

**“And it was communion”**  
**a sermon by Anna Pinckney Straight**  
**Maundy Thursday**  
**April 13, 2017**

Exodus 12: 1 – 4, 11 – 14

<sup>1</sup>The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: <sup>2</sup>This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. <sup>3</sup>Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. <sup>4</sup>If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it.

<sup>11</sup>This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the LORD. <sup>12</sup>For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup>The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

<sup>14</sup>This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

John 13: 1 – 17, 31b – 35

<sup>1</sup>Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup>The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup>Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup>Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. <sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup>Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup>Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." <sup>9</sup>Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

<sup>12</sup>After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" <sup>13</sup>You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup>Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup>If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

<sup>31</sup>When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup>If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' <sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

David Ellis Dickerson grew up Christian. In his own words, he was (as was everyone else in his family) an “*evangelical... conservative, Bible-believing Christian.*” He loved God, loved Jesus, loved being a Christian so much that he heard God calling him to be a pastor. With that as his goal, David went to college and declared his major to be religious studies.

David Ellis Dickerson told his story on the Public Radio program “This American Life<sup>1</sup>” a few years ago.

David went to college and declared his major to be religious studies, but....

*“from my very first scholarly class in the history of the Bible,” he says, “my faith began to crumble, ‘til there was nothing left.”*

With his faith crumbling, David found a new foundation. A new way of embracing the Bible. Instead of a text of faith, it became, for him, a text of flaws —contradictions, inaccuracies.

Like many a convert to a new thing, David set out to share his insights with anyone who would listen, and maybe change, too.

*“I now had this game I could play where if you open a Bible to any page, I could find five flaws in it..... Just mention the virgin birth, just once, and I’ll tell you it’s a mistranslation from Isaiah, you know. Just, just mention 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, and I can prove to you it is a second century forgery.*

*You know, say anything at all, please, please, about the antichrist, Revelation, the end times, anything like that..... I had all this ammunition and I couldn’t wait to use it.....*

David had left home, left his religion, and he didn’t look back.

Until he went back. Home. To face it. To sit down with the people he loved but whose life or beliefs he no longer shared. On the evening around which his “This American Life” story was centered, David sat with his father in a diner, prepared for a showdown. He wanted a showdown.

David’s words:

*I needed to save him. And so I said, “so uh, Dad, what’s your life like right now?”*

*And he said, “well, I, found a new church home.”*

*And I was like, “I heard church!” I perked up. And I was ready to go. But I thought, eh, church. Not much to argue about there. People go to church . Okay. Nothing biblical.*

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/432/know-when-to-fold-em>

Retrieved weekly free MP3 on Monday, April 10, 2011.

Transcription of spoken word by me. This sermon uses excerpts of his story.

If you would like to read the entire story as broadcast, please contact me.

*And he said, "You know, it's a small church, and the pastor found out that I play the accordion and he made me the music minister, and that'll be nice."*

*And again, I tightened, but I thought, "Eh, Music ministry. Nah, nothing there."*

*And then he said, "You know, this other kind of interesting thing is happening. I've been praying about it. And I think I'm going to be a missionary."*

*That struck a chord. I sat upright and I went, "Oh really? A Missionary? Where are you gonna go?"*

*And then he said, "Oh, Spain."*

*And I snapped. I said:*

*"Of course, of course you are going to go to Spain. That is so arrogant. Only an evangelical Christian would say, 'oh those poor benighted Spaniards need to learn about Jesus.'"*

*"You know. You know," I said, "Evangelical Christianity's a way. The whole model of salvation that you guys preach wasn't even around until the nineteenth century...."*

*"And, Dad," I said. "You're saving people. What are you saving them from? Hell, may I guess? Because let me point something else out to you. Hell is a mistranslation from the King James of four completely different words for the afterlife.... King James just rounded them all up to hell....And the second you believe in hell you are undermining everything good, because a morality based in fear can only bring out the worst in people and never their best."*

*And I just rambled on like this. And I knew, essentially, that, while I was doing this, I was also assaulting his dream. You know, saying everything he was excited about, that he was sharing with me, was misbegotten. Was a bad idea. Was morally corrupt.*

*But, **all he had to do** was admit that I was right and then we'd be okay. And I really didn't know what was going to happen now, because I'd just fired the first shot.*

*And he just kind of quietly let me do my thing.*

*And when I had settled down, and, you know, gotten my piece out, he said:*

*"Um.... [cough/throat clearing] David. I'm really proud of everything you've done. And I'm really glad that you enjoy studying all of these things and thinking all these thoughts. But I've gotta tell you, before I became a Christian, I was miserable. I wanted to kill myself. I wanted to get a divorce from your mom...."*

*You know, when I first went to Grace Chapel," which was the church where we had converted, he said "I thought those people were crazy.... You know, I was just staring at the stuff these people were doing. And I thought, 'this*

*is crazy.' But I could not ignore the love in that room. And the care they had for each other. And I kept going back. And I kept going back. And I wanted it to make sense to me. And I wanted it. And finally, one night, I prayed. And I said 'God, if I have to cut my own head off to be happy, I will do it.' So I know you've gone to college and you've learned all of these things, but here's what I know. I follow Jesus. And the Lord gave me a family."*

David reflected on what his dad had said. He said...

*My parents really had almost gotten divorced.... And then my dad had converted. And he said, "No. We're sticking this out. I'm going to make this work." And it had.*

*And my brother, too, you know, he's deeply conservative, listens to all of the kind of, you know, right-wing talk radio and so forth. And he's got to be convinced that I'm going to hell. But this one time. I was on this trip. And I was a student. And he gave me \$300 and said, "Don't bother repaying it."*

*And I remember looking at my dad, and I thought. You know, I'd sort of expected to argue.... You know, not to win, but to come to some kind of armistice. You know, some kind of truce where we're like, well, we'll agree to disagree, but I see your point. You know, that's a good point.*

*I half expected to lose completely, because you can't argue with decency. You can't argue with goodness.*

*The thing about the Bible is, it's huge. I could poke at it because I could pick at anything I wanted. You know, talking snakes... virgin birth. And eventually, I came around to thinking, well, maybe religion doesn't have to be consistent.... Maybe religion can be more like, like, I'm a big star trek fan. And if you would ask me, I would say, like "I love Star Trek." But if you asked me to defend individual episodes, I would be at a loss, because I can't go to bat for everything Star Trek did. I just love the concept. And maybe, religion can be like that.*

*So what I said to my dad was, "Oh, look... here comes the waitress."*

*And we got our sprite and had our hamburgers.*

*And we looked at each other*

*Raised the glass, had a bite.*

*And my dad didn't know this, but we were having communion.*

It was communion.

And it was like the table around which we gather this evening. Like the table around which the disciples gathered so many years ago, a supper which happened because of a meal from centuries before that—Passover, the instructions for which we heard about in our reading from Exodus.

Different people, with different ways of understanding their faith, with different worries and different hopes, gathering around the table with the one God who created and loves us all. To learn. To be recalibrated. To receive sustenance.

Sam Wells writes:<sup>2</sup>

When the Eucharist is served, a reshaping of human society begins. Each member of the congregation offers different things to the table, offering all that he or she uniquely is. This begins a reordering of society: members of the congregation come and in return receive from God everything they need to follow him.

[In Communion]...The elements of bread and wine are taken, blessed, broken and shared just as Jesus was taken, blessed, broken and shared. In a similar way the congregation as a whole is *taken* out of its ordinary pursuits; *blessed* with the grace and truth of forgiveness and scripture; *broken* in the disciplines of intercession, peacemaking and food-sharing; and *shared* with the world in love and service.

This table, tables of communion, are places of transformation, because God is there. God is **here**. God who, in communion, invites us unto Godself. Where we cannot pose. We cannot pretend. We can only be, dirty feet and all. And be washed, fed, and loved. When that happens, we cannot help but be changed. As David was changed. As the disciples were changed. As the Israelites were changed.

Saved.

As we gather around this table, do you want it? Do you want what God offers? Can you hear what God is calling? Are you hungry? Are you thirsty?

For a relationship, damaged, or maybe broken,  
 and finding its way back to the foundation of grace and love.  
 Faith, long held deep within, away from light and air, articulated, shared,  
 and people changed as a result. God's Kingdom brought one day closer.  
 Commitment to giving, living, speaking for others.  
 Where the potential missionary can be the evangelist, and the evangelist the student.

Bread is broken, the cup is shared, all are invited. To be held in God's hands. To be emptied, filled, and sent. To the cross. To the world. To the night ahead.

It happens around a table.

It was communion. It is communion. And thanks goes to God.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sam Wells. "Broken and shared—Worship: Act four." in *The Christian Century*, June 14, 2005.

<http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-06/broken-and-shared>  
 Retrieved April 19, 2011.