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Homily for Maundy Thursday
St. Mark's on the Campus
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AFTER THE EARLY CHRISTIANS had gone through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, they were struggling to figure out *what* they had gone through, to bring some understanding to what they had experienced. They knew that it was a religious experience. A spiritual experience. But what could they say about it? How could they express the meaning of it? What *was* the meaning of it all? You and I know how hard it is to put into words what we have gone through in such experiences, times when the Holy slices quite unexpectedly into our everyday lives. We might feel elated; we might feel awed; we might feel turned upside down. But how do we *explain* it to others?

I doubt that it was much different for the community of the apostles. Except of course that they did not grow up with the high sense of individuality that we do: their culture was more communal than ours. By and large, they sought and found understanding about their experiences of God as a group. It was part of their inherited tradition as the *people* of God, the *community* of God. So when they wanted to express what had happened with Jesus on the cross, they sought understanding from their shared religious tradition, the tradition that they had shared with Jesus himself. In that tradition they found images that began to make meaning of their experience, to express it, to proclaim it, and to pass it on to others so that others might have some chance of receiving the gift of God that they themselves had received.

What in the world did Jesus mean when at that last meal together he had said to them, “This is my body; this my blood, broken and shed for you”?

They sought clues from the timing of his words. Some gospels, like Mark's, tell us that the last supper was a Passover meal. John puts the meal right *before* Passover. I'm not sure the fine distinction amounts to a whole lot, but our Biblical scholar over here on my left might disagree with me. Certainly in the tradition of the church, it all gets melded together, and the Passover becomes part of the setting for understanding what's going on.

We hear the story of the Passover in our first reading this evening. Just to remind you of what has gone before, God has brought a series of plagues onto Egypt in an effort to get Pharaoh in line, so that Pharaoh will release the Hebrews from slavery.

But Pharaoh hasn't paid attention. So the LORD GOD tells the Hebrews that he's going to pass through Egypt and cause all firstborns to die, firstborns both of human and non-human animals.

The exception will be the Hebrews, who – if they put the blood of the Lamb on their doorposts – will be “passed over; in other words, *their* children, their animals will remain safe.

It's around the time of the Passover meal, the meal set aside to commemorate the Lord passing over the Hebrews, that Jesus and His disciples gather for their final meal together. If this is not specifically a Passover meal, it's at least a common meal among friends, and as was true with these common meals, they would bless bread and wine.

However, Jesus takes this time with His friends and He puts a major twist on it.

As they bless first the bread and then later the wine, Jesus says, “This is my Body, this is my Blood. Each time you do this, do it to re-member me,” or to re-call me, or to bring me back among you.

What Jesus begins is not a new spiritual activity so much as it is a new understanding of an activity which he could have counted on the community doing anyway, and doing on a very regular basis. A critical part of it is that the wine would have been shared *in community*.

Blessing the bread individually occurred all the time; wine was blessed when one was sharing the meal with others.

So this new understanding that Jesus is interpreting and establishing is at its heart a corporate reality, not an individual one. It takes place, if it takes place at all, only within the *community* of those gathered with Jesus.

That's especially important because Paul talks about it in his letter to the Corinthians from which we have a portion this evening. Remember that one of the issues Paul had with the Corinthians was that the rich were ignoring the poor among them; varying status levels were being brought from the world into the church community and those worldly status levels were determining behavior among followers of Jesus rather than Jesus' command to "love one another as I have loved you."

So when Paul writes to the Corinthians to "discern the body," he's reminding them that our essential identity is as part of the community of Jesus. THAT is our soul.

Remember that you share this sacred meal among you as the Body of Christ, Paul writes to the Corinthians. Remember the one you are calling to be present among you, the one you are embodying – or not embodying - with your actions. Remember that each time you share this meal, you proclaim His death.

To what degree does your behavior to one another reflect His behavior on the cross? Only to that degree do we reveal the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

This meal that we share in so often can seem odd to the outsider. My brother once called it crazy. In a way, he's not far off.

What occurs is a shared encounter with Jesus that is not only hard to put into words, but can't be captured by words. A lot of ink has been spilled about what it's all about, and I've even participated in that ink spilling by writing a doctor of ministry thesis about Eucharistic theology as it's experienced by people in the pews.

In the end, though, the gift we receive is about more than we can say. We call it God's grace. We call it the Holy Spirit. We call it "our Passover." We call it the real presence of Jesus in our midst. We name that gift in many ways. What we know about that gift, though, is more important than what we name it: we know inside ourselves that this gift helps us live more deeply into the life of the one we call our Lord and our Master, the one in whom we live and move and have our being – and that we do live this life *together*.

In our gospel tonight, Jesus tells his followers what that life is about. As Jesus is about to go off and die, his disciples are arguing about who is the greatest among them. And he tells them, "The kings of the gentiles lord it over them It must not be so with you. Rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves." We ordain deacons among us to be a visible reminder of Jesus' words to his disciples. Deacons have a particular call to embody a servant ministry as a witness to all of us, and they have a vocation to call *us* to share in servant ministry, because that ministry of service doesn't belong just to deacons.

It belongs to *all* of us as the people who belong to Jesus.

When supper ends, Jesus and his disciples go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus struggles with a decision he has to make. No doubt part of his struggle is the fact that he's making this decision not only for himself but also for everyone who follows him. He has already made the decision. We hear what he says to his disciples in our gospel. But as is true with all of us who choose to follow the path that Jesus takes, he must make that decision to embody loving service not just once, but again and again and again. He has faced, as we all must face, a lifetime of choices for or against serving the God who isn't always easy to name, but who is nonetheless ever-present in our lives.

Tonight, Jesus must choose one more time.