

## *The sacramental dance*

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

*I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

*1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

A poor, young Irish lass and lad were married in their rural parish church. Because they could not afford a reception elsewhere, and because the small church had no fellowship hall, the church itself would have to do for any ongoing celebration. Family and friends did what they could to bring food and drink, or a fiddle and a song. As things agreeably loosened up, guests took the liberty of moving some pews to make room for dancing.

But the revelry soon caught the ear of the curmudgeonly priest, who had removed himself to the rectory after the wedding proper. As the priest stormed into the church, the music and dancing halted. And after a breathless pause, he demanded, "*What's this depravity in the house of God?*" The groom's mother, a hard-working, loyal parishioner, quickly thought to say, "*But, Father, did not our Lord perform his first miracle at a wedding, turning water into wine?*" Jabbing his finger toward the sanctuary lamp and the tabernacle where the consecrated Host was kept, the priest nearly bellowed as he said, "*Aye, but the blessed sacrament was not there.*"

I believe that this story has been coming to my mind and heart in recent days because I am painfully aware that the blessed sacrament has not been there for so many of you who are accustomed to regularly receiving it. Whether conscious of it or not, I imagine that some of you may be hungering for it. Maybe you know that little dance in the sanctuary of your own heart when you receive it. And maybe you feel as if that dance suddenly halted, now almost a month ago.

There had been dancing in the streets just a few days ago, dancing and carrying on as Jesus entered Jerusalem in anticipation of the Passover festival. The crowds had crazily thrown down their own clothes on the street as Jesus approached. They'd waved branches that they'd spontaneously cut or torn from the trees. They had shouted *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*

But for the disciples, on this night, all of that seemed a lifetime ago. They had just shared the Passover meal. Jesus, as I imagine it, had lapsed into one of his monumental quiet spells. And then he surprised them all by getting up and washing their feet. And then he told them why he did so. And then he commanded them to do likewise.

Tonight I will genuinely miss the more elaborate ritual that you and I normally share as a means of remembering Christ's humble service and rekindling our own will to humble service. We will have to settle instead for a far simpler remembering and commending.

This Passover meal was the Last Supper that Jesus had shared with them, and it was here, on the night before he died for all of us, that he also instituted the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. In the passage that we heard from First Corinthians, St. Paul recaps the story for us, and then he urges our solemnest and most intentional understanding and approach to it. “*Examine yourselves,*” he reminds us, “*and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*” We can see here the origins of doctrines and practices that have led Christians to treat the Body and Blood of Christ with such extraordinary care and reverence. God being our helper, you and I have taken to heart and been faithful practitioners of that extraordinary care and reverence.

Even so, you and I may sometimes miss the likely double meaning of Jesus in the sacred meal. By blessing the most ordinary of earthly elements – bread and wine – and by doing so in the context of a meal, the most ordinary and necessary features of life, Jesus is inviting his disciples, as he now continually invites us, to find and receive the sacred in even the most ordinary of human moments and experiences.

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner asks us to believe and to experience this as he writes: ‘*A sacrament is when something holy happens. It is transparent time, time you can see through to something deep inside time.... [time when] you are apt to catch a glimpse of the almost unbearable preciousness and mystery of life.*’ And then he goes on with an insight that may be timely for many of us now: “*... church isn't the only place where the holy happens. Sacramental moments can occur at any moment, at any place, and to anybody. Watching [a birth]. Making love. A walk on the beach. Somebody coming to see you when you're sick. A meal with people you love. Looking into a stranger's eyes and [knowing] they are not a stranger ... If we weren't blind as bats, we might see that life itself is sacramental.*” (From ‘*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC,*’ 1993)

At this time, many of you must be feeling the absence of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, the sacred meal he instituted, for us, on the night before he died, for us. Although I myself am presently blessed to continue receiving the most blessed Sacrament of the altar, I myself feel deprived of the sacrament of your presence, the sacrament of your faces as we share the mass, the sacrament of your hands at the Communion rail, extended to receive Christ.

Even in all of this absence and that hunger, I trust that all of us may know something of that other species of sacrament, the sacrament of the present moment, any moment in which we recognize that He *is here*, after all. Even if we're not looking for it, even if we fail at prayer, even if we poor, blind sinners are distracted and dragged down by a thousand distractions and sorrows and torments, sometimes it, he, our Lord, Jesus, can move aside the pews and start a dance in the sanctuary of our hearts. And sometimes, even in the strangest, most awkward or contrary moments, we may just get a sense that he is trying to catch our attention and looking for a dance partner. *Amen.*