

Pentecost 23, Proper 25
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

October 23, 2016
Rev. Paul Moore

Food

Many years ago a friend of mine named Randy who grew up in the Amazon jungles of Ecuador told me a story. As background material you need to know that tropical peoples of South America consume a diet that is largely liquid. They eat a lot of soups, and they make thick drinks of ripe plantain, palm nuts or manioc. These thick drinks really are their staple and primary source of fiber and carbohydrates. Randy having grown up with the Cofan people, was used to this kind of diet.

The story begins when he was invited to visit the Waorani, south of the territory of the Cofan. Randy trotted into one of the local villages of the Waorani wearing a Cofan "cushma", with a string bag of essentials strung over his forehead on a tumpline as is very common. He sat down with everyone else in a big circle in one of the open houses. Very soon the hostess brought out large bowls of this thick banana drink. Each bowl probably held a healthy quart of liquid. Being thirsty and hungry, Randy did the expected thing and drained it in one long draught. Impressed that this "cuwudi" (as they called the Gringos,) could drink like that, they hurried to bring him another! Not wanting to offend, Randy promptly downed that one, too. Now, feeling very satisfied, he was a bit dismayed to see them hustle out of the cooking area with another bowl, this time of palm nut drink. These palm nuts are so rich that vultures eat them. A bowl of this is truly powerful food! He swallowed hard, and down it went. Now, feeling more than satisfied, he hoped he was done with the bowls...but he was not! When the final bowl was drained, and Randy was feeling considerable pain, the Waorani were very much impressed. This red-headed "cuwudi," they decided, was really a "cuwani," their variation on Cofan. He was of another tribe, yes, but he was one of them.

I tell you this story because the topic for today's sermon is how a meal makes us a people. If you will recall I am preaching through the liturgy. This is the last one of the series, and it has to do with Communion and the Dismissal. The Communion is the common meal. The Dismissal captures the significance of the meal.

This is why the Eucharist is so central to who we are. My Protestant upbringing had taught me well that this ceremony only a recalling of what Christ did with the disciples the night before he died, but the first time I took communion as sacrament (a whole lot bigger idea,) I was amazed, shocked, and deeply moved. There was something that vibrated in the air at that moment! It was the Spirit of God in the People of God.

Communion is what we call it: Communion. We use the word "communion" to describe relationships of unity. Churches who share sacramental life are said to be "in communion." To be in communion with another person denotes agreement, common vision, and common goals. The word derives from the same Latin word from which we get "community." It is not by coincidence, then, that we use it for this Sacramental meal.

This is more than just eating side-by-side. Like Randy and the Waorani, we recognize ourselves in one another. It draws out a reality that is otherwise perhaps unseen, and if unseen, then unappreciated, and unrealized.

This is, however, not just a picnic with funny food. It is kind of like Thanksgiving. The turkey and dressing, the pilgrim hats, and the theme of gratitude all recall a story from our nation's beginnings on the East Coast. One eats a Thanksgiving meal and is in communion with the others around the table. It is not enough to sit at the table and not eat anything while others enjoy the feast. Eating together makes us a community of gratitude. Similarly, Communion is an intentional meal with a specific meaning. The food is material, and it is symbolic. It means what we call it. It is bread and wine, and we call it Body and Blood, for it is more than merely bread and wine. Like the Thanksgiving meal, it recalls a story as well. It recalls the story of Jesus' institution of this meal the night before he was crucified, but it doesn't stop there, for Jesus himself gave it a meaning beyond the moment. He linked it to his death and resurrection. The meal puts us in touch with Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Eating it together makes us the kind of community the Bible calls the Body of Christ redeemed by the Blood of Christ. As Christ's death is overcome in resurrection, so our deaths are overcome by resurrection in Christ, and as Christ offered himself for us, shedding his blood, so we offer ourselves to the world in sacrificial self-giving.

Let's pick up the liturgy, then, where we left off. "Alleluia," says the presider, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." There is incredibly deep meaning packed into this simple sentence. Suffice it to say that it recalls the context of this meal just as Christ did for his disciples on that night two millennia ago.

The people respond with joy, "Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia." The feast we keep is not just the feast of the meal before us. Remember the story of changing the water into wine? Jesus is invited to a wedding feast. The author of the Gospel of John sets up a scene where we have Jesus at a wedding, becoming the acting host. Michael Card in his song, *The Wedding* (1985) writes,

*So amidst the laughter and feasting, there sits Jesus full with the fun.
He has made them wine because He is longing for a wedding that's yet to come*

The feast we celebrate now is a foretaste, an antipasto, appetizer, whatever you want to call it of ***The Feast***, the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. The book of Revelation paints a picture of the final resolution of all things as a great wedding feast.

"Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

As we exclaim, "Therefore, let us keep the feast," in the back of our minds we have this

hope of our place at The Great Feast, the Final Feast, the One that makes all the difference!

The Agnus Dei follows. This is an ancient hymn recognizing that the mercy of the Lamb (Jesus) is what reconciles us to God and grants us peace. It is traditionally said antiphonally or sung.

Then there is the Presentation. “The Gifts of God...”—yes, these elements are sacramental gifts of grace; “For the people of God...”—yes, this gift makes us a people, a people of God. “Take them in remembrance...”—in eating we are re-membered with Christ and one another in one Body. “Feed on him in your hearts by faith and with thanksgiving.”—we eat with gratitude—Eucharist.

We gather, then, at the holy table, at the Altar Rail, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, united in one meal and one purpose. In eating and drinking together we become manifestly the Body of Christ.

Note that in the passage from Revelation the white robes of the saints are their good deeds. This meal is not just for our own good. You can only fill an ice-cream dish with so much ice-cream before it begins to spill over. To put more in you have to take some out. In the same way, as we take this marvelous community of peace into the world in good deeds the grace we have received flows through us into the world. You cannot have communion without mission.

The mission has two expressions. After saying thank you for the food in the Post Communion Prayer we rehearse the announcements. This is not a parenthesis to the service, it is part of the service. The information shared pertains to how we will minister to one another together in the upcoming days, or how we have worked together for the Kingdom in the recent past. The announcements are administratively strategic, but they also draw their context from the mission of the Church. We see this clearly in the commissioning of the Eucharistic Visitors. These people take the communion of the table out to those who cannot be with us in body. They walk into the world carrying the light of the world in their hearts and in their hands

The second is the dismissal rites themselves. We are blessed in the name of God. This is performative language. Like the pronouncement at a wedding that seals the marriage, so the blessing seals the reality of grace given. God, eager to bless, grants us blessing. What does it mean to be blessed? It's not a good luck charm to win the lottery or to keep from getting a cold. It means to know the grace of God within and around.

We recess, the Altar Party leading the focus of the worship out to the door of the Church, symbolic of walking out into the world in mission. Finally the Deacon sends us forth with the Dismissal. The center of the word, "Dismissal" is “miss”-ion. We are sent out on mission from Sunday to Sunday, to take God's blessing and grace and love into the world, and then to bring back to God the hurts and pains of the world in which we live to lay these at the foot of the Cross for healing and restoration—only to do it again the next week!

There, we've done it. We've been through the whole 2-act drama. We've come, surrendered, and been formed in body and soul, we have surrendered again, been fed and constituted a body, and then sent back out into the world. Here, in this room, our world should draw upon its most profound meaning. From this meaning we ought to be living from Sunday to Sunday, so that in the world out there the power of the love of God might be known.