

Maundy Thursday, Yr. C
April 18, 2019

Maundy Thursday is usually associated with three things: the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist and, sometimes, with what's thought of as the sacrament of service as exemplified in the foot-washing, and with the command of Jesus to his disciples, to love one another as he has loved them. That command, "mandate" if you will, is where the "Maundy" in Maundy Thursday comes from. Given all that, it seems appropriate this evening, to think about sacraments.

Some of us can well remember the definition of sacraments that we learned as children: outward signs of an inward grace. What was happening on the outside was a manifestation of what was happening inside. As humans we have a need for physically embodied practices – through history there have been pilgrimages and prayer beads, there are the bodily movements like bowing and making the sign of the cross, there are statutes, and sprinkling with holy water. One way to think about

sacraments in general is that they are shortcuts to the infinite – in some way they use finite objects to show us the infinite – the face and presence of the holy, of God.

And any number of things can do that for us.

Remember the story of the Native American asking the missionary how many sacraments there were and, upon hearing that there were 7, was amazed. SEVEN, he said, I would have thought seventy times seven. Historically, there were more. The early church fathers had many, but did remind us that there were two primary sacraments: Baptism and Eucharist. Augustine thought there were 12. The Orthodox Church points to the liturgical calendar as a sign of sacred time and to church buildings as signs of sacred space. If we were to doubt that latter idea, that a church building is itself a sacrament, just think for a moment to the responses to the recent fire at the cathedral of Notre Dame. A space that not only symbolized the heart and soul of France, but also, through the centuries of prayer it contained surely was a sacred space, a space where people could somehow touch that deeper reality of the presence of God.

I've mentioned before that some theologians talk about creation as a God-soaked universe. One implication of that is that anything can become a "sacrament" in the sense of its ability to reveal God's presence to us. Thomas Merton says that the "gate of Heaven is everywhere." But this means that we have to be looking, we have to have the eyes to see this deeper reality.

At the recent deacons' school, I showed them the calendar that Frank and Betsy Rogers had put together from pictures they had taken when we were in the Holy Land. One of those pictures was of the Jordan River. The day we were there, there was a group of people being baptized in the river. They all had waded out into the water and were all wearing white baptismal gowns. OK – clearly a sacramental moment. And one would think that they would all be thinking of the power of baptism, their being washed clean, being included in the body of Christ. And perhaps they were. But a good number of them were also concerned about the fact that those robes were floating upward and they were spending a lot of energy trying to keep them down. I couldn't help but think, watching this, that the recipient of the

sacrament also has to be PRESENT, to be aware, to be open to the grace that's being received. Because while I think that sacraments can be ubiquitous, we can also miss the point completely. Perhaps that old saying, YOU HAVE TO BE PRESENT TO WIN, applies here.

Going back to the deacons' school for a minute, we were studying Mark this month. And in Mark's Gospel, the disciples just don't get it. They continually miss the point. And that's not just in Mark. While we hear John's story of the Last Supper in tonight's readings, John leaves something out that Luke includes and that is that while Jesus is talking with them and they are eating what will be this last meal before the passion, they are still arguing about who's the greatest. Missing the point. You will remember that eating together in that culture was a powerful sign of commitment and unity, a sign of the connection of love. But when they don't get it, perhaps Jesus, realizing this, tries another approach: WATCH THIS, he says, this is what I mean when I say that I'm giving my body for you and asking you to do the same, in remembrance of me, THIS is what it looks like. And he assumes

the role and posture of a servant, washing those tired, dusty, dirty feet. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we always use that phrase: DO THIS FOR THE REMEMBRANCE OF ME. And I think we usually interpret this to me, do this – celebrate this Eucharist. But it could just as easily mean – DO THIS – just I am giving my body over, so you should give over your body to serve others and, in doing so, heal the world. So what if what we're talking about here is that just as Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit, each of us is also: anointed and appointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind. What if we truly took to heart the truth that we are the hands and feet of Christ in the world today. In a little while, we'll continue our tradition, not of washing feet, but of anointing and blessing hands, those instruments by which we carry Christ to the world.

Let me close with a prayer written by Edward Hays:

Beloved Jesus, Lord of the Meal, I rejoice that a mother and a father, laboring for their family, begin and end each day's work saying, "This is my body, this is my blood."

An adult child nursing a sick elderly parent with compassion and patient care says, "This is my body; this is my blood."

A volunteer giving time to a needy cause without thanks or acknowledgement says, "This is my body; this is my blood."

A preacher, with prayerful study, preparing a homily that no one may remember or be moved by, says, "This is my body; this is my blood."

A singer forgetting self and the audience, making love out of music, says, "This is my body; this is my blood."

Artist or teacher, dancer or doctor, auto mechanic or officer worker attending to each detail of their work with full-hearted involvement, proclaims, "This is my body, this is my blood."

Ten thousand thousand consecrations occur daily, as all heaven's angels chime in, "holy, holy, holy," to the thunderous praise of a thousand silent silver bells. Listen. Listen.

Amen

