

## “Is it I?” (Mark 14:18-19)

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2009

I really don't like being wrong, but do you know what I like even less? Insisting I'm right, then being proven wrong. I don't like that at all! Why, I still cringe remembering a time in Kindergarten when this happened. We were supposed to be drawing farm animals, and I thought that was what I was doing, but when Miss Kirkpatrick looked at my paper, she was kind of puzzled. “What is that?” she asked. “A chicken,” I answered. “Then what are those?” she asked. “Legs,” I answered. “But there are four of them.” “Um hmm.” “But chickens only have two legs.” “No,” I corrected her, “they have four,” adding, “I know they have four, because whenever my mom fixes chicken for dinner, there are always four legs – one for each of us!” Surprisingly, not even that convinced her. Instead, Miss Kirkpatrick pulled out a book and showed me a picture of a chicken. Guess what? It only had two legs. Worse yet, every other kid in the class seemed to know a chicken only has two legs – everyone except me. Talk about humiliating! But it was a good lesson: that it's better to consider the possibility you might be wrong than to insist that you're right and then be proven wrong. Yes, it was a very good lesson. I just wish I had learned it back then!

Maybe you've had a similar experience. If so, you know just what I mean. And you also know that this overconfidence can bubble up in any area of life. Even in our spiritual life, we can be so sure we are right, with so little reason, and have to learn our lesson the hard way! If we're lucky, we might just embarrass ourselves over something trivial – like insisting “God helps those who help themselves” is a verse from the Bible, only to find out: *Bzzt! Wrong! It's from Aesop's Fables.* Unfortunately, overconfidence can also bubble up in ways that are not trivial – with consequences that are not trivial. Like being so sure we would never yield to such and such a temptation – only to find out: *Bzzt! Wrong! Now look what I've done!* Or being so sure we would never repeat such and such a behavior – only to find out: *Bzzt! Wrong! There I go again!* Yes, even in our spiritual lives, we can be so sure we are right, with so little reason, and find out the hard way that pride does go before a fall! That's why we need to take this lesson to heart – in our spiritual lives especially. Consider the possibility that we might be wrong! It's so much better than insisting we're right and then being proven wrong!

Case in point, think back to the Last Supper. As the disciples gathered round the table, Jesus said, “**Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me...**” Suddenly, there was such uncertainty in the room. One after the other, the disciples asked the Lord, “**Is it I?**” Now, two of them were not asking honestly. There was Judas, of course, who *knew* he was the one. And there was Peter, who was sure he was *not* the one. As for the other ten, each considered the awful possibility that Jesus might be speaking of him. “**Is it I?**” each one asked. “*Surely not!*” each one thought. Yet at the same time: “*Could I be the one to betray Him?*”

Now, we all know the passion story, so we know what these disciples would ultimately do. None of them proved wholly faithful. But who would be the biggest

offenders? Who would really *betray* Jesus? The two disciples who were so sure they were right: *Judas* and *Peter*. Look at those two! When Judas made a deal with the high priests, he was so sure he was doing the right thing. When he led their guards to take Jesus captive, he was sure he was doing the right thing. Even when he betrayed Jesus with a kiss, he was sure he was doing the right thing. Only too late did he realize that, far from doing the right thing, he had actually “**betrayed innocent blood.**” Likewise with Peter: when he swore he’d stand by the Lord, he was sure he would do the right thing. When he swore he would die before denying the Lord, he was sure he would do the right thing. Why, he even followed Jesus to the high priest’s house! He was sure he would do the right thing. And only too late did he realize the truth: he wasn’t as strong as he thought. In fact, he proved how weak he was, denying Jesus not once, not twice, but three times: “**I do not know the man.**”

As he looked back, how often Peter must have kicked himself for this overconfidence! How often he must have asked himself: *Why wasn’t I more humble? If only I had taken Jesus’ warning to heart! If only I had faced my weakness honestly! If only I hadn’t been so sure I was right! I might have handled things so much better! And I had the chance in the upper room as we gathered around the Lord’s Table. I had the chance! If only I had taken advantage of it, asking humbly, honestly, along with the rest, “Is it I?”*

For our part, as we look back, I’m sure we can sympathize with Peter. He was just so human, wasn’t he? But today, we want to do more than sympathize. We want to learn from his example. In general, we want to learn to spot overconfidence in ourselves and to cultivate humility. But especially as we come to the Lord’s Table, celebrating the sacrament first shared in the upper room, we want to draw upon Peter’s experience to enrich our own reception of Holy Communion. To do that, I’d like to reflect on this question: “**Is it I?**”

“**Is it I?**” This question was asked just before Jesus instituted Holy Communion – a question about guilt before sharing the meal of forgiveness – and this is well worth noting. In a book called *The Smirking Catechism*, the question is asked, “*What must I do before I can receive forgiveness?*” The answer: “*You must sin.*” And this was meant as humor, but it’s not far from the truth. A better answer would be, “*You must recognize your sin as sin – something you know is wrong, that you regret, and that you want to be cleansed from. Otherwise, why would you seek forgiveness?*” And we need to remember this as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table. Communion is a meal of forgiveness. Its chief benefit is forgiveness. Jesus’ words are clear: “**Given**” and “**shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.**” So why would we come to the Lord’s Table if we see no need of forgiveness? We wouldn’t...and shouldn’t. Before we come, we need to examine our consciences and recognize our sin as sin, confessing it, repenting of it, wanting to be cleansed of it. For how else can we experience Communion’s benefits? Only one who sees the need of forgiveness can experience forgiveness.

So this brings us back to the question: “**Is it I?**” When we examine our consciences, certain sins are relatively easy to confess: *I gossiped. I got impatient. I said a naughty word.* Now, it’s important to admit these sins, too, but we must not stop with them. We need to look more broadly and deeply, considering areas where we may think we’re doing all right. Often the sins that do the most damage are the ones we would just as soon ignore. Indeed, the sins that most insidiously betray our faith and our Lord can be ones we try to justify. Like Peter, we can be so sure we are right -- so right to demand such and such from family or friends; so right to hold a grudge against someone who’s offended us; so right to just say whatever we think however much it hurts someone else. And the list could go on and on. Yes, like Peter we can be so sure we’re right...and with so little reason! If Peter’s example teaches us anything, it’s the danger of such overconfidence. And the need for honesty about ourselves. And the value of humility – humility that’s willing to consider the possibility we might be in the wrong, and asks, “**Is it I?**”

When we do this, the results can be surprising – and healing! For instance, take this family I once knew. From the outside, the father seemed stern and traditional, the mother seemed kind and caring, and the kids seemed basically okay, if a little spoiled. Now, for years, mom had been the “good guy.” If the kids wanted permission to do something, mom was the person to go to. In fact, at times she secretly helped out the kids and covered up things they all knew their father would not approve. How could she not, being so kind and caring? Then one day, the father had a massive heart attack. He was incapacitated for quite some time. That meant mom had to handle things on her own. And it didn’t go real well. Money wasn’t the problem. There was plenty of that. But things got pretty chaotic. Rules were ignored. Responsibilities were neglected. The kids pretty much did their own thing, expecting mom to bail them out when necessary, just as she always had. Well, at first it was easy to blame this on the situation – specifically, on the father not being there to do his fair share. But one day the mom had an “**Is it I?**”-moment. She realized an awful truth about herself – that as much as she liked to see herself as kind and caring, she had helped enable this chaos by always needing to be the “good guy,” coddling her kids, and working behind her husband’s back. She may have cast her husband in the role of tyrant, but if anything, he had been the voice of sanity. Truth be told, he had been acting as the adult – the adult, where two had been needed. As you might guess, it was not easy for her to own up to this. Nor was it easy to admit it to her husband. Nor was it easy for him to admit his share of the fault. But they worked through it. They offered each other forgiveness. And some real healing occurred. What came out of this was a healthier relationship between the two of them and much better parenting. There was some real value in asking: “**Is it I?**”

And the same is true for us. There is some real value in asking: “**Is it I?**” – especially since we know we can count on forgiveness. Obviously, there would be no point in confessing our sins if we just stayed stuck with them! There would be no point in recognizing our guilt if we just had to wallow in it! The whole point

is to receive forgiveness and move on. So, if there is any question about this, any question about whether we are forgiven, this is another reason to ask, **“Is it I?”** We need to ask it about Jesus’ promise: **“Your sins are forgiven you.”** **“Is it I”** *who am being forgiven?* Listen carefully, for the answer will always be, *Yes, it is you!* Especially when we go to Communion, when we hear, **“Given”** and **“shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,”** we need to ask, **“Is it I”** *who am being forgiven?* For here too, the answer will always be, *Yes, it is you!*

There’s a reason why I mention this. One of the great ironies in the Christian life is that we can confess little sins that don’t bother us much and it’s easy trust they are forgiven, but when it comes to the bigger sins that bother us a lot, it can be hard to trust they are forgiven! We can feel like the Word of absolution flies right over our heads: *John is forgiven. Mary’s forgiven. Jack is forgiven. Lucille is forgiven. Everyone’s forgiven but me. My sin is just too big!*

But that’s not true. There are no hidden clauses to the promise of forgiveness. **“If we confess our sins, God will be faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** Did you hear anything about the size of the sin? No. Did you hear anything about the depth of the guilt? No. **“If we confess” it, “God will...forgive...”** Period. Let there be no doubt whatsoever! And if there is, ask the question, then listen to the answer. **“Is it I”** *who’s being forgiven?* *Yes, it is you!*

Remember, God wants us to experience forgiveness. That’s why He went through this whole plan of salvation, even offering up His Son to save us from our sins. God wants us to experience forgiveness. In fact, I suspect that’s one of the reasons God was not content to just have us hear the word of forgiveness, but gave it to us in this sacramental form. It is quite possible to hear the Word of forgiveness proclaimed in the absolution, yet have it fly right over your head. Or hear it proclaimed in Scripture and the Sermon and have it fly right over your head. But when you are kneeling at the altar for Communion, there is something different about taking the bread and wine into your mouth, receiving Christ Himself into your body, and hearing, **“Given”** and **“shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”** There’s no way that assurance of forgiveness can fly right over your head! When the Lord Himself comes to you in this deeply personal way and says, **“Your sins are forgiven you,”** there’s no question who He’s promising this to! **“Is it I?”** *Yes, it is you!*

So this Maundy Thursday, as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table, let us bring this question with us: **“Is it I?”** Let us use it to examine our consciences and see our need of forgiveness. Let us use it to hear Jesus’ promise of forgiveness and claim it as our own. In both senses, Law and Gospel, it is a very useful question: **“Is it I?”** Amen.