

Maundy Thursday (B)

Exodus 12:1-14a / 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 / John 13:1-17, 31b-35

When his father asked him what he was doing, the little boy answered, “Drawing a picture of God!”

“But, honey, you can’t do that,” his father told him. “Nobody knows what God looks like.”

“Well, they will in a few minutes,” the boy explained.

That little guy was ready to show God to anybody who would look at his drawing.

Although the Church doesn’t offer us a drawing of God, it does offer us an experience of God through participating in the sacraments.

You’re probably familiar with our Prayer Book’s definition of sacraments. They are “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.” Sounds like the catechism, doesn’t it?

There is another definition I really like, or, more precisely, an objective of sacraments. The Anglican Theologian, John Macquarrie, said the goal of a sacrament is to “make things of this world so transparent that in them and through them we know God’s presence and activity in our very midst, and so experience [God’s] grace.”

Considering that goal, the presence of God is not limited to the Church’s sacraments. We each experience God, and God’s grace, in numerous ways throughout our lives. And many—perhaps most—of those experiences have nothing to do with the Church. In fact, people had experienced the presence of God long before Christianity broke onto the scene. But the focus of Maundy Thursday (Commandment Thursday) is the sacraments, specifically, the Holy Eucharist.

This evening we heard the story of the origination of the Jewish festival of Passover. Our reading from Exodus gave us a detailed description of just how the Israelites—slaves in Egypt at the time—were to prepare for and eat that first sacred meal, prior to their miraculous departure from the oppression of the Egyptian pharaoh.

That meal, however, was not a one-time event. Jews have celebrated Passover ever since that time. In fact, according to three of our four gospels (John being the exception), it was the Passover meal Jesus and his disciples were celebrating when he instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion, which we heard about in our reading from 1 Corinthians.

But the eight-day Jewish celebration (which, this year, begins tomorrow night) is more than just a designation on the calendar for recalling a past event. In their ritual Passover meal, the Jews bring the saving events of that night so long ago into their own lives today. They participate with their ancestors in accepting God’s saving grace in their lives. They remember God’s presence in the past, and they experience God’s presence in the here and now.

So, it should come as no surprise that the earliest Christians, who were raised in the Jewish tradition, understood the ritual instituted by Jesus on that Passover night in a similar manner. The Church's sacrament of Holy Eucharist has come to mean more than just a casual recollection of something Jesus did two thousand years ago. Like the Jews in their celebration of Passover, Christians, through the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, experience Christ's "real presence" with us today.

The new Christians in the city of Corinth had apparently forgotten the purpose of the Communion Meal. While they still assembled together for the celebration, they seemed to have missed the whole point of the gathering. Rather than communing together in the spirit of their Lord, they ate their own individual meals, where the rich flaunted what they had in front of those who had little or nothing. So, in his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul reminded them of the purpose of the ritual: to eat it in community and in remembrance of all Jesus has done for us—to experience his spirit among us and, therefore, make us one with him.

Like the Jews, we Christians do not simply recall our salvation history; we participate in it, here and now. Celebrating the liturgy and partaking of the sacraments in community is always more than just going through the motions. It's a way of belonging—belonging to one another through Christ's presence.

We frequently fail to remember, that before the heart of our Christian tradition evolved into a set of beliefs, it was first a set of practices.

Those practices, however, are not limited to the church's liturgical rites. In our reading from John's gospel we see a humble and self-giving Jesus wash the feet of his disciples. And when he had finished he asked them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ... I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

But why? Why should we serve others as Jesus did?

Shortly after World War II ended, much of war-ravaged Europe was in ruins, and one of the saddest sights during that time was the orphaned children starving in the streets. Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a little boy with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, watching every move.

The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, got out, and walked over to where the boy was standing. Through the steamed-up window he could see the piping hot, mouth-watering morsels as they were being pulled from the oven. The boy salivated and released a slight groan as he watched the cook place them onto the glass-enclosed counter ever so carefully. The soldier's heart went out to the nameless orphan as he stood beside him. He asked, "Son, would you like some of those?"

"I sure would!" replied the boy.

The man stepped inside, bought a dozen donuts in a bag, and returned to where the boy was standing in the foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag, and said simply: “Here you are.”

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly: “Mister, are you God?”

No, he was not God, and neither are we. But when we serve others we present to them God’s presence—God’s love—God’s picture! Our job, you see, is not to take Christ into the world—he’s already there—but to help the world experience his presence, his grace.

When a faith community embodies Christ’s love, it assumes a new identity—an identity shaped by Christ himself. Such a personification can become, in a sense, a sacrament of its own. Such service can be the catalyst to help others come to know God’s presence in their lives. Like the little boy’s drawing of God, our self-giving service can help show God to the world.

But self-giving is a two-way street.

There’s a legend about St. Francis of Assisi. In his early days he was very wealthy; nothing but the best was good enough for him; he was an aristocrat of the aristocrats. But he was uncomfortable with his existence and there was no peace in his soul.

One day, as he was riding alone outside the city, he saw a leper who was a mass of sores—a horrible sight. Ordinarily the fastidious Francis would have recoiled in horror from this hideous wreck of humanity. But something moved within him. He dismounted from his horse and flung his arms around the leper. And as he embraced him, the leper turned into the figure of Jesus.

Through our self-giving, we not only help others to experience God, we enable ourselves to feel God’s presence as well.

The traditional practice of washing each other’s feet on Maundy Thursday is meant to assist us in that relationship. For our bonding with God is mysteriously tied to our bonding with others. We are indeed “one body in Christ.” And it is through communion with, and service to, others that we truly experience, and help others experience, the presence of God.