

“THE SACRAMENT OF THE LAST SUPPER”

Luke 22:14-30; I Corinthians 11:23-32

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When I saw Salvador Dalí's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*, it was hanging in a stairwell at The National Gallery in Washington D.C. At just under nine feet by five and a half feet, it just about filled the wall on the landing between floors. I don't know what possessed the museum curators to place it there, but it has since been moved to a place where you can step back from it in order to get a sense of the whole of the painting.

I love this painting, enough that we purchased a poster print that hangs in our office. Despite being so different from other paintings of the subject and inconsistent with the details of the gospel accounts, it captures something of the sacrament that more traditional renderings lack.

It may be that the differences and inconsistencies are what led renowned Protestant theologian Paul Tillich to call it "junk." For example, notice the symmetry in the painting with six apostles on either side of Jesus with the ones on the left exactly mirroring the ones on the right. The disciples are all praying. I have trouble seeing it, but the room, indicated by the wooden beams, is twelve-sided, which according to Plato is the shape of the whole universe. Dalí, himself refers to this as the "celestial communion of the number 12: 12 hours of the day – 12 months of the year – the 12 pentagons of the dodecahedron

– 12 signs of the Zodiac around the sun – the 12 apostles around Christ.” These details suggest a calm and a harmony inconsistent with the gospel record.

Dali seems to forget that there is a traitor among the twelve, that several of the disciples are discussing who among them is the greatest, that Peter, James, and John will fall asleep while Jesus is praying in the garden, and that Jesus, himself, is very troubled. Instead Dali gives us a Jesus who is lovely to look at, his right hand pointing at the headless body above him, his left hand pointing to himself as if to say as John’s gospel says, “the one who has seen me has seen the father.” Not a troubled scene, but one in which God is present, a sacred scene. All is well because Jesus is present at the horizon and his light fills the room.

He paints over the betrayal, the suffering, and the death. These are important things to me and my faith... and yet I love this painting. It’s not junk. It’s just something different than we expected. It’s not a recounting of the Last Supper, but instead an illustration of the “sacrament.” Dali’s painting reminds me that the “Sacrament” is not a re-enactment of the Last Supper, but a re-imagining.

Jesus isn’t interested in his disciples reliving the experience of this last meal. He doesn’t hide from them the trouble to come, but looking beyond that he says, according to Luke, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom....” Paul says to the church at Corinth, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*.” In the sacrament, we look toward Christ’s coming. We name Jesus as the host of this meal. As Presbyterians, we believe in the “real presence” of Jesus in the sacrament.

So when we come to the table, we’re not thinking about betrayals or egos, we’re thinking about Jesus, what he did, what he taught. We’re thinking about healing and forgiveness. When Paul talks about eating in an unworthy manner, he’s referring to a specific circumstance in Corinth. Some of the members worked late and arrived at the meeting late only to discover that those who arrived sooner had consumed all the food. The sacrament wasn’t about satisfying one’s hunger at the expense of others.

When we come to the table, we pray because we are encountering God’s presence in the sacrament. We come to the table as a faith community, in harmony because we share equally in the love of God. We come to the table to experience the light of God who is Jesus. We come to the table, recognizing that now is the time to live into God’s desire for us: to live into peace, to live into love, to live into health and wholeness. Yes, we live in a troubled world, but we live for something better.

Dali finished his painting in 1955. He pulled together his classical art skills with the surrealism he’d become famous for to bring together the real world with the mystical world

of faith. It's an image that isn't quite real but says a lot about reality. Billy Kangas wrote about this painting: "Dali is opening up the eyes of the viewer to see God as a reality that although imperceptible as divinity, is still manifest in the physical reality that we live in." This is what a sacrament does: uses a common physical object to help us see a deeper truth/reality. Dali's painting gets at the meaning of the sacrament which propels us into faith-filled living.

What we don't see in the painting is a "figure" representing the Holy Spirit. Most interpreters of this work don't think Dali would have forgotten the third person of the Trinity. Instead they see the Spirit in the figures of the apostles in prayer, as they were on the day of Pentecost just before the Spirit's arrival. So the "Lord's Supper" for Dali isn't a "last Supper" moment for the faith community, where we're thinking about the betrayal, our own inadequacies. It's a Pentecost moment where gather in prayer with Jesus as our host and the Creator embracing the faith community, who are anticipating becoming the hands and feet of Christ in the world as Teresa of Avila put it.

We come to the table to recall Jesus, to focus on his "living among us." We come to the table around which we experience God's love not just for us but for all creation. But we get up from the table, making our way back to the real world, empowered by the Spirit, to be Christ's ambassadors, to be his healing hands, to carry the good news of the gospel, to welcome the stranger and feed the hungry, and free the oppressed, in our world.

Yes, we discover forgiveness. Yes, we receive God's love and grace. But we also find our calling, propelled into faith-filled living. That's what I see in this painting and what I hear from Luke and Paul. So. Come to the table, a place for nurture and grace and even rest... but only for a time. We are meant to get up from the table, and having been refreshed and emboldened by the spirit, go out into the world as healers, encouragers, helpers, comforters, and whatever else God gives us to be and to do. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Resources:

<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/46590-sacrament-last-supper>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sacrament_of_the_Last_Supper

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/billykangas/2014/11/exploring-dalis-sacrament-of-the-last-supper.html>