread and a thimbleful of grape juice?

The German theologian Michael Welker helped me to see a dimension of this meal I had not fully appreciated before I read his book. Look again at the origins of this meal in the life of Jesus and the church, he suggests. This meal forever bears the imprint of *threat*. Not just the obvious threat from the outside – the threat of Roman soldiers patrolling the streets and religious authorities determined to do Jesus in. There’s another dimension of threat in this meal – *the threat from the inside*.

Jesus presides at the table **“on the night when he was betrayed.”** With Jesus at the table are 12 disciples, every one of whom is a serious security risk. We think especially of Judas and his kiss and of Peter and his three-fold disavowal, but all the disciples will betray Jesus before the night is over. (At least all the *male* disciples.) Jesus serves the bread and wine to men he loves, knowing that these are the very men who will scatter like frightened sheep when he needs them most.

We think of the meal in the upper room as the establishment of a sacrament – which it is – but a sacrament of what? Of Jesus’ suffering and death, certainly. Of his resurrection, to be sure. But also of the threat from within, from the church itself. Even as we gather at the table we face the very real possibility that we will betray our Savior. When the going gets rough, we might very well fall away. When the question is asked, **“Are you not one of his followers?”** we are just the kind of folk who might reply, **“I do not know the man.”**

There was a time when it was fashionable – even socially advantageous – to be a Christian. Nowadays, not so much. Pedophile priests feature in the headlines. Self-proclaimed “evangelicals” give enthusiastic support for xenophobic politicians. Even

here in North Florida, just a few notches away from the Bible Belt, it's far safer and less embarrassing to call yourself "spiritual but not religious."

Tonight is the grand Gala for the Tallahassee Memorial Hospital Foundation. Down the road in the Civic Center the movers and shakers of the community are dressed to the nines and having a grand old time. As a member of the Board of Trustees, I was expected to be there with my charming spouse.

At a TMH committee meeting yesterday a Board Member said, "See you tomorrow at the Gala."

"Not this year," I said. "It's Holy Week and tomorrow's Maundy Thursday. I have an invitation to a different banquet."

The look on my colleague's face seem to say, "Where are you from? Mars?"

John's Gospel has no account of the sharing of bread and wine in the upper room. In the place of what we call Communion, John has foot washing – which in John's Gospel functions as a kind of commentary on the Eucharist, if not a sacrament in its own right. References to the Eucharist permeate the whole of John's Gospel. It pops up all over. For instance, in chapter six, Jesus says **"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you"** (John 6:60).

"This teaching is hard," the disciples respond. **"Who can accept it?"**

No one, John seems to be saying tonight. No one, that is, who is not willing to become a servant of this man who has stripped down to his tunic, tied a towel around his waist, and knelt to perform a task usually assigned to women, children, and slaves.

And it all happens tonight, the night of his betrayal.

On the night when he was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread and a cup. *On the night that he was betrayed,* he took a towel and a basin. He fed the mouths that disavowed him and washed the feet that ran away.

This meal has changed somewhat over the centuries, but the threat from within remains. The living Christ is ever at risk of betrayal by the ones who claim to love him most.

The marvel of this night is that he still invites us to his table, still kneels to wash our feet, still offers his cheek for us to kiss. This meal, the sacrament of hope, also signifies the threat that you and I bring to it.

And still he says, "Take, eat, drink. This is for you."