

What I Need -- Maundy Thursday C

We hear a lot of talk about the difference between what we want and what we need. That word need is among the most mis- and over-used in our language. But one thing is certain, we need to eat and drink, and so it is one of our most basic instinct. From the dawn of time our evolutionary ancestors have been engaged in the obtaining of sufficient sustenance and refreshment to fuel our propagation and survival. This is a hard thing to remember in modern American society, where at least two-thirds of us eat more than we require, until we look at our Monday Night meal ministry and realize that everywhere, including here, having food to eat is of primary importance. If you've ever been hungry, you know how emotionally and psychologically difficult it is. Try fasting, or changing your diet to change your weight, and you will soon realize how hard it is to be hungry and not doing anything about it. This is of course why so-called "Miracle" diets' biggest claim is often, "Shed Pounds Without Being Hungry!" or some such nonsense. It is why multimedia advertising to children and adults alike plays (and preys) so heavily on the urge for instant gratification. It is why, when we get a little hungry, we often say to each other, "I'm starving!" Whether you call that hyperbole or self-deluded mistruth, the point is that the stakes are high when it comes to us and eating. Then imagine if you can how much more painful is a complete lack of choice about whether

or not to eat because there is no food for yourself or your children. This terrible state makes our hunger pangs feel insignificant indeed.

So, when Jesus decides to institute a tradition for his community, his choice of a meal as the metaphor for our relationship with God goes way beyond mere comparison. He isn't only saying that the two things are similar in that they both represent needs. Jesus is working with the human soul to describe a mystical identity between the meal and the relationship, between how we feel about eating and how we feel about God. Tonight we'll take wine and bread to celebrate the holy meal Jesus instituted with his disciples. By the choice of unleavened bread, we are acknowledging, remembering and glorifying not only the body and blood of Christ, but also the centrality of this pair of feelings to the human experience. Our spiritual ancestors the Israelites had already been celebrating a holy meal for a thousand years to remind themselves of the goodness of God's mercy in the escape from bondage in Egypt. And their ritual meal combined elements of two celebrations - one agricultural, one nomadic - whose origins predate history. Jesus is gathered with his friends in the context of just such a Jewish Passover meal. In keeping with the tradition, the central, most significant parts of the meal are the bread and the wine. And here Jesus makes the connection between the elements and their meaning - between groceries and the Godhead --- he makes the

connection explicit. This is my body. This is my blood. This is recognizing and taking into ourselves, God, because we want to reiterate and reenact our being made of God. Literally incorporating God with our selves, according to our deepest need and oldest activities: eating and drinking.

Jesus also makes explicit the purpose of our Godly nourishment: to give us strength to love one another as God loves us. If one of our deepest instincts is to eat – an instinct deeper than, say, altruism -- then caring for each other does not always win out naturally. Once we have everything we think we need perhaps we are willing to share the surplus with another. But we need some direction, some encouragement, some deeper motivation to move into prioritizing compassion. Jesus says to take whatever nourishment we get from this spiritual food, and in perceiving it to be a sign of how we are loved, allow it give us the strength to go and do likewise with each other. In a few minutes, we will imitate Christ as we demonstrate our commitment to care for each other by anointing one another with water. Jesus insisted that we learn to care without discrimination, to love extravagantly. He insisted that we are of one body with Him and with the whole of humanity. He instructed his friends to see God's grace in bathing one another's feet, and in the symbol of the holy meal – giving of thanks, breaking bread and sharing it -- thus making a

universal activity sacred; there isn't anyone who doesn't eat and drink if they can.

The grace thus symbolized and freely given enables us to do justice, to love mercy, and walk humbly through the World with God inside us, trying to let our love fall on whomever we encounter: Jew or Greek black, white, brown or yellow, of whatever creed that promotes peace; to be as indiscriminate as the rain. As Dr. King wrote on the edges of old newspapers in his jail cell, "I am in Birmingham, Alabama, because injustice is here. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." So if God is meeting and fulfilling our needs today, for God's sake, let us perform with our lives what we know in our hearts to be true; let us love one another - even as we have received the gift of love.