

## The Sign of Your Discipleship

*Matthew 26:17-25*

Rev. Dan Schumacher

It was about a week ago that Karen Wilson sent me a humorous email. At least I found it funny as one who is trying to plan worship services in the midst of a global pandemic.

In it was a meme entitled, "Worship Planning: COVID19 Pandemic Edition."

The first hymn listed was, "Breathe on Me, Breath of God." As your eyes swept across the page to where there would normally be a page number it just read, "Nope."

The next one: "Precious Lord, Take my Hand." ... Nope.

Then "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," "Gather Us In," and "Close to Thee."

Nope, nope, and nope.

Then, at the bottom, were a couple that were labeled "Could Work." Among that list were, "Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters," "I Come to the Garden Alone" (emphasis on *alone*), and "Trust and Obey."

It's a strange time to be celebrating the night when Jesus gathered in the intimacy of that upper room and shared his last supper with his twelve disciples. With all the precautions that we are now taking (and wisely so), it is difficult to imagine us all crammed around tables in the Fellowship Hall, washing each others' hands, sharing a meal with each other, and passing communion to one another.

I've seen one too many videos about "cross-contamination" lately to imagine us passing communion to each other!

And, of course, the church humor hasn't stopped with memes about hymn selections. I assume we're all quite familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's painting of "The Last Supper" (*figure 1*). Well, there's a contemporary version floating out there in that mysterious place we call the internet, and in it, Jesus sits all alone at the table, while all the disciples use Zoom or Google Meet to videoconference in – the "COVID19 Pandemic Edition" of the Last Supper (*figure 2*).

Because of that image, I've recently found myself contemplating on how the last supper is portrayed... or at least a lot about how we imagine it to have looked – and how it felt.

I think we imagine it a lot like the way da Vinci painted it, maybe because his painting is so well-known. Jesus sits in the center of the table, everyone else completely occupied

by their own desires, thoughts, assumptions, beliefs, about who Jesus was and who they wished him to be.

Peter leans in over Judas and whispers to John, trying to get John to find out from Jesus who would betray him. The truth was, they'd *all* betray him by their abandonment of him in his darkest hour.

Jesus seems to be looking down at his hand, taking the image of it in one last time before it's marred by the nails that will pierce it.

It's a striking image, because no one seems to really understand the gravity of the moment, but Jesus alone. It's a considered a masterpiece for a reason.

If we were to move on to another painting that was contemporary to da Vinci's portrayal, we might find some strong similarities.

This painting, entitled *The Passion of the Christ*, which is located in Old Saint Peter's Church in Strasbourg takes on a more iconographic quality (*figure 3*). It is a contemporary painting to da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, maybe even painted the exact year as da Vinci's. Like da Vinci's, Jesus still holds the central and most important position in the painting, even though the table is now round.

Church iconography, however, is overt in its symbolic use. For instance, it's commonplace in iconography to make the central figure larger than the rest to emphasize that figure's importance. In this painting, you might have noticed that Jesus is so large, he's holding the beloved disciple like a small toddler in his lap!

Peter, the elder statesman of the disciples, sitting to Jesus' right is depicted once again with gray hair and a prominent position close to Jesus. And note Judas in yellow opposite Jesus... patting his bag with his thirty pieces of silver with his right hand. Do you think it's an accident that he's portrayed as a redhead?

Such are the images that have pervaded our conscious and subconscious thoughts about the last supper: a group of white men, largely trying to figure out who was going to betray Jesus — like it was all a “whodunnit” mystery dinner theatre.

Then, I recently came across a modern depiction of the last supper by the London-born Irish artist, Brian Whelan (*figure 4*). Whelan takes a playful approach to the last supper that has reignited my mind around how I might imagine the table that night. In fact, he inverts this painting from Old Saint Peter's Cathedral, turning it on its head.

Jesus is still front and center, but this time his back is to us, hands raised as if trying to get the attention of anyone who will listen. The disciples are gathered around the table in what looks like an absolutely chaotic version of “show-and-tell.”

Why are they all waving different objects? Who brings a model ship to the dinner table? What do all these things mean?

In his painting, Whelan has marked each of the disciples with emblems associated with their life, their martyrdom, and their patronage of groups and guilds.

For example:

St. James has a scallop shell emblazoned on his hat. The shell symbolizes the two layers of the human condition: the physical and the spiritual. When pilgrims carry the scallop shell along, it represents our *personal* journey – the sacred path we must take within.

St. Bartholomew is the one pictured holding the flaying knife. That's because he's the most prominent flayed christian martyr. The flaying knife represents how he was skinned alive... which makes it deeply ironic or very dark humor that St. Bartholomew is the patron saint of butchers and tanners.

You might already know that St. Thomas is the patron saint of doubters – in fact we observe “Doubting Thomas Sunday” nearly every year on the Sunday after Easter in his honor. But, did you know that he is also the patron saint of masons, of construction workers, of architects, of builders, of stone masons, of stone cutters, and of surveyors.

Why all of these patronages associated with construction?

Tradition associates Thomas with having taken the Gospel to India, where, as part of his work, he is said to have formed and helped build seven churches. Which one is he in Whelan's painting? He's the one holding a T-square.

Then there's good, ol' St. Peter. As a former fisherman, he is the patron saint of net-makers, shipbuilders, and fishermen. But in this painting, Peter's not holding a net nor a fish... Instead, Whelan portrays him holding the “keys to heaven” (which, by the way, is why he is also the patron saint of locksmiths). Peter holds *the keys to the kingdom*, so to speak.

It is St. Andrew, brother of Peter, and a fisherman in his own right, who is portrayed with the net in his lap and holding a big fish with another disciple. But what sets him apart distinctly as Andrew is the *saltire*, also known as St. Andrew's Cross. It's a diagonal cross, and tradition tells us it's the type of cross on which Andrew was crucified.

We might want to assume that St. John is the other disciple holding that fish with St. Andrew, since he'd be the other half of *his* brotherly fishing duo – but it's not. In iconography, John is often pictured holding a chalice filled with serpents. This symbol is a reference to a legend from the *Acts of John* (an apocryphal book), in which John was challenged to drink a cup of poison to demonstrate the power of his faith (the poison being symbolized by the serpent)

One of my favorites is St. Philip. He is pictured with a armful of loaves of bread, because of his response to Jesus in John chapter 6:

“Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’

Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little’” (John 6:4-7).

Philip is the patron saint of hatters. That’s right. Hatters. Why? Good question. You’ll need to leave your Baptist pastor and go seek the council of a good Catholic Priest to get that answer. He is also the patron saint of pastry chefs. (That one makes more sense to your Baptist pastor.)

And you might think that Judas is at bottom of the image just to Jesus’ left, clutching his bag of thirty pieces of silver – but he’s not. That’s Matthew, the tax collector with the bag of money.

Judas is the one who, while reaching for the bread, has spilled the saltcellar.

To spill the salt was considered a bad omen. And if that scene seems familiar to you, it was Whelan’s homage to da Vinci’s master piece (*figure 5*).

Why has this painting so caught my attention this year?

A scallop shell. A flaying knife. A chalice fullled with serpents. An armful of loaves of bread. The “keys to the kingdom.” A t-square. A net and a fish. Spilled salt.

All different symbols of each’s unique discipleship.

It’s made me pause. It’s made me reflect. It’s made me wonder what the sign of my discipleship would be.

Lately, it feels like my iPhone and my laptop might be the most accurate signs of my discipleship. But those are such fleeting symbols.

What image reveals the core of my heart? What reveals my heart for serving Christ? What reveals my heart for loving you?

*That* is tougher to nail down.

That’s the thing about following Jesus. When we do it right, we *each* do it in the *unique* way that God calls us. And , then, when we come together... well, that’s what makes us the body of Christ – many parts, many members, *one* body.

So tonight, I invite you to reflect. I invite you to turn your imagination loose.

What would be the sign of your discipleship? If some artist were portraying us around the table with Jesus, what emblem would be emblazoned on your hat? What object would be in your hand? What group or guild would call you their patron or matron saint?

Christ still calls us — *each* of us — and each in our own way. Maybe tonight is your chance to imagine afresh the shape of your discipleship.

Amen.

## Invitation to Communion

After all these hundreds of years, Jesus is still calling us to gather round the table and to remember the signs of *his* ministry – the bread and the wine.

I want to invite you to partake in communion tonight. Hit pause right now and find something with which take communion. Jesus grabbed what was close and what could be found in an everyday setting. Maybe for you that's, a bag of Lays potato chips and an RC Cola (I'm looking at you Hartsel). Maybe it's a chocolate chip cookie and a glass of milk. That won't be the case for me tonight, because I already ate all of the chocolate chip cookies in our house... Whatever it is, hit pause right now and go get it.

I hope you found something absolutely ordinary, because God has a habit of taking ordinary things like basic bread and cheap wine – like you and me – and turning them into extraordinary signs of God's presence with us.

For my part, I will be using the unofficial unleavened bread of Colorado (a corn tortilla) and a cup of hot tea...

On this night above all nights, we remember when Jesus gathered in the upper room with his disciples.

"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'" (Matthew 26:26).

*The body of Christ broken for you.*

"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'" (Matthew 26:27-28).

*The blood of Christ shed for you.*

## Figures



Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci, "The Last Supper," 1490s.



Figure 2.



Figure 5: Cut out of Judas' elbow from da Vinci's portrayal. Note he's spilling the salt cellar.



Figure 3: "The Passion of the Christ," circa 1485-1490, located in the Old Saint Peter's Church in Strasborg.



Figure 4: Brian Whelan, "The Last Supper."