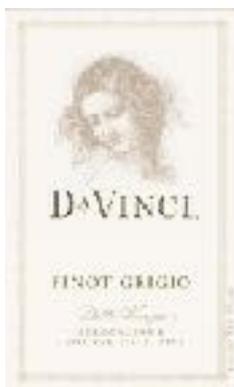


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
“Radically Open Table”
Second of four in a sermon series entitled “Iconic Devotional Art”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Jeremiah 2:4-13
Christian Scripture: Luke 1, 7-14
Sunday, 1 September 2019



If the sermon seems a little ‘loosy-goosey’ this morning, it is because I drank this entire bottle of white wine while writing the sermon.



I drank this wine because when I preach I want to imbibe the spirit of Leonardo da Vinci, whose name and art graces the bottle.

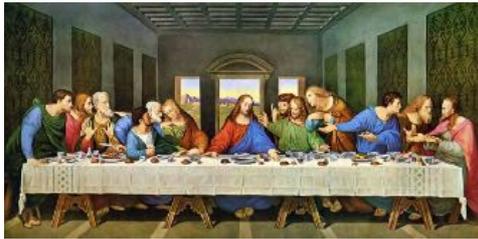


In all honesty, no alcoholic spirits need inspire this morning's sermon. For the Holy Spirit inspired the genius of Leonardo da Vinci, inspires the music offered by Stephanie and the Manadnock Recorder Ensemble, and inspires all aspects of our worship service this morning - especially that of Holy Communion.



Friends, welcome to our second of four sermons in our series “Iconic Devotional Art” wherein we explore how gifted artists in partnership with our holy scriptures can inspire us to greater heights of spiritual awareness and devotion. Last week we invited the French painter Millet to encourage us to wallow in thanksgiving on a daily basis, to pause, to participate in a communal ‘time-out’, and to give glory to God. Today, we ask Leonardo da Vinci to bring us to the table,

to the Lord's Table. We ask Leonardo, despite the distance of a continent and the separation of centuries, to bring us into the Upper Room to provide a message of hope from Jesus, who more than anyone else about whom we have ever read or heard, speaks the very will and does the very work of God.



Rather than discuss experts' interpretation of the painting, allow me to just share with you some choice 'fun facts'.

1. The painting is bigger than you think. It is 15 by 24 feet.
2. It captures a climactic moment. Yes, the last supper, but more specifically, the instant just after Jesus reveals one of his friends will betray him.¹
3. You will not find it in a museum. It is painted on a wall, in a convent's dining room back in 1495.
4. Very few of Leonardo's brushstrokes remain. Within twenty years, it began to flake and decay. By fifty years, it was almost a ruin.

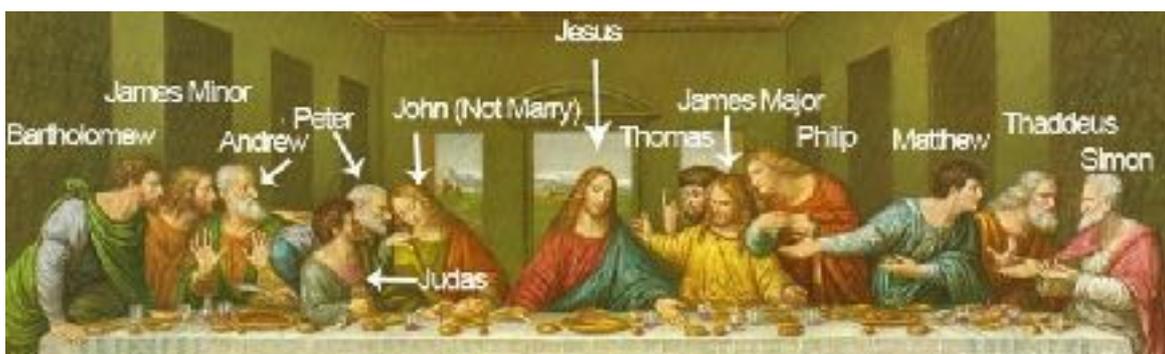
¹ Isaacson, Walter. Leonardo Da Vinci: *The Biography* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2017), pp. 281-2.

Early restoration efforts made it worse. In 1980, a nineteen-year restoration began. But it lost most of its original paint.²

5. The face of Judas was most likely modelled by an actual criminal in Milan's jail.



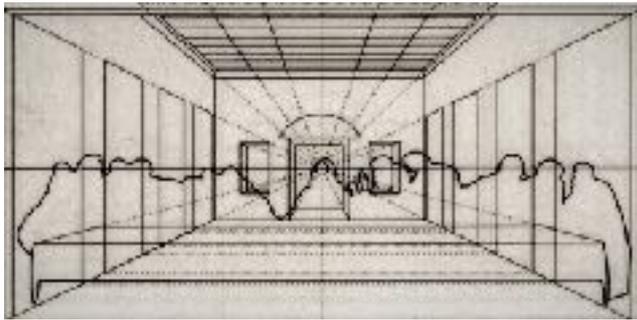
6. You need to book about two months in advance to see the painting.
7. 'Perspective' is what makes the painting so striking. It seems to invite the viewer to step into the dramatic scene.³



² Isaacson, Walter. *Leonardo Da Vinci: The Biography* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2017), pp. 291-2.

³ Puchko, Kristy. "15 Facts about Leonardo Da Vinci's 'The Last Supper'", in *Mental Floss*, 2 April 2017. <https://mentalfloss.com/article/64372/15-things-you-should-know-about-last-supper>, accessed 1 September 2019.

What strikes you about Leonardo's capturing of Jesus on the night before his betrayal? Each of us could write a different sermon when we engage with this painting. So, it also is with scripture. We each have special God-given experiences and unique insights into God's heart and mind.



In his masterpiece biography on Leonardo da Vinci, Walter Isaacson devotes an entire chapter to “The Last Supper”. Earlier, I stated that ‘perspective’ is one of the defining characteristics of Leonardo’s painting. Isaacson wrote, “The only thing straightforward about perspective in “The Last Supper” is the vanishing point, where all the lines of sight ‘tend and converge’ [as Leonardo worded it] [...]. These receding lines, or orthogonals, point to the forehead of Jesus. When he began his work, Leonardo hammered a small nail in the center of the wall. We can see that hole in Jesus right temple. Then he cut incisions in the wall radiating out. These would help to guide the lines that were parallel in the imaginary room, such as the beams in the ceiling and the tops of the tapestries, as they receded toward the

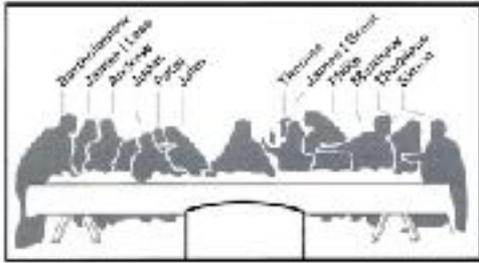
vanishing point in the painting”.⁴ Now, we can ask Heidi Mario to explain to us what all that means. But for a simple minister like me, that means Jesus is the focus, the point, the source, the center of our entire perspective.



More important than thousands of experts' observations about "The Last Supper" is my observation about it. What I noticed first and foremost Leonardo's "The Last Supper" is that everyone is sitting *on one side* of the table, thirteen people on one side! Now, when was the last have you have been to a dinner party were folks sat only on one side of the table? Never. People sit on two sides of table. Last night Stephanie and I went out to dinner. (You see, I have to wine and dine her in order to get her to play the piano and sing for us.) We sat on opposite sides of the table. When my son, Micah, and I went to Carlene and Bill's home for supper three weeks ago, we sat on four sides of the table. So, I think it strange that during the Last Supper everyone sat on

⁴ Isaacson, Walter. Leonardo Da Vinci: *The Biography* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2017), pp. 286-7.

one side. Surely, this was not a historical representation of the seating arrangements.



When I look at this painting, I ask, who is to sit on the other side of the table? On one side, we have, sadly in my opinion, a bunch of, what?, a bunch of adult white males (with a distinct preference for facial hair). Who is missing at the table?



Women. Children. People of color. Handicapped people. As far as we know all the disciples had wives and not husbands, so it is safe to say, gays were also absent (at least not ones that were 'out'). No one is in prison. So, there are no criminals represented. While the disciples were of modest means, the poor are not represented. And, while heroin and opioids were not yet in existence, we see no one passed-out on the floor under the table. Those addicted to alcohol, drugs, sex,

and work are also not found in Leonardo's painting. Who also is not at the table? Perhaps, those who suffer from mental illness.

Friends, let us now bring the author of Luke and Jeremiah into our conversation with Leonardo.



In our Christian scripture reading, Jesus attended a dinner party of a Pharisee. I can see Jesus, sitting back, innocuous, quietly observing people jockeying for position, for prestige, for promotion, for pre-eminence (Luke 14:1). Jesus read people's body language and actions, just as Leonardo duplicates so expertly in his painting. Jesus keenly observed at this dinner party how people, all people, have a proclivity to make themselves their own idols.



Jesus told two parables, the first about guests jockeying for position - feeding their own egos. Therefore, we must warn ourselves, especially in this age of social media, against the danger of our image that we ourselves cultivate and then worship. Jesus observed how we so often worship the image that we create for ourselves, sometimes completely losing perspective of God and therefore others.



Jesus directed his second parable to hosts, advising them not to invite other potential hosts, but rather the most marginalized, to the table. Jesus advises all of us to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to the table - all those in Jesus' time were barred from the table.



What often happens, and against which Jeremiah preached, is when God's perspective is lost and we fashion ourselves our own idols. Jeremiah concluded: "Two sins have my people committed, they have forsaken me, a spring of water" (Jeremiah 2:13a). The second sin people commit is "hewing out for themselves cisterns, cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13b). In other words, we sit ourselves at the head of the table, at the centre, and we set the table for ourselves only - leaving no room, setting no placings, and offering no food for others.



Friends, I am a proud member of the United Church of Christ and minister of Center Congregational Church because we celebrate at a radically open table. In front of this table is no fence. *In front of this table is no wall.* As is printed on the front of our bulletin and demonstrated by our Loaves & Fishes ministry, Jesus' example and teachings are that which direct our perspectives. And we live out the perspective that Leonardo da Vinci gives us that leaves half the table open to others. It is *for us* and for *all others*.



Our open table does not represent the absence and exclusion of people. No! In fact, precisely the opposite. Our open table represents a welcome and an invitation to all who have historically have been and even today are told “you do not belong”.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.