

Holy Thursday 2019
St. Mary Catholic Church
Fr. Michael Renninger

“She missed the meaning of the meal.”

That’s what he said to me. Years ago, while I was in seminary, a friend of mine was in Washington DC for business. He offered to take me to dinner. Clergy rarely turn down free food!

As we ate, he talked about a woman with whom he worked. The more he spoke about her, it was clear that he had deep feelings for her. So I finally asked, “Does she know you love her?”

And that’s when he said, “She missed the meaning of the meal.”

He explained that, for months, he had paid attention to her at work (no, not in a creepy way!). Rather, he loved her enough to listen when she spoke.

As he listened, he found out what she liked.

He listened when she mentioned her favorite wine. He listened when she described an appetizer her mother used to make.

He listened when she said that she loved filet mignon with gorgonzola, how she loved red velvet cake for dessert.

Since he was shy, he found it hard to say to her, “I really like you.” So he came up with a plan...

He invited her to dinner. He was going to cook for her.

When she arrived, he was playing her favorite music. He had been listening.

He poured her a glass of her favorite wine. He had been listening.

He served the appetizer her mother used to make. He had been listening.

He served filet with gorgonzola and finished the meal with red velvet cake. He had been listening.

He hoped that with every sip, with every bite, she – too – would be listening.

He hoped that she would realize that by serving every one of her favorites, by playing her favorite music, she would hear what his heart was saying: “I love you... enough to listen.”

But, *she missed the meaning of meal*. She wasn't listening to what his heart was saying. Because, all through this wonderful meal, she kept talking about *another* guy at work with whom she was infatuated...

She missed the meaning of the meal.

As we celebrate this Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, I have to wonder: did the disciples of Jesus miss the meaning of the meal?

Did any of the disciples understand what the heart of Jesus was saying to them as he broke the bread, passed the cup, washed their feet?

Were they listening intently enough to hear what the heart of Jesus was saying? “I love you. I am with you. I have given you an example.”

You see, Jesus loves us enough to listen. He listened to the fears and hurts, the hungers and thirsts, of the human heart. He listened so well, he knows what we need.

What do we need? We need to know that we are not alone. We need to know that our life has purpose. We need to know where God is. There are days and weeks, times and seasons, when we don't know where the Lord is, or how to find him.

There are moments in life when we have run out of strength, and we are not sure how to go on.

Jesus was listening, and he heard the cry that wells up from deep within the struggling human soul: “Where are you, Lord?”

So, *because* Jesus was listening, he provided the meal that answers those questions, and fulfills those needs.

He took bread, said the blessing, broke it, gave it. “This is my body. Given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you.”

Don't miss the meaning of this meal.

+ When we feel utterly isolated, Jesus says in this meal, “I am here, with you, loving you.”

+ When we conclude that our life has no purpose, Jesus says in this meal, “I’m here, leading you.”

+ When we run out of strength, and we’re not sure how to go on, Jesus says in this meal, “I am the bread of life. I will nourish you, strengthen you, walk with you. And love you.”

+ When our soul screams, ‘Where are you Lord?’ He answers in this meal – “Here I am, right where I told you I would be. This bread – my body. This cup – my blood. This meal – my presence. I am here. Loving you.”

Don’t miss the meaning of the meal.

Apparently, Jesus was not sure his disciples would comprehend the meaning of the meal!

After all, these were the men who, with startling consistency, *missed* the meaning of so much of what Jesus said and did.

These were the men who heard Jesus predict his passion – then they argued about who would get the best seats in his kingdom.

These were the men who heard Jesus say – ‘you must pick up your cross every day,’ then they fought over who was the greatest.

Jesus kept talking about service and self-giving, *they* kept talking about honors and rank.

Were they listening? Did they get the meaning?

So, in the middle of this meal which reveals the heart of our God, the Savior stands up, takes off his cloak, wraps a towel around his waist, and proceeds to do the task that was usually reserved to the lowliest servant or slave.

He washed the filthy feet of these proud-hearted disciples.

He washed the feet of Peter – who later that night would deny that he even knew Jesus.

He washed the feet of Thomas – who would become so full of doubt that ‘doubt’ became his nickname.

He washed the feet of Judas – his betrayer.

This is what love looks like: the Creator of the universe, on his knees, serving. Humility. Self-giving. Doing what needs to be done. Not trying to sort out whether the recipient is worthy of our generosity.

In the washing of the feet, Jesus is showing us the meaning of this meal, the meaning of the Eucharist.

Jesus got up from the table, and took a towel in his hand.

When *we* get up from this table, Jesus sends us out the door – *with a towel in our hand*.

The Eucharist was never intended to solely be a reassuring celebration in which we, his ‘chosen few,’ gather to congratulate ourselves that he has, once again, come to be with us in this sacrament.

The Eucharist is, rather, the meal in which the Risen Lord turns our lives upside down, redefines our priorities, and throws us headlong into the messy needs of the world, with one instruction on his lips: ‘*Get to work. As I have done, you must do. As I have served, so must you.*’

The Eucharist is that meal which means, ‘your life does not belong to you.’ If you have a talent or skill, God gave it to you so that you can give it away. If you have energy, God gave it to you so that you can get down on your knees and humbly serve your neighbor.

If I have breath in me, then today is another day when I can think less of my needs, and find my life’s purpose in serving the needs of others.

The Eucharist means that, in all things, I can say ‘thank you’ to God. ‘Thank you for another day, thank you of a chance to serve, thank you for the people you send into the dining room of my life, those people with proud hearts and filthy feet and broken lives – and you tell me to bend down, serve them, love them.’

“As I have done, you must do.”

The Eucharist is a *dangerous* meal, because I approach His table with empty hands, and He sends me from this table with a towel in my hands and his love in my heart and his Spirit telling me where to go and whom to care for.

And who knows? He may even send you to serve the Judases in your life – the ones who have betrayed you or broken your heart.

“As I have done, you must do.”

What is the meaning of this meal? This is the meal where the crucified and risen One lavishes his love upon us. And his love is an unruly, wild, generous, dangerous, life-changing love.

What is the meaning of this meal? It is the place where we always know we can find him – or rather, where he finds us.

But he never lets us stay for too long. There is still work to do, there are still hearts to be mended, hungers to be fed, feet to be washed.

So he does not let us linger. He sends us out the door - nurtured, nourished, nudged.

“Go. As I have done, you must do.”

The meaning of this meal is... love, his love. Do not miss it. The meaning of this meal is love. Live it.