

Homily for Holy Thursday 2007

1. Several years ago there was a show on TV called *Fear Factor*.
 - a. Where people got money for doing things they were afraid of.
 - b. It was supposed to be a game show, but for me it was a horror show;
 - c. As people ate live bugs, swallowed worms, and lay down in tubs filled with snakes
 - d. In short touched things I would not touch with a ten foot pole, let alone eat.
2. The people of Israel in Jesus' would have understood my fear.
 - a. For there were things that they would never eat;
 - i. pork for example, certain cuts of beef, or any type of shellfish.
 - b. There were things that they would never touch;
 - i. Lepers for example, women during their monthly period, or any one's feet.
 - c. For in a time where people wore sandals
 - i. And the city sewers were the city streets;
 - (1) A person's feet came into contact with everything.
 - (2) Foot care was the ultimate fear factor.
3. Which is why washing feet was left to slaves and servants.
 - a. they were little better than untouchables anyway; no one cared about them.
 - b. That is what the disciples would have believed;
 - c. That is certainly what Peter believed;
 - d. we know this because of the way he behaved
 - e. at the supper Jesus celebrated with his disciples on the night before he died.
4. This was the Last Supper Where we as Catholics believe
 - a. Jesus instituted the meal we call the mass
 - b. And the ministry that celebrates the mass we call the priesthood.
5. And yet when John tells the story of that meal, he barely mentions it.
 - a. It isn't that he does not believe in it; for he devotes all of chapter 6 of his gospel to the idea at the heart of the mass;
 - i. That Jesus' flesh and blood becomes our food and drink.
 - b. And yet here all John says is that after supper,
 - i. Jesus bends down to wash his disciples' feet.
6. No wonder Peter reacted as he did;
 - a. Not only were feet a fear factor; but this was the eve of the Passover;
 - i. Didn't Jesus realize that he was making himself untouchable?!
7. Off course he did; that is why he did it;
 - a. and he told them that one day they would do the same.
 - b. He also said they wouldn't understand what he was doing;
 - i. and maybe neither do we.
8. For nowadays of course, feet are no longer such a fear factor;
 - a. Indeed in a few minutes I will wash feet.
 - i. The feet I will wash will be washed, pedicured;
 - (1) even splashed with a bit of cologne.
 - (2) so that they will neither look, nor smell like Peter's.
 - ii. They will be very touchable,
 - iii. And thus completely robbed of the fear Jesus' disciples felt that night;
 - iv. And also robbed of the deepest meaning of the meal that John barely mentions so he can tell this story about washing feet.
 - b. Because John believed that we would not understand what Jesus was doing with the bread and wine, unless we first understood what Jesus is doing washing feet.

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- c. He was becoming one with us; all of us- even the untouchables - by becoming untouchable himself; so that he might touch us in his service and make us clean.
- 9. Nowadays, neither food nor feet (most feet anyway) frighten us the way they did Jesus' friends.
 - a. But that does not mean that there are no longer any untouchables.
- 10. Sara Miles had been a cook here in New York, and a writer in Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution in the 1980's.
 - a. She describes herself as a secular humanist, and atheist and a lesbian.
 - i. In short, someone who would be untouchable to so many both within our Church and without.
- 11. But then as she writes in her book, *Take This Bread - The Spiritual Memoir of a 21st Century Christian* ,
 - a. *Early one winter morning I walked into St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in Francisco. I had no earthly reason to be there . . . I went in on an impulse, with no more than a reporter's habitual curiosity. . . We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down . . . And then we gathered around (the) table . . .and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying, "The body of Christ" . . . and handing me the goblet of sweet wine saying, "the blood of Christ," and then something outrageous and terrifying happened to me . . . I was in tears and physically unbalanced. I could not reconcile the experience with anything I knew or had been told. But neither could I go away . . . I wanted that bread again.*
- 12. As a result of that experience Sara eventually gets baptized, and within a year moves her wealthy Episcopal Church to open a food pantry, because
 - a. *"There was that vision (I had) of a table where everyone was welcome. Our neighbors, friends and strangers, were hungry. The very least a Christian Church could do, for starters, was feed them."*
- 13. What had happened to Sara?
 - a. She was touched by Jesus;
 - i. he had become her food and drink and fed her,
 - ii. not just with bread and wine but with his life;
 - iii. and because of that life she began to feed others.
- 14. Now I know what you are thinking: "But father! OK, I can accept the fact that she was a secular atheist; that changed; and that she is a lesbian; after all we all know gay people nowadays . . . but Father, an Episcopalian!" Whenever I hear people talk about crazy liberal Christians these days, they always talk about Episcopalians!
 - a. Exactly. God used that church, which many would judge to be, well untouchable,
 - b. To touch a woman whom many would judge to be well, untouchable,
 - c. And to turn her into a prophet reminding us all that the meal whose beginning we celebrate here tonight, and the ministry which makes happen, exist solely so that Christ can become our food and drink; so that he can touch us; and through us touch others.
 - i. And make that vision of a table which will one day welcome everybody, a reality.
 - ii. Don't you want to work for that day, when everyone can share freely what we so take for granted here? I hope you do; Jesus did.