

1 March 2015

**Acts of Worship**  
Matthew 26:17-30

Matthew 26:17-30. *On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples." ' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.*

*When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'*

*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.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I 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.' When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Last week I introduced the concept of “means of grace,” by which I mean spiritual disciplines that are undertaken in a spirit of anticipation, not duty. Means of grace are actions, behaviors, or habits that we engage in when we are actively seeking to better experience God’s grace. In that sermon last week, I gave you two signs a means of grace is genuine: if it fosters either love of God or love of neighbor. I then said, in passing, that we could divide means of grace into things done individually, in private, and those done in groups, in the public sphere. This is illustrated by the cross on the front of your bulletin. You see the vertical axis (love of God or love of neighbor) and the horizontal axis (private and public). That gives us four quadrants, and for each of the remaining Sundays in Lent, we’re going to discuss one a week. Today, we’re looking at the bottom right of the cross, expressing love of God together, publically. We call this “Worship.”

Before we start, though, I need to make an important distinction. Although we tend to call this hour at church on Sunday morning just “worship,” worship and the worship *service* are not exactly the same thing. Certainly I hope that worship always takes place during this hour, but we also do a lot of other things here. What I’m doing right now is teaching. We also take care of some institutional business during this hour: make program announcements, record attendance, and so on. All good things, but not really “worship.” Even the greeting and expressions of love and welcome before, during, and after the service, while great, are not really “worship,” as I’m using the word today. By “worship” I mean the expression of love toward God, done *together*. So let me ask you: what are the things that we do in this time that *do* fit that definition? What do

we do during our service that points toward God's grace? And especially, what are the things that we do better *together* than we could do on our own?

And I should warn you now. I'm really asking. Throughout Lent, I'll be looking for your responses during the sermon. I want to hear your thoughts, and I'm all right waiting. So, again: What do we do during our service that points toward God's grace? And especially, what are the things that we do better *together* that we could do on our own?

*[Pause in the service for responses from the congregation]*

Look back at our scripture today. As Jesus prepared himself for what he knew would be his betrayal and death, he gathered his disciples and closest friends to share a meal. Now sharing a meal is obviously one of the most ordinary of experiences, but Jesus turned that ordinary act of eating together into a sacred expression of thanks to God and praise for God's self-giving love. Taking the ordinary bread, he said, "This is my body, which is given for you." Then, taking the cup of wine, he said, "This cup represents the new covenant that God is making with you, an eternal promise that is sealed not by repeated sacrifices of animals, but by a one-time sacrifice of me. The blood that confirms this covenant is mine." And then, it's worth noting, they sang a hymn together. They gathered together. They turned their attention to God's grace. They shared the sense of God's presence. They sang. This is the heart of what we seek when we gather for worship on Sunday mornings at eight and ten.

But notice something. Jesus created this sacred moment of worship from an ordinary meal in a private home. Worship – the expression of love to God together – is not restricted to what our website refers to as our official "worship times." So now, once again, I want to turn it back to you. In your bulletin today you see a blank green card. I'd like to invite you to write down on that card ways to seek God's grace through worship – expressing love to God together. Maybe in a church group, or maybe not. Maybe in a large gathering, maybe a small one. Maybe with friends or family, maybe with strangers. Take a few minutes. If you want to talk with a neighbor, feel free. Sign your name only if you want to. Here's what the Worship Team and I plan to do with these: we want to post these cards on the window out in the Wesleyan Room, so that we can learn from each other how we are incorporating worship into our lives. With that in mind, let me stress that what we are looking for is not something that you thought of that somebody *might* do, but rather something that you already do or that you are resolved to begin. We'll give you some time, then send our Junior Ushers down the aisle with baskets. If you have something that you think might be helpful to another – pass it down the aisle.

*[Pause in the service to allow people talk, write, then return their thoughts.]*

I hope that the exercise of thinking about what worship is – more than just what we call our "worship service" – has given you a new perspective. Not everything we do in this hour is worship, and worship is much much more than just what happens here on Sundays. It can look very different, and can begin with very ordinary things. Let me tell you one story. I read an article recently about a new church that's started in Brooklyn called "St. Lydia's Dinner Church." They meet Sunday and Monday evenings, cook a meal together, then worship around tables while they eat. Like Jesus did that night so long ago, they take the ordinary act of eating with friends and make it a sacred space, a time when together they love God. That's worship.