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HOLY THURSDAY HOMILY

Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

April 5, 2012

Some of my most memorable moments... and fondest moments of friendships... have been around a table with others sharing food and drink. Some of those meals have been very important in the life of some particular relationships. Some of those meals have brought those relationships to a depth of intimacy that I would have never thought possible. In fact some of those meals have been life changing experiences. It wasn't about the food, but about the encounter with another person.

Throughout the life of Jesus, the Gospels speak of the many times that He spent around a table with others eating and drinking and sharing table fellowship. And through those encounters, many people's lives were changed because of it. It wasn't about the food, but it was about the encounter with Jesus. The meal we heard about tonight was one such meal.

It would have changed the lives of the apostles. It would have brought their relationship with Jesus to a new and different level. I suspect that this particular meal would have changed the meaning of their relationship.....though they would not have realized it until after Jesus' death and resurrection.

As we gather tonight, what we celebrate in this liturgy is the Institution of the Eucharist. Its roots are, of course, in the Passover sacrifice of Israel celebrated for more than 1500 years beginning during the time of Moses. Israel received salvation through the blood of the lamb, applied to the doorposts and lintel of their houses. And annually this Passover ritual was to be observed, for it proclaimed something important – it proclaimed the saving power of God. But on this night when the Lord gathered the apostles to observe this annual memorial feast, He offered bread and wine and transformed them into Himself, into His own Body and Blood.

It is now Jesus making present this saving act of God.....for all eternity. Jesus is making Himself the New Passover, the Paschal Lamb. He is proclaiming Himself the new covenant; proclaiming Himself the SAVING ACT OF GOD. Jesus is to become the sacrifice that is now to be perpetual for all times.

As we hear in John's Gospel, there is no mention of bread and wine. And there wouldn't have to be. For St. John, writing in the late first century, the celebration of the Eucharist would have been a common ritual. The Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist would have been widespread and so would the part when Jesus expresses that the bread is His Body and the wine His Blood was simply already the belief, the faith of the early Church.

And so St. John expresses another reality that is connected to the Eucharistic Banquet. It is no accident or coincidence that the washing of the feet and the sharing of the Passover meal are happening together. It is no accident or coincidence that Jesus connects the Eucharist that He

shared with his apostles with service. Jesus, after proclaiming Himself to be the Passover lamb... His own Body to be broken and shared; His own Blood to be shed for the forgiveness of sins... He takes off His robe – the words used here in Greek would literally mean “he laid down all his clothes”, stripped Himself voluntarily. Then wearing only a loin cloth, He put a towel around Himself like a slave would do and He washed their feet.

This obviously threw the disciples off balance. How could Jesus, their master and teacher and Lord, do such a thing? How could He lower Himself to slave standards? This action represents what Jesus was about to do in laying down His life, being humiliated before the whole world. In the eyes of the world, Jesus’ dignity was taken away.....but for Him, it was a way of loving that the world did not yet know....and which would be fully expressed on the cross.

Both gestures....the foot washing and the sharing of His Body and Blood... are not only profound gestures of love, but they represent to us an intimacy with Christ and His mission. It is also the way in which Jesus chose to institute the priesthood. Jesus chose these apostles, formed them by His Word, and then called them to participate in His ministry. **He said:**

“Do this in memory of me.”

“What I just did was to give you an example; as I have done, so you must do.”

But both of these gestures would also become the example of Christian living for all disciples and they are intimately connected to our relationship with Jesus.

Story:

An attractive nun was working in a leper colony in the heat of West Africa. A journalist was visiting there and doing a story. He was amazed watching the young nun bathing the wounds of a victim of leprosy.

“I wouldn’t do that for \$10,000”, said the journalist.

”Neither would I,” said the nun. “I do it for love.”

We do not serve our brothers and sisters simply because we are told to do so by Jesus. We don’t do it because it will help us get to heaven. We do it for love; we do it in response to the love shown us by Jesus Himself.

The Eucharistic celebration is an interaction between Jesus and his Body the Church. It is a mystery in which people and communities are transformed. Whenever we come together at Christ’s table, we participate in a living encounter with the Risen Lord, for those who are present to this encounter. Through this encounter, Jesus teaches us, shows us, and enables us to love – to love as He does.

We can only understand the Eucharist when we come to understand the washing of the feet. After having received the Body and Blood of Jesus, you and I are then sent forth to be this sacrament of love to others.....to empty ourselves for others.....to give up our lives for others.

The most beautiful thing about it all is that when we gather in this church to celebrate Eucharist, we meet Jesus face to face. When we come to share in the Eucharist, it is not so that we can passively get something and then go home. No! The Eucharist is not an object to be received; it is not an event to be witnessed; but the most beautiful thing for us is that this is an encounter with a person, the person of Jesus Christ. When we deal at the level of an encounter, we are talking about

interpersonal relationships, both with Jesus and with others. Our relationship with Christ must also include all the members of His Body.

So the Eucharist is a dynamic reality. So often people are slow to understand the “action” aspect of the liturgy – “*Do this in memory of me.*” The Eucharist calls us to active ministry. It empowers us to a way of loving that the world still doesn’t quite understand.....and it draws us into a deeper intimacy and love relationship with Jesus Christ...so that we can go back into the secular world and serve the Body of Christ, like the nun ministering to lepers or like Mother Teresa in ministering to the poorest of the poor.

“If the Mass is reduced to a ritual or an event that is supposed to make us feel good, then it is being used mainly for our personal satisfaction and consolation. Jesus did not give us the Eucharist to make us feel good. He wanted it to enable us to *be* good.”

We cannot say that we love Jesus Christ, unless we are willing to wash the feet of others... unless we are willing to put our lives at the service of God and God’s kingdom... the whole Body of Christ.

Is this always easy? No. We all know it isn’t. Are there times that we struggle to live this kind of life? Absolutely! It’s more frequent than we care to think about!

That is why we come back to the Eucharist week after week...to encounter Jesus and his love in His self-giving sacrifice. His Word and His spiritual food give us the courage, the strength and the desire to live such a life. The more we are present to this encounter with Jesus in faith, the more we will become like Him... because personal encounters of love change us... and we become like the “other.”

Jesus has told us, “*Do this in memory of me.*”

“*What I just did was to give you an example; as I have done, so you must do.*”

So tonight, in this Eucharist, we ask the Holy Spirit to transform not only the bread and wine, but all of us who share Christ’s Body and Blood in his memory. May our encounter with Jesus tonight remind us of three things, who we are, what our lives are called to be, but most importantly, Christ’s deep love for us. God bless you all.