

BODY AND BLOOD

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Mark 5:21-43

In 1495, Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned to create a piece of art that we know as The Last Supper. The Last Supper is one of the most recognized artworks in the western world. It is iconic. Today, whenever we see a depiction of thirteen people sitting at a long table, immediately, we think "Last Supper."

The Last Supper is not a traditional painting on canvas. It is in fact a mural painted on a wall. And it is huge—15 feet tall by 29 feet wide.

Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned by the Duke of Milan to create an artwork for an interior wall in the Dominican Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. The room was intended to become a mausoleum for the Sforza family. However, it eventually became the refectory (or dining hall) of the convent.

Traditionally, artists attempting a mural such as this would have created them as a fresco. In a fresco, an artist paints directly on to wet plaster. For example, Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel were done in the fresco style. When working with a fresco, the artist has to paint quickly before the plaster dries. Da Vinci didn't want to do it that way. He wanted to work more slowly so he chose to paint directly on dry plaster. Two layers of plaster were coated onto a stone wall. An underlay of a lead-based white paint was applied to the plaster. Da Vinci painted on top of that. Da Vinci worked on the painting off and on for three years. It was completed about 1498.

Problems with the painting surfaced immediately as paint began to flake off. Da Vinci was called in several times to repair his creation. The problem was that the wall was thin and humidity easily soaked into the plaster. Within just a few decades, the painting had lost much of its color and brilliance.

Over the centuries, The Last Supper has suffered a series of indignities. First of all, there have been a number of poor attempts at restoration. These caused a great deal of damage to the work. Over time, the painting suffered from the steam and smoke of the refectory's kitchen. In 1652, Jesus lost his feet when a door was cut into the wall at the bottom of the painting. That regrettable project also loosened some of the paint and plaster. Napoleon's troops used the room as a horse stable. In the 19th century, there was a flood and the painting was ravaged by mold. During World War II, an Allied bomb collapsed the roof and one wall of the refectory. The painting was not damaged directly, but it was exposed to the elements for several months. The latest extensive restoration was completed in 1999. The overall result of all this is that very little of the original painting remains today.

The subject of da Vinci's Last Supper is the Passover meal that Jesus celebrates with his disciples shortly before he is arrested and crucified. The moment in time is just seconds after Jesus has informed the twelve that one of them will betray him. Da Vinci gives each apostle a different expression on their face ranging from disbelief to anguish. Judas is shown holding a small purse to indicate that he had received the payment for his betrayal. Peter is waving a knife as a foreshadowing of how he will soon slice off a servant's ear as Jesus is arrested.

It is, of course, at the Passover meal that Jesus institutes the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. He transforms this meal into an eternal remembrance of his being. Picking up the bread, he tells the apostles, *This is my body*. Then he takes a cup and declares, *This is my blood*.

This is the heart of our sacrament of communion—remembering Jesus through this meal. His body, like the bread, would be broken in crucifixion. His blood would be spilled as sacrifice.

Our reading today from the Gospel of Mark is not one story but it is actually two intertwined stories—the raising of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage. What makes these stories so interesting is the way that the second one interrupts the first.

The first story begins when a man approaches Jesus and explains that his *little daughter* is near death. He drops to his knees and begs Jesus to *Come and lay your hands on her, that she may be made well, and live*. And Jesus complies. Jesus goes with the man and a large crowd follows them. The man's name is Jairus and he is one of the leaders of the local synagogue. He is not a priest but a lay person who was member of the ruling board—a member of the church session. This position with the synagogue likely carried with it civic responsibilities, as well. The man would be a person of some standing in the community.

As Jesus makes his way towards Jairus' house, the story is interrupted by the second story which is about a woman with a medical condition. This woman had been *suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years*. We don't know the details of her ailment but do know that that she has spent all of her money on doctors who had not been able to cure her. In fact, she had only gotten worse. In addition to draining her resources, the ailment likely rendered her ritually unclean and therefore placed her outside the bounds of her religion.

Unlike Jairus who was confident enough to approach Jesus directly, the woman instead approaches Jesus from the rear. She doesn't even address him but instead sneaks through the crowd and so that she might touch his clothes. She believed that would be enough. And it is. Immediately upon touching Jesus' clothing, she is healed. And immediately Jesus senses that *power had gone forth from him*, and he asks, *Who touched my clothes?* The disciples cannot believe that he asks this question. The crowd around him is like a mosh pit at Bonnaroo—everyone is

touching him. What does he mean, *Who touched me?* But the woman knows and in *fear and trembling* she falls down before him and confesses *the whole truth*. The woman's fear is not of Jesus but of what she has done without his permission. Jesus forgives her saying, *Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.*

At this point, the first story recommences when word comes to Jairus that his daughter has died. Jesus tells him, *Do not fear, only believe*. At the house, Jesus says to the mourners, *the child is not dead but sleeping*. They laugh at him. Of course the girl is dead. Jesus sends everyone out of the house except for the parents. He takes the girl's hand and says, *Little girl, get up*, and she does, and Jesus tells them to give her something to eat.

There is so much going on in these two stories. There is the contrast between Jairus and this woman who is never named. Jairus approaches Jesus with confidence and she does so with fear. The daughter is twelve years old; the woman has been suffering for twelve years. The mourners laugh at Jesus; the disciples practically laugh at him when he asks, *Who touched me?* But these are only details to a much greater story.

What touches me so deeply in this reading is how it so beautifully reflects the experience of Jesus' body and blood. Individually, each of these two stories is an amazing witness to Jesus' presence, but together they are transformed into a powerful testament of faith. The little girl serves as a reflection of Jesus' body—a body broken and dead that is lifted up to life. In the woman, we experience the blood, literally, just as we will encounter Jesus' blood spilled at the cross. His blood becomes the blood of a new covenant with God.

When Jesus lifts up the bread and the cup at the Passover table he is lifting up the hand of the little girl. He is lifting up the hand of each of us. He brings new life. When he says, *This is my body*, he is not just referring to his own body, but all of us who gather in his name. We are the body. When he says, *This is my blood*, our blood becomes co-mingled with his. We are invited to be part of his body and blood.

Five-hundred years ago, Leonardo da Vinci's magnificent painting, *The Last Supper*, was destined to decorate the wall of a mausoleum—a room for the dead. But for some reason, that room became a place of life, of eating and drinking. At each meal, the members of the convent were blessed to be able to look upon their Lord sitting at table sharing the bread and the cup as an eternal remembrance of his love. As we celebrate communion with one another today, we too are blessed. We are one with our Lord. Amen.