

Ex 12:1-8, 11-14
Ps 116:12-13, 15-16bc, 17-18
I Cor 11:23-26
Jn 13:1-15

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Referring to the Eucharist, St. Augustine called it, “O Sacrament of Love, sign of our unity, bond of our fraternity.” Today we celebrate that day when Christ gave us the Eucharist. We all know the basic outline of the story. Jesus realized that his end was near. He had challenged the basic concepts of the Pharisees and religious authorities of his time with a new commandment of love and with his outreach to the poor and marginalized class. He realized that they would not tolerate it any longer, yet he could not back down because He was only fulfilling the will of his Father. And so He was to leave his followers, but at the same time He knew that they could not go on alone. So, in the Passover Supper, he took the bread and wine and changed what they were and what they meant. He made them into his body and blood so that the force of new life would enter into His disciples and transform them from frightened, insecure followers into people who would be able to continue on with the mission that He had inaugurated. The biblical readings today help us to understand why we still need that force of new life and the challenge it evokes from us.

St. Paul in the second reading is writing to the community of Corinth. The passage we have heard is understood in the context of the problem he was trying to solve. In the community of Corinth there were Christians from different walks of life. Some were from the prosperous commercial class and others were slaves, the poorest of people. Yet when the Christians gathered they not only celebrated the Eucharist, they also had the custom then to eat a regular meal. However, in Corinth the wealthier people ate a nice meal, while in the same space the poor sat and ate next to nothing. St. Paul writes to them and tells them about the Eucharist as the Body of Christ. He does so in the reading we hear this night and in the next couple of chapters of this letter. What he says is that there is an incoherency between the faith they are professing in celebrating the Eucharist, and in the life they are living by not sharing. He tells this community of early Christians that the whole point of receiving the Body of Christ in the Eucharist is to build the Body of Christ among themselves. Yet if they do not share their food with the poor who sit in front of them, they are dividing the Body of Christ which is the community, while they say they believe in the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. Paul tells them they have it all wrong. They receive the Body of Christ to Build the Body of Christ. If they do not want to build it in the community, then in vain they receive it in the sacrament.

In our divided world, between the rich nations and the poor we often face the same problem that the Corinthians faced. Sometimes as a nation we do not want to share our wealth with the poor. Sometimes as individuals we are indifferent to the suffering of the less fortunate and we justify our attitudes in a variety of creative ways. However, the Word of God today, on this day when Christ gives us the Sacrament of Love, is a

reminder to us of that basic link. Namely each time we come up to receive the Eucharist our “Amen” is not only a profession of faith in what we believe in and receive, it is a pledge to build that Body of Christ in our divided world. It is a pledge to be in solidarity with that part of Christ’s body that suffers more than we do.

The gospel reading gives us another perspective on this same basic theme of unity and solidarity. In John’s Gospel he does not follow the other three evangelists and tell us the story of the institution of the Eucharist; rather he wants to tell us what the Eucharist really means and what it invites us to live as a people. Jesus gets up and humbles himself in a way not easily conceived of by his followers. He is the Master, yet he does the work of the slave. He then washes the feet of all of them. The astonishing fact is that Judas is among those who sit with Him. The one who is to betray Him, is also included in the washing of the feet. Jesus then gets up and says those words that still penetrate to the core of our being as His followers... “What I have done... so you must do.” It is a reference not only to the washing of feet, but to the ministry of His whole life. What Jesus does, we must do.

In washing the feet of Judas, Jesus reminds us of the great power of forgiveness. How many “Judases” do we have in our life journey? How many people have mistreated us, betrayed us, been unfaithful to us, trashed our reputations or stepped on us to get ahead? Yet it is to these that Jesus patiently shows us that we must “wash their feet.” In a world that is in conflict we are asked, “how do we wash the feet of our enemy?” What does it mean to “wash the feet” of those that wish us evil?

These are not easy questions. In fact, they represent an impossible task by any human measure. And so Jesus doesn’t leave us with only human force, He gives us the Eucharist so that we have the very life-force of God within us, which lifts us up to do what we could not do if we tried alone. Humility, forgiveness, patience, tolerance are not achievable unless the force of God transforms us so that we can do what Jesus did.

This brings us to the first reading. Perhaps it is a little odd to end in the opposite order of the readings, but this reading from the book of Exodus helps us to understand the final dimension of this “sacrament of unity.” In the reading we hear of the first Passover, when the Israelites placed the blood of the sacrificed animal on their doors so that the force of death would “passover” them and not strike them down. It is followed immediately by Pharaoh allowing Moses to lead his people to liberation. When Jesus gives us now His blood, as the new covenant of love, He is asking us to allow the “force of death” to pass us by. We are always tempted to take up the call of the forces of death. Whether it be in our simple lies to hurt another, or the abuse of power in our place of work, or the temptation of a powerful nation to impose its will on others, the forces of death call us constantly to become their allies. We take of the Blood of Christ so that we can let this temptation pass us by, and we become transformed into forces of life. That is never easy, and it seldom leads us to embrace the political wisdom of the day. But again, that is why we, like the disciples, are not left alone.

In the measure that we reject the force of death, and imbibe in the force of life we become a sign of unity and we build the bond of fraternity. In our modern political culture, now gearing up for another presidential campaign, the destruction of the other is the constant example that is set before us. In our modern world where terrorism or military force is used rather than dialogue and respect, we are constantly given the example that “might makes right” and “the end justifies any means.” To go against these

currents is difficult, but in the measure that we do so, in the words of St. Augustine “we become, what we receive.”

O Sacrament of Love, Sign of our Unity, Bond of our Fraternity. Let us look upon the Eucharist this night with renewed faith that what we see is that Sacrament of Love and what we receive is so that we become that Bond of Fraternity.