

The Lord's Supper: Saying It All

- *Holy Thursday, 2010*
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We enter together this evening as one Catholic and Christian faith community into the Mass of the Lord's Supper and we do it as always, but tonight more intensely and awarely, with the Lord, with Jesus of Nazareth.

After hundreds of meals, table fellowship, suppers with his disciples, with followers, sinners, friends, Jesus comes at last to what he knows will be the last supper with his closest, chosen disciples. You get the sense very clearly how much he knows this is a culmination, a gathering together, a final time, a last chance, in how this last supper is introduced:

Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. So during supper, fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God...

See how clearly Jesus knows this is the turning point, the gathering of all of the past, the opening to all of the future. It is as if Jesus has his whole life in his hands, all he's ever said, done, and been, and in this supper which he knows is his last with his friends, the last chance of his life, he wants to somehow say it all, to show it all, to express clearly his whole meaning for now and for always. He loved his own in the world... (and that includes us)... and he wanted to love them to the end, to say and show that love.

How do you say it all so that it is said fully, clearly, and will always be remembered? Have you ever had to do that in a meal, in a family gathering, in a last time with friends, in a final time perhaps gathered around a beloved dying person? How do you say it all; how do you love to the end? That's what Jesus is trying to do this evening.

Six days earlier a woman named Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, of the town of Bethany was faced by the same desire and challenge of saying it all, of showing her love to the end, and that too was at a supper. She found the way to do it most fully from who she was and for how she loved and was filled with gratitude for Jesus. It was the custom to anoint gently with perfumed oil the forehead of an honored guest at a meal. She took a whole liter of the most costly perfumed oil, broke the flask, and poured it all on the feet of Jesus, washed his feet in an abundance of oil that filled the whole house with its aroma. So abundant, crazily abundant was the oil that she had to dry his anointed feet with her hair, or at least that's how she chose to dry them in her way. There was her way of saying it all in one moment, in a supper, pouring out her extravagant love, saying it fully without words. Jesus praised her, said she had done a good thing, and would be remembered forever.

Did Jesus remember this anointing of his feet six days earlier when he was with his disciples and in a last supper and wanted to love them to the end, to show them in his own way—as she had done in hers—his extravagant, beyond measure, crazy love of them and of us? You wonder if he was not in that very moment remembering her. He rose from the table, took off and laid aside his garments (as he had said he would lay aside his life) and took up a towel and tied it around his waist (as he had said he would take up his life) and he poured water into a basin and came around to each disciple, each follower, each friend, and kneeling before them, lovingly washed their feet and dried them with the towel.

Oh yes, this is a cleansing, and this is an act of humility and of personal service, but it is more than that. It is saying it all—again without words—of loving them to the end, an act of intimacy, an act of pouring out his extravagant love at the feet of disciples as Mary had poured out her extravagant love at his feet. It says it all, or almost says it all.

I have always had a hard time in my own prayer, in retreats when I come to this washing of my feet by Jesus, to accept it, to allow him to do it, to submit to the intimacy, the fullness of his love. I find that it is not easy to let Jesus in one act to say it all to me, to show it all to me, personally, individually, even if I feel it's okay that he do this to others! I find that I am somehow reduced, or exposed, or helpless, or embarrassed; that somehow it's not right that he do it to me! There's a lot of Peter in me, resistant to drop out of all that keeps me safe and allow this intimacy to be expressed by the Lord, by Jesus of Nazareth. When I do allow, I remember it forever.

This extraordinary act of showing his extravagant love to the end to his disciples, to us, brings sharply into focus an ordinary act of hundreds of suppers which became completely new and extraordinary for the first time and forever that night, this night. It's all part of the one saying it all. Very simply Jesus took bread, broke it, gave it to the disciples at table and said "This is me!" He took a cup of wine, blessed it, passed it around to be drunk, and said "This is me!" It's all part of the one thing—the washing of the feet and the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine—all part of one saying it all a final time with those disciples and always with us the disciples of today and tomorrow. As the washing was an action, the breaking and the pouring are an action—minimally worded, hardly needing to be worded—the washing of the feet: This is me"; the breaking of the bread: "This is me"; the pouring of the wine: "This is me".

You wonder from the fullness and finality of this saying it all and showing his love to the end whether Jesus really needed to say: "If you identify your life with me, do this yourselves, remember me this way." But he did say it so that there would be no mistake for the first disciples and for us the disciples of today.

Every time we gather in the Eucharist we do the actions and we do the remembering and each time Jesus is as really here as in the last supper. He's here, really present, really to be received, but it requires of us a humility of faith to accept the intimacy of his presence, reality, and love. On this special night of the Mass of the Lord's Supper—as we enter our annual three holy days—we re-enact the fullness of Jesus saying it all in his own way in the last supper of pouring out his extravagant love for us and for all of his own in the world in the washing of the feet and the breaking and pouring to which we now turn. Let us together allow the intimacy of the evening for the sake of the holiness of the days ahead.