

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 20, 2008

Maundy Thursday

\In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tonight's service is the opening of the Triduum – one long service over three days. You will note there is no dismissal at the end of this service or at Good Friday's. It is liturgy at its best – there are some things communicated best other than by using words.

Our readings from Corinthians touches on one side of tonight's service – the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus at the Last Supper. Jesus took bread and wine – the two most common staples of his community – and blessed them and made them holy – his very self – and gave them to his Disciples. The sacrament makes us more than we are and is a symbol of the intimacy and love that exists between Jesus and those who follow Him. The celebration of the Eucharist is a community event. Christ is present when two or more are gathered together in His name. Sanctification is not primarily a personal thing. At the Eucharist it is in community that we encounter Christ in the sacrament.

John's version of the Last Supper is different from the other three Gospels. He makes no reference to the Eucharist. His Gospel account of the Last Supper is a grand instructional farewell address followed by great theater – tonight's account of Jesus' washing of the Disciples' feet. By doing this act that one could not demand of a Jewish slave, Jesus is preaching through action a very radical message: If he, their teacher and master, could humble himself to do this, they too must follow his example within the community they will soon lead. In a society ruled by honor/shame and a

strict purity code designed to separate people from those who are different, Jesus' willingness to assume the role fit only for a gentile slave is a message of radical openness and inclusion.

Jesus teaches a servant style of leadership very different from the society he and his disciples lived in. Put plainly, for Jesus there are no second class Christians simply because there are no first class Christians.

The Church to be the Church needs both the coming together in worship and fellowship to share the sacrament and a structure of servant leadership. We certainly are in a mess right now. People can't come to the table together and often grandstanding has replaced service as a model of leadership. I take some comfort that it has happened before. Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth was written to a community which had forgotten that the Eucharist is to be celebrated as one community. Corinth was similar in many ways to our world. It was a brash new city in a new global economy. The city attracted people from all over; if it existed anywhere in the world, it could probably be found in Corinth. It was both very cosmopolitan and divided. The people forgot that the community celebrated the Eucharist; they divided up the community and started their own private meals. Perhaps not dissimilar from those who for whatever reason cannot share the Eucharist with those who differ from them in their view of what the Bible says or because of the gender of the celebrant.

I find wisdom and hope in the Elizabethan Settlement in the 1600s – believe what you will, but gather together to pray and eat at one table and walk out the door to God's work during the week; the rest will sort itself out in time. Would that we be so wise!

When I was in seminary a few years ago, I did my field work at St. Bartholomew's in New York City. Earlier, that church was the least welcoming church in Christendom! You would get the once over coming in to see if you were "our kind". But when the paid choir outnumbered the congregation, they hired a new rector who actually not only believed in God's inclusive love, but actually put it into practice. It is my prayer that here at Holy Innocents we can be a gathering place for all followers of Christ. Despite all our differences, we come together to celebrate the Great Thanksgiving to God and then go into the world as God's people. If we can model that behavior, we give a great gift to the Church.

AMEN.