

Food As a Love Language

Matthew 26:26-29

True or false? Sometime in the early 1970's Linda Riggins tried to sell Girl Scout Cookies to Bobby Knight. Fact check: true! Or nearly true. At the time her name was Linda Smith. Her family and Knight's lived on the same street. She rang the doorbell knowing it was his house. She did not expect *him* to answer. He did. He told her he did not want any cookies but gave her a bill from his wallet. With his death this week have come the summations of his life. The honest ones speak of his temper, his lack of self-control, but also his brilliance and his generosity—*great* generosity—to people he perceived as doing good and/or being loyal to him. I interviewed him once. Linda and I played in the IU basketball pep band. Every year, near the end of the season he would skulk across the court and thank us, with obvious sincerity, for our support for the team. I am genuinely grateful for what his talent gave me personally. We traveled from one end of this nation to the other—at athletic department expense. We were there when the team won the national championship in 1981. But he was complicated. For the record, I openly called for IU to terminate his contract for years before they finally did. But I will give the man his due: among his other admirable qualities, he was generous.

Today we start our annual stewardship drive. In a few weeks, we will ask you to make a pledge to support this congregation financially in 2024. I make no apology for

this. I know that one of the top reasons unchurched people give to pollsters for their lack of interest in churches is, “They’re after my money.” As a matter of fact, we do want you to give. But not to us. To the work of God. Yes, my salary is the most expensive line item in the annual budget. Yet, it is in my self-interest to ask you to give. But I did not get into this line of work for the money. I could have gotten an equivalent education in any number of fields and earned more. We do not talk about this in the family, but I believe my children’s households are already out-earning ours. Substantially. But this makes me happy. I want them to prosper. No, I do not stand before you today asking you to give so I can keep cashing my paychecks. I ask because being generous is holy and joyful and empowers a great deal of godly work.

The passage from Matthew we read today depicts the end of Jesus’ Last Supper. In a few hours soldiers led by Judas will come to arrest him. He will endure two interrogations, a mock trial, a scourging—a whipping with leather strips into which his tormentors will have tied bits of rock or glass—and crucifixion. As Jesus follows ourselves, we must believe he knew all of this was coming. Yet instead of fleeing from the coming affliction he stayed put. He gave himself up for the likes of us. He was the most generous soul ever to walk the planet. If we desire truly to follow his lead, we must give in response to his giving.

But stop for a moment and look at what Jesus had on his mind in his last free moments. Matthew tells us he decided to reconfigure the by then ancient ritual of Passover into the Eucharist. Moses had walked the planet approximately 1300 years

earlier. He led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. He received a message from the Lord, telling him to institute the Passover rite. Essentially a meal, Passover re-enacts the haste with which the Hebrews had to escape. But it also contains (to this day) important symbolic elements, among them the unleavened bread and the cups of red wine. They mean specific things to the Jews. Jesus, a Jew, and the Son of God, gives them related but new meanings. As we will observe in a few minutes when we celebrate the sacrament he created, the bread now symbolizes his body, broken on the cross. The cup now symbolizes his blood, shed on the cross.

As the old hymn tells us, “Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow.” Such theology can strike our ears today as a bit morbid. But fact checking is fact checking. Jesus gave it all. He willingly sacrificed himself to atone—pay for—our sins. People give to the church for various reasons. Most of them are perfectly valid. The inspiration to support a worthy mission, like United Campus Ministries or Manna from Seven. A love for this church and its care for people we love. The need to honor those who went before us. The hope to connect with more folks and bring them into our circle. But the most important reason to support the church is it is the Body of Christ. He himself said so. He gave us the mission of making him manifest to our corner of his creation. And he gave everything he could to show us the eternal importance of the work he gave us.

At the very end of our passage Jesus alluded to drinking the cup “new with you in my Father's kingdom.” If we allow our beliefs and our church experience to lose this

dimension we lose with it perhaps its most important message. Having experienced four deaths in my immediate family in the past eighteen months (and yes, I count our dog) I can tell you that promises of the kingdom have become much more vivid and necessary for me. So many of you have sought to console us by sharing your own experiences, and how your faith has worked to heal your hearts. We had no idea how many of you had experienced still-births. It is not the sort of thing you bring up in casual conversation. Which means many of us quietly carry burdens of grief with us day after day after day.

Jesus also mentioned the covenant. The Old Testament covenants God made with the Chosen People mostly made this-world promises. But Jesus reconfigured this as well. “This is the cup of the *new* covenant,” he said. By breaking his body and shedding his blood he bought *forgiveness of sin*, he said. Were this a Baptist or Nazarene church some of you would be shouting, “Amen!” Relax, I don't expect that, except from a certain young man who by saying it proves again and again he is listening. Yet even we Presbyterians must from time to time remind ourselves of the greatest gift ever given—and of its fruits. Jesus paid it all. We owe him. We have free will. We can choose whether to give in return. We can choose how much to give. We can even choose to stop believing and walk away. Jesus leaves the decisions to us. We do not earn life in the kingdom by giving. He has already offered us life on a sterling silver plate. No, we give out of gratitude. Please, keep that in consideration as you make your free choice about what pledge you make for next year.