

JUST A MEAL

Maundy Thursday

April 13, 2017

The story of Holy Week, Jesus' last week, is a drama—perhaps the greatest drama ever. There are lies, betrayals, trials, torture, executions, and miracles. But tonight, on Maundy Thursday, we celebrate—a meal. It is a miraculous meal, one that has survived down through the centuries as a ritual of sharing not just in the life of Christ, but in his very being, one that is reenacted millions of times of times around the world whenever Christians gather to act out and share the heart concepts of our faith. It is also true, though, that the Last Supper was in many ways routine. It was gathering together to share food and drink. Even in its world-changing importance, it was just a meal.

Its commonness, its ordinariness is sacredly important for us. The most powerful rituals often are made of the ordinary things in life. This is because many things are ordinary because they are crucial. Fire, food, water, wine. The daily acts of washing and eating and drinking, and of sharing the necessities of life are the stuff of ritual. The importance of being clean becomes rituals of purification. The act of eating with someone rather than eating alone becomes a ritual of sharing and common life together—a sharing not just of food, but of love and the acknowledging that we need others to live, and being thankful to

the source of life, the God who blesses us with our lives and with others with whom to share the joys and burdens of life.

The writer of Luke is also realistic about what meals represent, even if it's a Passover meal. (The Gospel account of the Last Supper in Luke is set on the evening of Passover and concentrates on the meal. In the Gospel of John, which we just heard, the meal takes place before Passover and focuses on foot-washing, Jesus' acting out of the command to love one another in equality and humility.

So while the emphasis on the institution of the Eucharist is usually—and rightly—on its mysteries and its powers to take us far beyond our daily lives, tonight I'm looking at the other side of communion: the simple richness of its connections to things we do every day. And I emphasize, by the way, that these two ways of thinking about the Lord's Supper are not mutually exclusive or even in opposition to each other: they are aspects of the same profound ritual that has the power to change and shape our lives.

Holy Week is about the bringing together of realities that affect us, that change our lives: the lengthening days and quickening life of spring; the stirring of the urges to create life and nurture life in all forms, from our desires to propagate the species and to plant crops that will help keep our lives going. (The very word "Easter" is not Christian in origin, but comes from an ancient European goddess of spring and fertility.) Overlaid with these natural forces

are other layers of religious facts and images, especially the Jewish Passover sacrifice of lambs, a sacrifice that saved their lives. Therefore Jesus, who saves our lives with his, becomes our “Passover,” which we remember during every Eucharist.

Looking backward, then, communion is layered with meanings derived from Christ’s and our religious roots in Jewish faith. But looking at the present, and the future, it is also food and drink today, right now. We feed on the still-living reality of Christ’s sacrifice and his presence within us and among us—*that* is one of the chief mysteries of our faith. But the Holy Eucharist that we celebrate tonight also invites us to taste our redemption, our new lives, not just every time we take communion, but every time we eat. Silently or aloud, we should give thanks for the life that courses within us because we have eaten and drunk of “the food and drink of new and unending life in him,” as we say in one of our Eucharistic prayers.

And we do it together. That is essential. There is no church of one person. We do not take communion alone. We come together to celebrate that our redemption is a gift that should be as much a part of us as what we eat and drink. And like our food and drink it is necessary for life, and always with us. We are all together in this: this gift, this reality, which we will call in our Eucharistic prayer tonight: “holy gifts for holy people, the bread of life and the cup of salvation.”

My professor of liturgy at seminary in Philadelphia, Gordon Lathrop, writes in his book *Holy Things* about a small country church in Wisconsin that had a bell engraved with these words:

*To the bath and the table,
To the prayers and the word,
I call every seeking soul.*

He notes that the bell is given a voice to call people “to gather around the use of sacred things. ‘Bath, table, word’ are set out to humanity’s need, not ‘font, altar, Bible,’ as the objects that were used might be named, not even ‘baptism, eucharist, scripture reading and preaching.’ Lathrop, one of our greatest scholars of church ceremonies and their meanings, insists that rituals are never merely “spiritual,” that “the spiritual is intimately involved with the material..., as inseparable as God was from humanity in Jesus.”

For me, insisting on the reality of the meal, the table, at communion is a way of insisting that our call to discipleship is always before us, just as our needs for food and water are always with us. We are all, and always, seeking souls, drawn to the table, including the one the Lord miraculously gave us on this night so long ago.

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