

My favorite hiking trail is located at a state park in Wisconsin. I'll never forget the first time I hiked it. It was a warm summer day as we started down the trail, and I do mean down; down what seemed to be an infinite number of steps; even descending a short ladder at one point. Continuing through the woods, with flies and mosquitos buzzing around, I began to wonder if we were even going the right way, or if we had missed a turn at some point. But then we reached the edge of a lake, and following the trail, soon found ourselves at the base of huge, white limestone cliffs, in which there were numerous caves, with tiny waterfalls trickling out. It was beautiful. Enchanting. Awe-inspiring. Eventually, we had to continue the trail and go back up the hill, through the heat and the bugs. But this time, we walked with the vivid memory of what we had seen and experienced. It changed the rest of the hike.

When you look at the night Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples and then went into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, you might see something similar. There in the most unlikely place; there in the thick of uninviting terrain; there where you wouldn't expect to find such beauty; you find Jesus saying to his disciples, and to the Church down through the ages, to me and you: “This is my body... this is my blood.”

This beautiful Supper is sandwiched between Judas' act of treachery (when he went to the chief priests and offered to hand Jesus over to them for thirty pieces of silver) and his act of betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane. It reminds me of the verse from the 23rd Psalm, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” I want to make sure you see that this amazing Passover meal is surrounded by all the ugliness that humanity can offer. The Last Supper is celebrated in a bewildering forest of deception, greed and fear.

In fact, when Jesus sat down with his disciples to fulfill and transform the Passover meal, everything seemed to be spiraling out of control. Judas had already set his plan in motion, which culminated in a false kiss of betrayal. Jesus was arrested like a criminal and dragged off to court in the middle of the night. Peter denied three times that he ever knew Jesus even though he had boldly stated that he would never do such a thing; the other disciples ran away and went into hiding.

So it was then, so it is today. And so it will always be in this mixed-up, contradictory world of ours. The Lord's Supper is given in a world that we know all too well; a world shaken by conflict, hatred, and violence. The Lord's Supper is not found in antiseptic, perfect conditions. The Supper is not there for people who feel they've got it all together in their spiritual lives. It's not there for people who are so good, they don't really need it. It's just the opposite.

Not only is the world a terrifying place, but we can terrify ourselves with our own ability to sin; our own potential to wander off the trail. To give us the greatest help possible, Jesus takes bread and wine and gives them to us. He calls these elements his body and blood, and gives them to us right where we are, in a broken world. Jesus gives his body and blood to the guilty, to those who

have in some way betrayed Him. In spite of what we are, what we have done, and what we have failed to do, he shares himself with us, for the sake of reconciliation.

There is no escape from the world. We're in it. There is no escape from our weaknesses. They're in us. Knowing this, Jesus comes to give you an experience; a remembrance that will sustain you. In this meal, Jesus shares your sorrows, he joins you in your troubles, he sympathizes with your sadness, he struggles as you struggle with weakness and he gives you victory over it all.

More than we care to admit, we have a hard time with the rocky terrain of our daily lives. We wonder if we are going to make it. We even wonder if the whole thing is worthwhile. Weary, worn out, our spirits down, we come here and we taste that food and drink and we hear those words of Jesus again: Take and eat; this is my body. Take and drink; this is my blood. Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. Jesus come to give you an experience; a remembrance; a vision of his love that will revive you, so that you can keep hiking the uphill climb of life. You've been at the table with Jesus. He has touched you. Holding that in your heart, you can go on, maybe even with a spring in your step.

The food that Jesus gives you is a guarantee that you are still loved by him. Eat and drink in remembrance of Him and find an awe-inspiring oasis; a place of rest and refreshment.

On our Wisconsin trail, after we stood under those imposing cliffs, and saw the quiet creeks, the mossy rocks and logs, the sunlight streaming through the trees, we felt we could stay there forever and bask in the peace and beauty. But we couldn't stay there. We had to head back up the trail and out of the park.

It's the same thing with this Supper. You take a challenging path to get here, to take a place at the Lord's Table, and once you're here, you are immersed in the love of Jesus. It's a place in which you want to remain. Our hearts crave it. But we can't stay. We are here for a time, but then are sent back to our homes, our work, our communities. That too is a challenging path, but we take with us this experience, this remembrance, this vision of love. It allows us to know there is something beyond the struggle; there is a love deeper than my deepest pain, and that love is for me, in Jesus. But the great news is, the day is coming when you will not have to leave the close presence of Jesus. Every time you come to the Lord's Table in this life, it's like a preview of coming attractions. It's the rehearsal dinner before the Great Wedding and the reception that follows.

I can only hike my favorite trail once every couple of years or so; what a blessing to be able to come to the table of Jesus consistently. What blessing to hike the unpredictable trail of life knowing that it's never long until the gracious Host says again, "Take and eat; take and drink; my body and blood, given for you." Let this experience of love change the rest of your journey.

Maundy Thursday + March 29, 2018

St. Mark Lutheran Church, Chesterland, Ohio

Pastor Mark Matzke