

Dr. Ronald C. Young
Maundy Thursday
Year C RCL
April 1 2010 St. Peter's Church Essex Fells

I used to volunteer in the small homeless shelter at General Seminary. It housed 6 men overnight. It was a 12 hours place of refuge – a bed, showers, a washing machine and dryer to clean their clothes, and a lounge with a kitchen for them to sit and talk and to cook. These older men came from Peter's Place, a resource center for the older homeless in the city operated by the Partnership for the Homeless. There weren't enough shelter beds for the men and many had to sleep on chairs or on the floor of Peter's Place. They tried to send the "good" men to the nighttime shelters – those you were well behaved, those could get along with each other, the very old and those who they felt had a chance. Peter's Place tended to send the same men to the same shelter for many months running. These men formed a community within the homeless community.

Before I volunteered I asked my friend Ellen is there anything I extra I could do when I was the host. She said that she usually cooked a dinner for the men. Being green I decided to do the same. I cooked a chicken and vegetables and brought it over. As the men arrived, some on foot and some by bus, they fell into their ritual. I offered them dinner and they started cooking. One man began making sandwiches. Another made an omelet. A third cooked pasta. They all had supplies. And food that I had cooked is sitting on the table untouched. You can guess how I felt.

Then I noticed something. One man asked to borrow some bread from another guest. It was given. Another guest placed a few rather beaten cupcakes on the table. Mitch, who had cooked the pasta, I saw was making it for another guest. A couple of the men had started eating my chicken and vegetables. One man made coffee for everyone. I was offered part of the omelet. They were sharing –we were sharing. Food was bringing them together. Food and drink was forming community. Food and drink are symbols not of fuel for the body but of life.

I need to make it clear – sentimentality and romanticism were remarkably absent from this moment. This was the farthest thing from a Kumbya moment you can imagine. There wasn't a lot of polite conversation. The language was harsh and crude. There was tension and even anger among some of the men. I didn't get that warm fuzzy feeling that we associate with the idea of community. Frankly, I was scared and confused. But I came to see over the months ahead that this was a community in action. It was a community built around life giving food and drink serving others – literally serving others.

I tell that story because the focus of this evening is also built upon life giving food and drink and also upon service. We have shared bread and soup. Coming up into the church our readings continue the theme. We heard of the Passover meal that commemorated the Exodus from Egypt. We heard Paul's description Jesus' last meal to take and bless bread and wine in remembrance of him. This is the origin of Holy Communion or the Eucharist. Soon we will take, bless and receive bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus. And from John's Gospel, we hear the story another part of the

Jesus' meal in the Upper Room – the part that makes us uncomfortable and scandalized Peter – Jesus' washing of his disciples feet. In a few minutes we will commemorate this act signifying service by doing the same.

Tonight's scriptures and our liturgy remind us that there was distinctive character Jesus' last evening with his disciples in the Upper Room – the shared meal, the bread and wine and the washing of feet. Tonight we commemorated that meal in a special way. We sat down together and shared a meal. We actually broke bread together. In a few minutes we are going to imitate Jesus' example invite you to have your feet washed and to wash each our neighbor's feet. Then we will follow Jesus' command to continue to bless and receive bread and wine in remembrance of his. Tonight is the exception. The early Christians used to gather each week and to bless bread and wine as part of a meal. They understand that something special happens when you break bread together. However, over time the bread and wine have become symbols of the shared meal. We have formalized and ritualized it.

There is a new church community in New York called Saint Lydia's. I haven't been there yet. It meets on Sunday night in a Lutheran Church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was founded by two lay women and it is a small community numbering about typically 10-15 on a Sunday and about 30-50 people in total. The average age of this congregation is 25-30. They call it a dinner church. Yes, a dinner church. They gather in early evening and the fix dinner. Everyone is put to work-cooking, setting the table. They sit down to eat and begin with a Eucharist led by a

visiting priest. Then they eat. Then they talk, someone may preach, and they sing. Then they clean up. They gather in this way because they believe people are hungry. People are hungry not just for food. In breaking bread together something special happens. Relationships are formed. Community is built.

I am intrigued by what they are doing at St. Lydia's but I don't think that we need to follow their example. Saint Lydia's works because it is a small community. However, their action does serve as a reminder that when we come to the altar to receive Communion, it is a communal act. We are symbolically sharing a meal. It is not "I alone" who is receiving Communion, but it is "We" who are receiving communion. We are being united to each other as we are being united with Christ. We are creating and building up community.