**WE ARE HOW WE EAT**

A homily for Maundy Thursday

By The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

About five years ago, two researchers, one a religious scholar and the other a food scientist, published a study about how artists have depicted the Last Supper in their sculptures, paintings and other visual media from the year 1000 to the year 2000. Controlling for the differing sizes of the artists’ canvasses and using the average disciples’ head size in each image as a standardizing point of comparison, they found a fascinating trend. Over the course of the second millennium, the size of the food portions, the size of the plates, and the size of the bread had increased, on average, over 50%. In their paper, the scholars noted that the increase in the amount of food depicted in the images parallels the general trend of food becoming more available and accessible in western cultures during the same period.

I’m not sure there is much at stake in the particular trend that this research describes -- but it’s a fascinating example of the role that meals play in both *reflecting* the cultural values of a particular community.

Meals do far more than provide our bodies with the nutrients we need to survive. Meals build community. Meals create social bonds and they reinforce social norms, roles and community values. Consider two examples:

First, a formal college dinner at a British University like Oxford or Cambridge: everyone dresses up, your seat is assigned, based on your rank in the community. You arrive on time, and you remain seated until the meal ends. The food is served by others who have no formal standing in the academic community. The high table is often on a raised dais. Those who make the decisions in the community sit apart from those affected by those decisions. Disruption is not tolerated. This all reflects the ethos of the rarified world of elite academia – a “high order” society, where hierarchy and status differences are valued and, everyone is expected to remain within their place until you are elevated by those already at the top.

Compare this to a meal like our annual pancake supper here at church. We dress informally. Children are present…and make their presence known, and heard. The food is prepared, served and enjoyed by a rotating cast of characters. I don’t think anyone remains in their same seat for more than about 10 minutes before moving to another group. Some arrive late and others leave early. There is no guest list, no seating chart, and no head table. This all reflects the value and ethos of our parish community: informal, fluid, perhaps even a little chaotic, one in which everyone both serves and is served.

How we eat together, reveals how we are together. And tonight, as we remember the institution of Holy Meal at Jesus’ last supper, we are invited to remember what kind of community Jesus was trying to offer those who followed him in his gift of the holy meal.

The meal has two parts: the gathering ritual (the footwashing), and the table ritual (the bread and wine). The washing of feet feels foreign to us, but, in fact, it was quite a common occurrence in Jesus’ time and place. The common footwear was a very simple sandal, and people walked everywhere. Feet got dirty. Dirt got everywhere. So it was common practice, upon entering a home for a servant or a child or some other lower ranked person to kneel down and wash your feet. If you were on the bottom rung of the social latter, you washed your own.

But when Jesus gathers his disciples, he inverts the social hierarchy. He places himself at the bottom, voluntarily taking the role of the lowest person in the room. In doing so, he removes the shame associated with being on the bottom and serving others; he reveals the worthiness of servanthood. And he does something even more important. He transforms this commonplace ritual from act that reinforces social hierarchy into an act of intimacy, love and care. Note that Jesus washes his friends’ feet NOT as they arrive, but halfway through the meal. He is not washing their feet because they are dirty, but because he wants to change the meaning of this daily ritual from one that divides the servant and the served, to one that creates intimacy, care, and mutual service. This is why his commandment to the disciples is not just that they should wash the feet of others, but that they should have their feet washed as well. Jesus ends ritual that separates, and replaces it with ritual that binds.

So too, at the Table. There, Jesus acts to change the ritual practices in which some eat first and then others get whatever is left. He breaks the bread and shares the cup among all at the table. Everyone gets the same -- an affirmation that this community gathers in a spirit of abundance and sharing, rather than scarcity and hoarding. No doubt this reminds the disciples of the feeding of the 5,000, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, when they couldn’t imagine that there would be enough to share. And there were basketsful remaining.

The gift of the Eucharist, like the gift of the footwashing, breaks down community hierarchy. Eucharist is a ritual of radical inclusion in which there is enough for all, and we need not turn anyone away. The Eucharist reinforces our equal dignity before God, and our dual roles as those who offer God’s presence to others, and as those who receive that presence from the hands of others. This is why we all kneel together at each side of the rail when we receive – as an outward and visible sign of the inward unity in Christ and equal worth among each other that this sacrament bestows upon us. It is also why Rachel and I choose not to self-administer, but to receive the bread and wine from one of the other ministers at the altar; and why we do so during the middle of the distribution, neither first, nor last, but somewhere in between…without ceremony or fanfare.

Of course, this is how it is supposed to be. The best case scenario -- when how we worship visibly reflects the kind of love-based community that we already are. But we are human, our relationships with each other do not at all times and in all places perfectly mirror the open, intimate, and mutually-affirming society that our rituals depict. At times that distance is particularly awkward, even painful: sharing Eucharist with a family member with whom we are feuding, or washing the feet of someone who just spoke against our proposal at Town Meeting.

But that dissonance is ok, even desirable at times. Because the point of our rituals is to reveal not just how we *are* with each other, but also how we *long to be* with each other. Rituals do not just show the values of a community, they help to inscribe those values in our hearts and in our relationships. Our holy meal reflects both the actual and the aspirational state of our community: we make Eucharist not to claim that we’ve reached this perfect harmony of mutual care, but to proclaim that this is our deep intention.

For most of us, the Eucharist is so familiar a ritual that we sometimes forget the transformed reality towards which it points – and the footwashing is so unfamiliar that we do not understand its meaning for us. So tonight, let us remember: we share bread and wine to make real our belief that God is present in all people, and that this presence endows every person with a dignity that none of the world’s systems or structures or statuses can overshadow. And we wash feet to affirm that as Jesus’ followers we eschew the dynamics of higher and lower, richer and poorer, smarter and slower, healthier and sicker, purer and compromised, dignified and unworthy; that embrace each other as people worthy of our care and love, no matter the distance between us.

Tonight as we wash feet and share the bread and the wine, I invite you to keep in your mind the words we sometimes say as we invite the community up to the table: Behold what you are, may we become what we receive. Amen.