

Matthew 26:17-29

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.'

The Murderer was Captured by the Flag Rev. Charles Schuster July 6, 2008

Anne Lamott wrote a book entitled *Grace Eventually*. It's a book in which she expresses her thoughts on faith, Anne Lamott. "The best way to change the world is to change your mind, which often requires feeding yourself. It makes for biochemical peace. It's almost like a prayer. To be needy, to eat, to taste, to be filled. Building up instead of tearing down. You find energy to do something you hadn't expected to do, maybe even one of the holiest things."

This morning we're setting out to change the world by changing our minds. By feeding ourselves, by greeting each other, by meeting at the table. And at the end of our time together, to find the energy to do something we hadn't expected to do. Let me take you to another time and place. Let us think about the plot, two plots, assassinations. Let us think about changing the world and how we do it. They had their own reasons for doing what they did, and we have to remember the time and place. The civil war had been fought, the issues were complex. Some of those issues are ones we still find contentious – the preservation of the union, the right of states to make their own laws, local government versus federal authority, government of the people, by the people, and for the people. The Confederacy had lost the war. Their land was pillaged and burned. Young people died. It was savage and bloody. And it was out of that kind of circumstance that the plot was hatched. What pushed them to the point of conspiracy, what motivated them to act, was a

speech they heard in Richmond, Virginia. The President had said, since the slaves were now free, the next step was to give them the right to vote. Unthinkable. Men acting as one, at the appointed hour.

The plot: Three men must die, the President, the Vice-President, and the Secretary of State. The Vice President's assassin bailed out, it never happened. But at the appointed hour, someone entered William Seward's home dressed as if he were a doctor there to administer medicine. Secretary Seward had been injured the week before in a carriage accident and suffered a broken jaw, was confined to bed. The assailant entered the room, drew his knife, and attacked brutally. The Secretary suffered a near-fatal stab wound and the murderer escaped. John Wilkes Booth, at the same time, he had been plotting the day before. He was a well-known actor, so he was given free rein of the theater. The President had had this dream some time back, it was an eerie rehearsal for what actually occurred.

"There seemed to be a death-like stillness about me," he told Mary. "I heard subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping. I went from room to room. No living person was in sight, but the same mournful sounds of distress met me as I passed along, determined to find the cause of the state of things, so mysterious and so shocking. I kept on until I arrived at the East Room of the White House. I entered, and there I met with a sickening surprise. Before me was a catafalque on which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments, and around it were stationed soldiers who were acting as guards, and there was a throng of people gazing mournfully upon the corpse, whose face was covered, others weeping pitifully. 'Who is dead in the White House?' I demanded from one of the soldiers. 'The President' was the answer. 'He was killed by an assassin.'" Abraham Lincoln's dream.

The Lincolns entered the theater. The audience stood. The band played "Hail to the Chief." The play began, "Our American Cousin." At one point in the play, the heroine, seated on a couch, asked for a shawl to protect her from a draft of cool air. The actor, Edward Southern, looks up at the box just above the stage where the President and Mrs. Lincoln are sitting, and others in their party, and adds this line to the script. "Oh, you are mistaken, Miss Mary. The draft has already been stopped by order of the President." Abraham Lincoln laughed. Just then, a message was delivered to him by a soldier who was guarding the box, then the soldier stepped out for a smoke, and the box was unprotected. At twelve minutes after ten, at the very same time that William Seward, Secretary of State, was brutally stabbed, John Wilkes Booth gained admission to the box, raised his pistol, and pointed it at the back of the President's head and fired. Doris Kearns Goodwin describes what happened next.

"As Lincoln slumped forward, Henry Rathbone attempted to grab the intruder. Booth pulled out his knife and slashed Rathbone in the chest. Leaping from the box onto the stage fifteen feet below. As he jumped, one of the spurs on his riding boots caught on the folds of the flag draped over the front of the box, causing him to fall partially on his hands and knees as he struck the stage below. He was in great pain, for he shattered his left leg in the fall. He waved his shining dagger in the air. The audience thought it was

part of the play. The dagger reflected light as though it had been diamond-sparkled, and he shouted the words from his home state's motto, the motto of Virginia, "Sic semper tyrannis" – Thus always to tyrants – and he fled. Twelve days later he was captured and killed in a tobacco barn sixty miles from the scene of the murder. As he lay dying, he uttered his final words, 'Useless, useless.'

Abraham Lincoln did not die immediately. He lingered. Robert Todd Lincoln was at his bedside when he died. When Mary learned of her husband's death, she was inconsolable. She blamed the soldier who left his post. She said to anyone who would listen, in hysterics she said, "I can never forgive that man. I could never forgive him." And so the story goes, Robert said to his mother, "Mama, Papa would have forgiven him. Papa would have forgiven him." How would Lincoln want to be remembered during the war? Lincoln at an official reception referred to Southerners not as foes that should be killed. He saw them as patriots who were mistaken in their patriotism. Someone said to him, "How can you speak so kindly of your enemy?" and he answered, "Do I not make my enemy a friend, and thus destroy him?" He who had a dream that he would die by an assassin's bullet is remembered for having malice toward none, and charity for all, and on this, the Fourth of July weekend, we remember the values he lived and the lessons he taught.

This is not just a day to relive history, though history has much to tell us. There's another assassination, and it has formed us as a people. The plot began in the silent recesses of what I think was a twisted mind. It was not within the lingering insanity of a despiser, it began within the thought processes of a friend, a follower, an avid adherent. The best of intentions can never justify an unspeakable action. No means can ever justify an evil end, but it can explain it. The intent was to activate the leader to lead, to set in motion a series of events that would bring about something messianic caused by one who could be jump-started to become a messiah, for time was running out. People needed to be saved. People looked for a savior, and Judas, whose name is synonymous with treachery and deception, Judas took his blood money from the Roman goons and the Jewish jihad and the deed was sealed with a kiss. Ironic that the act of hatred was sparked by a display of affection. Still more interesting, that the plot was known and the consequences were understood. He who had the most to lose knew what would happen, and let it happen. How did he know? Was there a conversation overheard and reported chapter and verse? Was there a note intercepted that was carried up the ladder to the Lord, or was it just the intuitive ability of the Son of God to read the signs of his times in the minds of men and women? Some kind of psychic proclivity?

But he knew. He was prepared for the plot to unfold. He could have had it unravel. He could have moved away from the inevitable, he could have intercepted the ploy. It could have been stopped. Judas was one who was from Ishkar, he wasn't like the others. In fact, the others didn't like him anyway. Moneychangers are always unpopular in groups. He was a banker. This assassination could have been squelched, but it wasn't. Jesus didn't call in the force, he called for meal. He invited in his enemy and told him to take his place. He invited him to break the bread, and instead of imposing a counter-plot to foil the assassin and uncover the truth, he added fuel to the fire. He gave momentum to the

plan. "One of you will betray me," he said, and he knew which one it was. And still, he invited him to the table. "One of you will betray me. Join me at the table." To love those who love you, that is easy. To love those who hate you, to pray for those who persecute you, to return hatred with love.... "One of you will betray me. This is my body, broken for him. This is my blood, shed for him. One of you will betray me. Join me at the table." Words from the upper room descend to the lowest point, and there comes to us a time when the words cannot be ignored. Because we care more about the future yet to be than our immediate gratification. Because we no longer need conversions to the way we think, but conversations with people who think otherwise. Because there comes a time in life when we give up the need to be on top, and seek to be on tap, and available to do God's will, no longer concerned to see what God will do for us.

Joan Chidester is a Catholic theologian, an advocate for peace. She never forgot the year they brought together in a meeting of Palestinian women and Israeli women to begin to try to work toward some common future. The meeting took place in Oslo, Norway. Much progress was made. The Palestinians supported the Israeli right to an independent state and the Israeli women supported the Palestinians' right to the resources, political integrity, and freedom to live in the land. Much was given up so that much could be gained. Ancient animosities were confronted squarely and these women began to look at each other, face to face, as people. "This has been wonderful," said one of the Israeli women. "This time with you is a time we will never forget." A young Palestinian woman was silent, and then she spoke for all the others. "I'm glad for you, but I am concerned. And I must tell you that I am confused. I don't know what to do now, now that my enemy has become my friend." The next day the women flew back home. The Israeli woman walked through Customs and baggage claim while the Palestinian women did not. When the Israeli women realized the Palestinians had been held up in Customs by the Israeli police, they turned around, they went back and refused to leave the Customs hall themselves until all the Palestinians were released.

What does it mean? What do we do when our enemy has become our friend? Joan Chidester tells us it means having the courage to make human connections with people we fear. It means standing up for those we hate, those who think differently than we do, and it means refusing to leave others behind as we go.

Something happened in this country in the mid-Fifties. A group that was called the Fellowship of Reconciliation learned that there was a famine in the Chinese mainland, and thus began the Feed the Enemy campaign. And it went on for a while. It was actually thought that the campaign had failed, but thousands of little bags of rice, sent to the White House with a tag quoting Scripture, saying "If thine enemy is hungry, feed them." The President never spoke of it. An empty gesture, perhaps, but it was learned, years later, President Eisenhower met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider U.S. options in the conflict with China. On two occasions, the Joint Chiefs recommended the use of nuclear weapons. Each time, President Eisenhower turned to his aide and asked, "How many little bags of rice came in?" And when told that they numbered in the tens of thousands, Eisenhower told the generals as long as so many Americans were expressing active interest in having our country feed the Chinese, he wasn't going to consider using

nuclear weapons against them. Can a patriot be a Christian? Can you speak out against a war and be supportive of the men and women assigned to fight it? Can we love our enemies, or is this just some shallow hope?

Linda Williams has a dream. Her dream is that the children of tomorrow will be as shocked to learn about war as the children of today are shocked to learn about slavery. Children. Vacation Bible School at the Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church taught their parents a lesson. On the final night, the program, the place was packed. Four five-year-old boys, giving their interpretation of Moses and the Jews leaving Egypt. The boys, waving enthusiastically plastic swords, showing how mean Pharaoh and his army had been with their firm resolve and their antagonism, Moses standing in front of Pharaoh. "Pharaoh, the slaves are tired and they don't want you bossing them around any more. Let my people go." Pharaoh, sitting on his throne, twirling his plastic sword, saying, "Never, never, never." Moses leaves, soon to return, approaching Pharaoh once more. "Pharaoh, my people are really tired of being beaten up. Now, would you let my people go, please?" There was a pause. It was as if Pharaoh swallowed the script, and the audience leaned forward as Nancy, one of the teachers, tried to bring Pharaoh back into the drama, repeating the words, lifting up the script. "Never, never, never." But this five-year-old Pharaoh had had enough. He leaped from his throne and he threw down his plastic sword, and as clear and loud as it could be, he said, the congregation heard the words, "I don't want to be mean any more. All of you can go. Just go. You can all go home now." And he walked over to Moses and he put his arm around his neck, and the two of them walked off the stage, and the congregation sat, stunned, in silence.

What was being shown here? What was revealed? What do we do when our enemy becomes our friend? How do we be a patriot and a Christian in a world like this? We can change the world by changing our minds, by feeding ourselves the bread, the cup, and by finding the energy to do something we hadn't really expected to do. Abraham Lincoln, when he was President, on many Wednesday evenings he liked to go hear the preaching at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church – I wish I could say it was Methodist, but it wasn't – it was near the White House. Lincoln was leaving the service one night, and someone said to him, "Mr. Lincoln, what did you think of the sermon tonight?" Lincoln thought for a moment and he said, "Well, the content was excellent, and Doctor Gurley spoke with great eloquence, and it was obvious that he put a great deal of work into his sermon." "So you thought it was a great sermon, did you, Mr. President?" And Lincoln answered, "No, I didn't say that. I said the content was excellent. I said the preacher spoke with eloquence, but Dr. Gurley on this night forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great." And Jesus said, "If you have an enemy, if there's someone who doesn't like you, invite them for a meal, and treat them like a friend."