

APRIL 13TH, 2017: EUCHARIST OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14 I Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-15

It's more than interesting that the problem which triggered tonight's I Corinthians pericope was still around at least 35 years later and also triggered our Johannine passage. Writing as a frequent Eucharistic presider, I guarantee the same problem is still front and center today; it's never gone away.

Someone recently complained to me that the new priest in their parish habitually celebrates a "robotic Mass." He simply rattles off the prayers and performs the required actions. There's almost no eye contact with the participants, no spontaneity in the celebration. The church building itself is configured in the usual "hallway pattern:" altar in front, pews tightly positioned on either side of the center aisle. We're so accustomed to that configuration and that kind of Mass that most of us find it hard to imagine the ideals that prompted Paul and John to compose today's second and third readings.

Early Christian Eucharists were thought to be the central place in which people of faith encountered the risen Jesus. Among other biblical passages, Luke's chapter 24 story of the disciples Easter Sunday chance meeting with Jesus on the road to Emmaus provides us a prime example of that theology. "They recognized him in the 'breaking of the bread.'"

None of our ancestors in the faith believed that the risen Jesus appeared magically, just because someone said the right words or employed the correct gestures. They were convinced that just as Jesus died prior to his resurrection, so they had to die prior to experiencing him. As always, their death revolved around giving themselves to others – in this case, in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

It's clear in the second half of I Corinthians 11 that Paul is more than uptight about some in the community who are refusing to wholeheartedly include the poor in their celebrations. That's why he reminds them not only of what Jesus said and did during his Last Supper, but also of their obligation in their recreations of that meal to ". . . proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes."

The problem of Eucharistic giving of oneself for others is also a problem for John's community. That's why the evangelist brings up the foot washing during his account of Jesus' Last Supper. His Jesus not only shows the depth of his giving by engaging in this menial action, but through his confrontation with Peter, he also shows that he expects his followers to be just as giving. Peter is basically saying, "If I were in your place, I wouldn't do this." Jesus, on the other hand, informs him, "It's my way or the highway!" (I often remind my communities of something a friend once mentioned: "It's pretty nigh impossible to wash someone's feet when you're standing on a pedestal.")

Just as our Jewish ancestors were expected to recreate the particulars of the Exodus in their Passover celebrations, so we Christians are expected to recreate the particulars of Jesus' giving of himself in our Eucharistic celebrations. Difficult to do given some of our church's liturgical restrictions.

I'll never forget the comment one of our parishioners made during our first celebration of the Lord's Supper after we replaced our pews with chairs and set them up in a semi-circle around the altar. "This is the first time I've actually seen people's faces during Mass," she remarked. "Usually I just saw the backs of their heads."

Perhaps tonight of all nights, we might at least make a special attempt to look people in the eye during the celebration. After all, if we're serious about giving ourselves for them, we're actually looking into the eyes of the risen Jesus in our midst.

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APRIL 16TH, 2017: THE EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 1:1-2:2 Exodus 14:15-15:1 Isaiah 55:1-11 Matthew 28:1-10

(Ideally all nine readings should be proclaimed tonight. But space limits me to commenting on just four.)

It's interesting to discover that one biblical author often depends on another biblical author. That's the case with the inspired person who penned tonight's first reading (the "priestly" author). Scholars agree he read and was influenced by Deutero-Isaiah – Isaiah 40-55 – the prophet responsible for tonight's fourth and fifth readings. He seems to have been particularly moved by Deutero-Isaiah's theology of the power of Yahweh's word.

Pay special attention to this unnamed prophet's fascinating reflection on that word: "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful . . . so shall my (Yahweh's) word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it." In other words, when Yahweh says something, it happens!

It's important to note that, unlike the Bible's prior myth of creation (Genesis 2), Yahweh doesn't break a sweat in the priestly author's account. Yahweh simply says, "Let there be!" and "So there was!" Yahweh creates only by employing Yahweh's word.

Deutero-Isaiah constantly falls back on the force of Yahweh's word; he has no other security during the Babylonian Exile. Either people believe Yahweh's pledge to return them to the Promised Land, or they continue to give in to the depression which has haunted them for over 50 years.

From tonight's Exodus reading, it's also clear that the Israelites fleeing Egypt seven centuries before the exile likewise had nothing to go on except Yahweh's word when they faced the sea in front of them and Pharaoh's army behind them. God's command to Moses couldn't be simpler or more disturbing: "Tell the Israelites to go forward!" In their minds, they're to go forward into certain death.

Of course, we're hearing these readings against the background of Jesus' death and resurrection. The parallel is evident. From our gospel pericope, we realize that neither could his disciples see a path through the death he had just endured. It was the end; not the beginning. Yet, as the angel reminds the women at the tomb, "He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said."

That word of God keeps popping up everywhere, so often it would seem our faith depends on it.

Tonight's sacred authors agree: it does.

We live our daily lives based on God's word. If we're determined to be people of faith, we have no other choice. Especially at this time, in this country, we're lost if we don't fall back on God's word and go forward. We, like the 6th century BCE Jewish exiles, could easily give ourselves over to depression. "Things" simply haven't turned out the way we expected. Most of us never signed on for this kind of existence.

Though I often give into the temptation not even to watch the evening news, in my saner moments I realize that "bailing out" is never the proper course of action for someone committed to carrying on the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. No matter what's happening around us, God's word is still at the heart of our faith. The priestly author of Genesis experienced creation in that word. Deutero-Isaiah was convinced it could bring growth. And Jesus trusted that it would eventually bring him life.

Perhaps the only thing we can hope for God's word to bring us is just hope itself; something that will never happen if we just stay put and wait for the "enemy" to annihilate us.

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