

A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR: THIS IS MY BODY

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Mark 14:12-26

I'd like to begin this morning with a story from the news. You may have caught wind of it back in February. It's about a man whose name is James Harrison. In February, he died at the age of 88, peacefully in his sleep. James Harrison was Australian. He lived his entire life in Australia. He worked as a clerk for the Regional Railway authority. His wife was a teacher. They had a daughter, two grandsons, and four great-grandchildren.

So why is it that when he died, his obituary, a lengthy one, appeared in the New York Times? There were articles about him in papers all over the world, including National Public Radio and The Guardian. The AP had a long writeup. Furthermore, why was it that in 1999 that the Australian Government awarded Mr. Harrison the Medal of the Order of Australia? I don't know what that is, but it sounds very nice. The reason that this otherwise very unassuming man is remembered is because he gave blood. That's all.

From the time that he was 18 until the law required that he retire from giving blood at 81, he donated every two weeks, without fail, 1173 times. He donated through Lifeblood, which is part of the Australian Red Cross.

Why did he give blood? Well, when he was 14, he got sick, and they had to remove one of his lungs. Through the operation and recovery, he required close to two gallons of blood. And his mother impressed upon him the fact that so many people—people he would never know, never meet—had helped save his life. And so, he was inspired to donate. And he did as soon as he turned 18 and was legally able to do so. And he donated until age 81—1173 times.

How many of us have done something so selfless over 1000 times in our lives without fail? James Harrison gave blood, and that should be enough.

But it doesn't stop there because it was discovered that Mr. Harrison's blood was special. It was discovered to contain a rare antibody known as anti-D. Anti-D was discovered in the mid-1960s, and it is used in a medication to prevent Hemolytic Disease of the Fetus and Newborn, also known as Rhesus Disease. This is a potentially fatal disease that occurs when a pregnant woman's blood is incompatible with that of their unborn baby. It causes the mother's immune system to attack the fetus's red blood cells. And it afflicts about 17% of pregnant women. In Australia, only 200 people possess that antibody. It is rare. And James Harrison was the first and the most prolific donor of this anti-D antibody. Because of this antibody in his blood, children's lives were saved. How many? Thousands, ten

thousand? More than that—2.4 million. One man changed the lives of 2.4 million children.

Just as James Harrison gave something precious and life-saving, our savior, Jesus Christ, in a far greater act of love, also gave his blood, his body, even his life for us. And so today we turn again to the Gospel of Mark as we look at a pivotal moment in our lives of faith.

The occasion is the celebration of the Passover—the Passover feast. The Passover feast is based on the story of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt. The Hebrew people—the descendants of Joseph--were living in Egypt and had been enslaved by the Pharaoh and forced to hard work. And the people cried out, God sent Moses to lead the people to a land of their own. There is a succession of plagues until finally the final plague arrives—the plague of death. God will send the angel of death to pass over the land of Egypt, but the Hebrews are instructed by Moses to: 1) get ready to leave because they will flee very soon; 2) bake unleavened bread because they don't have time for it to rise; 3) slaughter a lamb and roast it and eat it. But they are to take the blood of the lamb and put it over the door of their homes so that when the Angel of Death passes over Egypt, he will pass over the homes of the Hebrew people.

And so, in Jesus' day, some thousands of years later, they continued to celebrate the Passover and commemorate it with a feast. Jews from all corners of the world converged on Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast in that great city. And as we read today, on Thursday of Holy Week, Jesus sends disciples into the city to set up the room that he prearranged, and tells them to prepare the meal to be ready that evening so that he and his disciples can gather.

Those who are tasked with gathering the food together must get wine. They also need bitter herbs because bitter herbs are a reminder of the bitterness of slavery. They are to gather *charoset*, this boiled fruit which has the consistency and color of mortar, a reminder of how their ancestors were forced to make bricks. And then there's to be a lamb that is to be roasted and eaten.

But this is no ordinary Passover feast, is it? Because Jesus knows what is going to happen to him. This will be the Last Supper that he has with his disciples and the tension is high. He is aware of the significance of this particular Passover. He knows that his time is near. And honestly, as I read this story, it's kind of like an Agatha Christie novel, where some wealthy man invites his good friends to come to have dinner at his castle, which is off the coast of Scotland, and it's foggy, and they're having this meal together, and the host stands up in the middle of the meal and says, "Tonight, one of you will murder me." And they all go, "No, you're crazy. We're not going to murder you." Jesus says the same thing to his disciples tonight: "One of you will betray me," and they all go, "No, it's not me." That betrayal will lead to Jesus' death. Peter says, "I'll give my life before I deny you," and we know

how that turns out later in the evening. But the tension, the apprehension, is high at this time. This meal is enveloped in betrayal.

But Jesus continues, and he shares this sacred meal with those closest to him. And through this ancient ritual, he reappropriates it adding a new and profound sacrament to our lives. We read, *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take; this is my body.'* In this part of the Passover ritual, the person at the head of the table takes the bread, breaks off a piece, and hands it to someone who passes it down. And this is done until all have a piece of bread. And Jesus says a prayer—a blessing over the bread. But then he goes off script and tells his disciples, *This is my body.*

And in this moment, we are reminded of how the next day his body will be broken on the cross. This bread symbolizes Jesus' physical sacrifice and his suffering for our sins.

As Presbyterians, we don't hear *This is my body* as a literal transforming of bread into flesh. It is more than a symbol. It is an eternal reminder that Jesus is with us. He's telling his disciples, "This is my body and any time you eat bread you should be reminded that I am with you." And he doesn't mean for them to take the bread and stick it in their pocket and keep it as a keepsake forevermore. No, they were to eat it so that it would become part of them and be reminded that Jesus is with them.

Think of the story of the Hebrews after leaving Egypt. They're in the wilderness, and they want food and God sends them *manna*. The manna, which isn't meant to be collected or hoarded or stashed away, is meant to be eaten right away as a reminder that God will provide. And there is our prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." God will be with us.

This word "body" in Greek, which is *soma*, is similar to the English word in that it has a wide range of meanings. It can mean our body or person or an entire thing like a body of work. And by saying, *This is my body*, we're reminded of this promise that Jesus will always be with us. He will always be with his disciples. And when we take the body of Christ, we are connected to his sacrifice, we are connected to him, and we are connected to one another—the great body of believers.

Then we read, *He took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood; this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.'* Again, we have this extremely deliberate action. Jesus goes off script, takes the cup that's on the table, and says, *This is my blood*. By doing this, he emphasizes the communal aspect of their being together because all of them drink from the cup—all the disciples participate in this act. But he calls it *my blood of the covenant* and right away, we're reminded of the blood of the lamb at the Passover spread on the doors of the homes of the Hebrews. We're

reminded of the concept of the covenant. We look back to Exodus where Moses goes to the people and sprinkles blood on them to remind them of the covenant that God has made with them. *Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you."*

At the Passover feast, the blood of Jesus establishes a new covenant, a new covenant based on a relationship between God and humanity based on grace and forgiveness. All the teachings of Christ are here in this new covenant, this new sacrament.

And finally, Jesus says, *This is my blood poured out for many*, because we will see his blood shed the very next day at the cross, blood shed for the forgiveness of sins for all. *This is my blood poured out for many*. So we ask ourselves, what does it mean to partake in the blood of the covenant? How does this remind us of the cost of our forgiveness and the new life that we have in Jesus Christ? Because all of this is what happens when we gather at this table. When we come to this table we eat the bread and we're reminded that Christ is with us. We drink from the cup and we're reminded of the sacrifice that he made for us. We are celebrating this new covenant for Christ is indeed the new covenant that God has forged for us.

You remember the story I began with about James Harrison whose life really was a selfless act. I think of all the times that he sat in that chair giving blood. That in itself is a sort of Eucharist—pouring out his blood so that others may live, even people he didn't know. And we too are called to regularly remember Jesus's ultimate sacrifice through active communion, through our prayers, through our study of scripture, through our being together. It's a time when we ask ourselves, "What do this bread and this cup mean to us personally? How does this impact our relationship with God and with one another? How do we live in light of this incredible gift? How do we embody the selflessness and love that Jesus demonstrated to his disciples that night and to us through time?"

James Harrison was a person who gave and gave and gave in little bits—pints of blood. He gave so that others might live, and that should inspire us all to give more of ourselves.

So, I ask you this day to reflect on your own actions, your selfless actions. What are they? Identify them. Write them down. Are you committed to doing these things? Do you perform them on a regular basis? Are these things a sacrifice for you in any way? Do they reflect the life of Christ? Do they bring you joy? I pray that they do. Amen.