

Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2005
Dr. Richard Lischer

Hebrews 9:11
"We Have an Altar"

But when Christ appeared as a high priest. . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

He was the word that spake it.

He took the bread and brake it;

and what that word did make it

I do believe and take it.

This simple sixteenth-century poem sums up the trust each of us has as we approach the table to receive the body and blood of Christ. We know that many beliefs about the sacrament, however, have not been that simple. What the church calls the sacrament of unity has often tragically turned out to be the sacrament of disunity, setting off great arguments among Christians over the composition of these ordinary elements.

Some of you may be aware that an even older theological division has long existed not over the bread and the wine but over the piece of furniture on which they are set. It is this: Shall we call the place where we meet God an altar or a table? When the people of God eat their sacred meal do they do so gathered around something resembling a slaughter-stone or a kitchen table?

A congregation I once served had just begun to plan for a new sanctuary when it was forced to deal with just this question. The Methodist architect put it to us: tell me about your theology of the sacrament. What'll it be: an altar or a table? At the end of many earnest meetings, we made our weasel-worded reply. Make it a table, but a *very* substantial one.

Our instincts told us that there is something big and powerful behind the table, but we were unwilling to name it or let it go. What's behind the table?

As an experiment, perhaps when you are sitting at table, ask a child this question. "Where does that slice of bread on your sandwich come from?"

"From this package."

"No, where, really?"

"Well, from Harris-Teeter, I guess."

"No, silly, I mean where does it *come* from?"

When pressed, the child will admit that she thinks the bread comes from a truck. If you probe any deeper, you come to what the archeologists term "the inaccessibility of origins." And what is true of bread is true of electricity, hamburgers, lunch money, good books, and iPods. Things just are. We are given our world.

To see how removed we are from the origins of things, wander through the streets of a Guatemalan village until, toward dusk, you hear the sound of an unearthly scream. A child in pain? A dog in heat? A murder in progress? Well, sort of. On the back stoop of a tarpaper house a woman is calmly wringing a chicken's neck. It's suppertime. She is preparing a meal which from its source in the back yard will be table-ready in a matter of hours. Compare her grandchildren who are standing in the doorway nonchalantly watching with our grandchildren who think that chicken comes from a kindly man with a white goatee, and one arrives at a truth about our culture.

Our culture shields us from origins, for often at the source of a commodity there is misery. Adults know this. Children do not. So children ask innocently, "Why do some Indians live on reservations?" "Why is Japan our special friend?" "Why are poor people poor?"

Does one appreciate the product more if one understands the toil and pain that lay behind it? Would we enjoy our barbeque or fried chicken more if we could see the life of the hog or chicken in a factory farm, to say nothing of the workers? You can stroll into Belks or Hechts and buy a genuine suede jacket for \$37. When you get it home you will notice it was made in Bangladesh, which is to say, somebody practically died to make your jacket. You are not alone if you would rather not think about it.

Most churches are shying away from the altar as a monolithic place of sacrifice in favor of a table.

At table there is harmony, unity, and good etiquette. The only sounds are interesting conversation and the clink of sterling on china, or at least plastic on styrofoam.

At the altar there is the braying and screeching of beasts being slaughtered; it is not conversation one hears, but a cry of dereliction. "My God, my God."

At table there is the coziness of family relationships. One belongs at the table. Only for the most heinous of crimes is the child sent from the family table. There at table the child has direct access to the parent.

At the altar is the alien and austere presence of the priest, the intermediary, who is neither father nor friend. One approaches the altar as one treads on holy ground, with fear and trembling.

At table there is bread, wine and hospitality.

At the altar, there is body, blood, carnage and death.

Maybe you, like me, grew up at a good table. Ok, it was aluminum with a formica top, ok, fake formica, but the people at the table were good. There was always a pot roast with carrots and potatoes or, to appease some ancestral god, German sauerkraut and spareribs, but the food was hot, and you could both be yourself at the table and belong to something bigger than yourself at the same time.

You could put with comments like "Get your elbows off the table," because you were allowed to be at the table.

But if you're like me, maybe you didn't appreciate all that made that table possible: a woman was holding down a low-paying job and doing her chores late into the night; a man was working one job Monday to Friday and another more hateful job on Saturdays, and that together they were spending their savings on medical care for parents and the distant hope of a college education for their kid.

If we fought, we tried not to do it at the table. It is a place of such intimacy that it almost invites betrayals. Who is the one who betrays me? It's the one to whom I give this bread after I have dipped it into the dish we've been sharing. Take, eat.

The early Christians were sometimes accused of having no altar, which was like being an atheist, because they had done away with animal sacrifice. "We have an altar," writes the author of Hebrews, "from which those who serve in the Tabernacle have no right to eat." We have an altar. We consider Christ's entire act of self-sacrifice to be our altar. The cross is a vast altar that makes it possible for us to be a people at table. And maybe we don't have Leave it to Beaver dinner hour—who does?—or the perfect American family—what's that?—but because of Jesus' sacrifice we have a family in which we can be ourselves and belong to something greater than our selves.

Last month the university sponsored a discussion of the most divisive issue on this campus—race. To do so, a few people, including the President gathered around a table that looked for all the world like my table, formica, aluminum, in a kitchen on the stage of the Griffin Theater. It wasn't just a feel-good session, however, because everyone agreed that a lot of suffering had gone into making that table possible. We can break bread today because behind the table looms the outline of something more substantial. As Maya Angelou says, "You have been paid for at a distant place."

And yet for all its horror and carnage, the altar can be a place of refuge. For it symbolizes the place of God's own sacrifice. "For when Christ appeared as a high priest . . . he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."

In the novel *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, a group of Allied soldiers is captured and herded into a defunct meatpacking plant near Dresden. It's a slaughterhouse in which they will be incarcerated. How the prisoners hated the dank basement of that place! But when the firebombing of Dresden begins, the slaughterhouse no longer seems cold and inhospitable. Slaughterhouse No. 5 becomes a place of refuge.

On Maundy Thursday while sitting at table, Jesus considered himself a dead man and spoke of a body broken, blood poured out, and other subjects regarded as indelicate at table. He was clearly thinking of the slaughter-stone. He said, This meal will not be free. All the forgiveness and love that is in this little room is going to cost somebody something terrible. Then with his typical generosity he said, "Check."