

No ordinary meal

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017.

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you,...for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 1 Corinthians 11:23, 26

This is the night that brings our worship into focus. On the night before he died, Jesus gathered with his disciples for the last time and took the bread and wine and shared it with them as a way to remember him. Each time we gather in his name we recall the person of Christ in this very simple act of sharing bread and wine. These elements mean more than his physical person, they are his whole life, what he taught, what he means to us and how he lived and died and rose again for us.

Generations of faithful Christians have continued this great act of remembrance down through the centuries. There are so many ways in which the Eucharist is celebrated from all the beauty and drama of an Anglo-Catholic solemn high mass to my first celebration as a newly ordained priest around a ping-pong table at a youth retreat. In any form in which the Eucharist is celebrated, we are not spectators; we are participants in the great drama of Christ. We do this when we gather in his name. It is what he asked us to do. It's as simple as that.

There are two essential things to remember about the Eucharist. First, this is an act of thanksgiving. The word Eucharist is from the Greek, *eucharistia*, which means thanksgiving. Inside of that is another word, *charis*, which means grace and favor. We are thanking God for the grace received in Christ's offering of himself for us. His one great sacrifice means our reconciliation with God and with each other.

Secondly, this is also an act of offering. We are offering our whole selves to God in return for what we receive in Christ. Just as we would want to return a favor for what was done for us, in this great sacrament we are offering ourselves in return for what God has given us in Christ.

The church is altar-centered. It is evident when you walk in here that God's altar is the focal point. I once asked a young child what she sees first when she enters the church. Instead of referring to it as an altar, she called it a counter. What struck me about that is how much we are a consumer society. Whenever we need something, we purchase it from a clerk behind a counter. The difference is that our salvation has already been purchased by Jesus' costly sacrifice of himself. Our forgiveness is given to us freely out of love.

I don't know about you, but I prefer to eat my meals in the company of others. I avoid eating alone in restaurants. The celebration of this great sacrament of the Eucharist is never a private act. It requires the company of others. Through the experience of our common fellowship in the Christian community, we gain a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves. Our personal relationship with Christ is both private and corporate. It is deeply personal while lived out in relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

A Jewish person who attended a Eucharist once asked me about the meaning of the phrase "Christ our Passover." His question was a teaching opportunity to explain the connection between the Jewish observance of the Passover and the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. Both celebrate freedom from bondage. The Jewish Passover celebrates their freedom from slavery and oppression in Egypt while the Christian Eucharist celebrates our freedom from slavery to sin and death. Both recall prime events in our salvation history. Tonight, we experience the real presence of Christ in these elements of bread and wine as signs of his continued presence in our lives.

This great sacrament of the Eucharist recalls the high point of the story of our salvation history. We all have the need to be loved, but we don't always know how to love. Jesus didn't just suggest, he commanded that we love one another as he loves us. Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin *mandatum* that means commandment. You are invited to come forward to the altar to find strength, and encouragement to know what it means to love as you are loved.

At the Last supper on the night before he died Jesus tells Judas to go and do what he has to do. Jesus is then arrested, put on trial, and condemned to die on the cross. The crucifixion is not the end of our story, nor does it end on Easter. Our story continues on in the lives of those who have been lifted up from failure and despair. In the Eucharist we continue to remember Christ's sacrificial love for us as we partake of these sacred elements of bread and wine.

This quatrain about the Eucharist used by Queen Elizabeth I is attributed to John Donne, the 17th century poet and Dean of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London:

He was the Word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it;
And what that Word did make it,
I do believe and take it.

When the bread and wine are blessed, it is Christ, the Incarnate Word who is present in a very real and sacred way to give meaning to who and what we are as the people of God. We give thanks for the gift of God's grace that we receive by offering back our very best in this one great act of remembrance.