Maundy Thursday

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego
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Scott Richardson

Be present, O Jesus, as you were present to your disciples,
and be known to us in the breaking of the bread. Amen.

I'd like to talk about the sacred meal tonight but not, perhaps, in the way you're thinking about it. In response to our readings, you may be focused on the Passover or the Eucharist. Those meals are, of course, central to our life and worthy of our undivided attention. I'm now, however, going to call you away from those tables for just a moment so that we might return with even more understanding, appreciation, and zeal.

The feast I want to hold up before you tonight does not feature roasted lamb or bread and wine made holy but, rather, bread and fish. There's strong evidence that table fellowship in the early church revolved around two different offerings, the eucharistic meal with its Passover implications and what we would now understand to be a church potluck. This primitive potluck may have been the setting for the earliest celebrations of Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, but it was also, in and of itself, laden with sacred meaning. It referred back to several instances when Jesus sustained his people with bread and fish – the feeding of the five thousand, for instance, or the post-resurrection barbeque Jesus hosts for Peter and friends in the Gospel According to John.

Observing this ancient and holy meal fell out of use over time; I'm now suggesting that this was a bitter loss for the people of God. This meal, as much as the Eucharist we now observe, shaped the godly values of the Christian community of faith. The feast of bread and fish did two salutary things – it served as a safety net for those who didn't have enough to eat and it leveled the social playing field, allowing for table fellowship between people and classes who might have otherwise avoided one another at mealtime. Social welfare and egalitarian dining; food for the hungry and humility for the mighty - that's good eatin'.

Saint Paul, in one of his letters to the church in Corinth, strongly enforced this code of radical charity. He challenged those who came to the feast and disregarded the needs of their neighbors, keeping the preferred food and drink to themselves. "It is not the Lord's Supper that you eat; for when the eating begins, each one of you has his own supper first, and there is one going hungry while another is getting drunk. Surely you have homes for doing your eating and drinking in. Have you such disregard for God's assembly that you can put to shame those who have nothing?"

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and author, comments on this passage: "Later eucharistic theologians don't know what to do with this text. Clearly the

first century Church had a very different understanding of Eucharist than we do now. Clearly it was a sharing of real food, not a priest standing at an altar with bread and wine… It was the potluck supper in which we all came together. The rich people could bring rich food, the poor people would bring chitlins… this is revolutionary theology by later Church criteria."

So there we have it: A feast that included everyone, a feast that provided amply for one and all, a feast that broke down social barriers. And now here's the good news – we are, in our own manner, recreating the ethos and spirit of that first meal tonight. We do so in three ways – we wash one another's feet (humility, service, attending to the comfort needs of our neighbor), we receive the bread and wine made holy, the Body and Blood of Christ, and we retire to the Great Hall for the *agape* meal, the sacred potluck wherein all are assured of sustenance and fellowship, at least for tonight. On this night, above and beyond most others, we draw near our spiritual ancestors. We now invite your full participation in God's three-part dance of love. Amen.