

The Woman in White

John 4:25-35

In preparation for the Lord's table, I would like for us to consider what happens or should happen when we partake of the Lord's Supper.

When I was a little boy, our communion table at the Coy Baptist Church had etched in wood the phrase, "Do This In Remembrance Of Me." Our choir just sang this in their beautiful anthem: In Remembrance - In remembrance of me, heal the sick, feed the poor, search for truth, always love. In remembrance of me eat, drink, my body and blood shed for you.

What happens at this table or should happen? It is just crackers and juice. Somehow in the mystery of God's love these elements are transformed into spiritual food for the soul.

Our Catholic friends call it Transubstantiation. The bread and wine are changed and become the actual body and blood of the Lord Christ. Baptists believe the bread and cup are symbolic of the body and blood of Jesus. We all believe that change and transformation can take place at this holy table. I have told some of you before, the ancient priest, speaking in Latin, would chant the words, Hoc est Corpus Meum - "this is my body" from Matthew 26:26. In ancient times, the illiterate poor hearing the Catholic Mass in Latin, a language they did not speak, heard this phrase Hoc est Corpus as Hocus Pocus. My church history friend Dr. Bill Leonard suggests the phrase became the etiology of the chant used by magicians or a conjurer's incantation.

Everyone knew some kind of mysterious change was happening at this table. But unfortunately, the true meaning became twisted - Hoc est Corpus, this is my body became Hocus Pocus, as if a hoax or some form of trickery was being perpetrated on God's people. This table is all about change.

In 1860, a famous British author wrote a novel about change. His name was Wilkie Collins and his novel was The Woman in White. His story gave inspiration to my sermon title today. Collins was a contemporary of Charles Dickens and thought by some literary scholars to be the father of the murder mystery novel somewhat like the style of author John Grisham.

While Collins' novel was still selling in thousands, manufacturers were producing The Woman in White perfume, The Woman in White cloaks and bonnets, and the music shops displayed The Woman in White waltzes and quadrilles, all in the 1800s.

Several years ago I enjoyed a musical adaptation of Collins' novel by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber. With intrigue and fascinating character development, The Woman in White tells the story of the English gentleman Walter Hartright and his midnight encounter with a mysterious and distraught woman dressed entirely in white. Hartright helps her escape from her pursuers.

Later, Hartright falls in love with Laura who strikingly resembles the woman in white. She returns his love but is engaged to Sir Percival Glyde whom she marries. Sir Percival only marries Laura for her money. Unable to acquire her wealth, Sir Percival and his evil sidekick the corpulent Italian Count Fosco, incarcerates Laura in an asylum. Our hero Hartright discovers all the wrongdoings, takes care of the malefactors and restores Laura to her rightful place as Lady of Limmeridge Hall.

Now, who is The Woman in White and what happens to her? I'll not spoil your mystery reading. Wilkie Collins' story, The Woman in White, is all about change. The Biblical story, the woman at the well, is also all about change.

Listen as I read John 4:25-35 from New King James Version. You remember the story. Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria. The disciples go into a village for food while Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman drawing well water and they have a theological conversation. We pick up the story at verse 25 where they are talking about the Messiah.

John 4:25-35

25 The woman said to Him, I know that Messiah is coming(who is called Christ). When He comes, He will tell us all things.26 Jesus said to her, I who speak to you am He. 27 And at this point His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, What do You seek? or, Why are You talking with her?28 The woman then left her water pot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, 29 Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?30 Then they went out of the city and came to Him. 31 In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, Rabbi, eat.32 But He said to them, I have food to eat of which you do not know.33 Therefore the disciples said to one another, Has anyone brought Him anything to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. 35 Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!

This is a story all about change -- Jews talking with Samaritans, a woman talking to a man at midday, the disciples concerned about physical food, Jesus concerned about spiritual food, and the woman at the well becoming the Woman in White. This is a story all about change. I have placed a white robe on the pulpit chair symbolic of this woman's change. I believe she was the Woman in White. And you many be asking, what makes you think she was wearing white?

In Jesus' eyes she was. Listen again to John 4:35 *Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!*

Jesus saw her wearing white. White because she was ready for salvation's harvest and pure white because her life through Jesus Christ had changed. Her life needed a change? What about you? What are you wearing that needs to be changed? Are you wearing, alcoholism, drug addition, addition to pornography, hate, selfishness, jealousy, gluttony, deceit, and unforgiving spirit, or like the well woman, are you wearing a relationship that is unhealthy?

This type of clothing will destroy us. But I tell you some Good News, Jesus sees us wearing white.

White – the Murchison family is thinking white these days. We are in a wedding mode - daughter Rebecca's nuptial in August and son Mitchell's wedding date is Dec. 16.

With these weddings so close together, I told Rebecca several months ago, how about a double wedding with brother Mitchell. You know, I am thinking this would be romantic, meaningful, and family focused. To which, Rebecca gave me the look, as if to say, "Dad, what you are really thinking is cheap." The truth hurts.

Every stage of family life will change us: birth, kindergarten, school age, off to college, new career, blissful wedding, and wonderful grandchildren.

Events in your own life will change you: functional and dysfunctional families, they change you, positive and negative relationships, they change you, good health, poor health, death of loved ones and friends, it changes you, accepting a job, losing a job, a happy marriage, a divorce, spiritually connected to God or spiritually estranged from God. Life events will change us.

Change— a lot of change happened this week, locally, state wide and nationally, from Dennis Hastert to Nancy Pelosi, from Donald Rumsfeld to Robert Michael Gates. The names and titles have changed and it can get rather confusing.

Margaret and I were watching the elections returns on Tuesday night. As we listened to some of the challenging comments being made by TV commentators about President Bush and what this might portend for the Presidential election of 2008, Margaret suggested that Mr. Bush better be careful or he might not win again in 2008. The astute political analyst that I am gently reminded my sweet wife that after two terms President Bush could not run again in 2008. With a rye smile she said, *"I was just testing your political knowledge."* I decided to change the subject.

What needs to change within your life? What habit, what life style...if you keep doing what you are doing, you will keep getting what you are getting. Does anything within your life need to change?

Change – What if, Moses had not changed from the Prince of Pharaoh's court, to the deliver of God's People. What if, Peter had not changed from a denying coward, to Cephas 'the rock' on which the church would be built. What if, Saul had not changed from the persecutor of the church, to Paul one of the greatest missionaries of all time. What if, you don't change - from the way you are living right now, to the way God would have you live. What are you doing that is detrimental to your life?

It happened to me over 30 years ago - a major change. I thought I had fallen in love and wanted to get married. Her name was, well we will call her Barbara. By the way, Margaret has approved this romantic story. Ironically, Margaret and Barbara went to the same college and were both sorority council members.

Barbara and I had grown up together, elementary school, junior high and high school. Her Dad was a deacon at Coy Baptist Church and her Mom could make the best cup cakes in town.

We started dating after college. As the relationship matured, I began to think, would Barbara be a good pastor's wife? She does play the piano. I like her Mother and Dad. We both share the same hometown.

Barbara saw where I wanted this relationship to go. And I recall one day as we were having a serious conversation she told me the painful news, *"Rodger, I like you, but I do not want to be a preacher's wife."*

I thought to myself, maybe I can change her. I did not say a word. I remember driving away from her apartment and crying and wondering does God have anybody for me. What do you do with unrequited love?

Years and years later after God blessed me with Margaret, Mitchell, and Rebecca, I heard Garth Brooks sing a poignant country song titled, *"Unanswered Prayers"*. He sings a story of meeting his old high school flame at a hometown football game with his wife on his arm. During the encounter he realizes, some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

A few years ago I was invited to preach in my hometown Arkansas area. Rebecca sang a solo and Margaret encourage us both. Guess who I saw singing in the church choir? It was Barbara.

After the service, I gave her a hug and we had some polite social small talk. Barbara had never left the small farming community where we grew up. My mind flashed back 30 years and I thanked God of an unanswered prayer.

For what are you praying? What change needs to occur in your life? Some habit, some thought, some damaging relationship, some way of acting, some attitude...what needs to change.

This table is all about change. I believe the woman in white was at this table. The woman at the well could have become a follower of Jesus. The ancient Passover Seder meal was not just for men. We get the impression from Leonard's painting and other images that only men were with Jesus at what we call the Last Supper.

The Jewish Passover meal was primary for families and especially children. The meal was shared in homes and not the synagogue. So it would have been quite ordinary for woman and children to have joined Jesus and his disciples at this meal.

So guess who's coming to dinner? Can you see her holding the bread and the wine? The well woman now all dressed in white. Jesus says to her, "This is my body and this is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me." And through tears of gratitude, she remembers how she was changed. May it be so for all of us.

Come, come to the table, all of us dressed in white.

Dear Heavenly Father:

We gather as your people of faith. Some of us have more faithful than others. Some of us have lost faith in the battles of life. While some of us have gained faith in these same battles.

We all come to worship and praise thanking you Dear Father, for all of your generous gifts and blessings. To live in a country with liberty and freedom is a blessed gift. For those who have and continue to serve in military service we express sincere gratitude. Embrace their families as they endure times of trial and hardship. To live in the land of the free and the home of the brave is a blessing we must always remember.

It is also a blessing for us to come to your table Lord. The sacrifice of Your Son is a gift for which we are not worthy. Although our sins be as scarlet, wash us white as snow.

We hold the bread and cup remembering our Lord Christ and praising your name through Him - Blessed Communion - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - through Christ we pray. Amen