

We so often default to a distant image of God, a powerful, supreme being armed with lightning bolts and exercising dominating supremacy. But in Christ, who is the image of God, we see a God armed with a basin and a towel, who spews not threats but good news for all, who rode not a warhorse but a donkey, who wept in compassion for people who have lost their way in this often broken and hurting world. In Christ, God is supreme, but as the supreme healer, the supreme friend, the supreme lover, the supreme life-giver who self-empties in gracious love for all. The king of kings and lord of lords is the servant of all and the friend of sinners. That's how we can all take our place at this table tonight. We all share the same reality – we are sinners, and we are God's friends.

To be a follower of Jesus is to change our understanding of God. To accept Jesus and to accept the God Jesus loved is to become an atheist in relation to the Supreme Being of violent and dominating power. We are not demoting God to a lower, weaker level; we are rising to a higher and deeper understanding of God as pure light, with no shadow of violence, conquest, exclusion, hostility, or hate.

We could say that with that basin and towel, Jesus inserted into the human imagination a radical new vision of God – nondominating, nonviolent, supreme in service, and self-giving. A God who is indeed love. Or as one poet put it "A God who gets down on His hands and knees and plays 'this little piggy' with us."

All of this is a call to be menders of the brokenness of our world. Jesus left us the Eucharist as a source of our unity. Sadly, often, it's been the cause of our division, both among Christian denominations and within them. We tend to do battle about most everything connected to the Eucharist. What's its precise theology? Who may preside? How often should it be celebrated? What's the precise role of the presider? How is the presider to be vested? Where should the altar and tabernacle be placed? Which hymns are appropriate and which aren't? New music or old? Guitar or organ? How inclusive should the language be? How solemn should the celebration be? Who can receive the Eucharist? And who is not worthy? The disagreements, it seems, never end.

There is one consolation in all of this. Scripture scholars suggest that it has ever been thus, right from the beginning. Already within the earliest apostolic churches, matters about the Eucharist were hotly debated and were the source of painful divisions.

Looking at the Christian scriptures we see that there is no single theology and practice of the Eucharist presented there. Rather there are already a variety of theologies, approaches, and vocabularies about it. Some communities, for instance, called it 'The Lord's Supper,' others, it seems, didn't; some communities, John's for example, may have celebrated Eucharist daily while others may have celebrated it only on Sundays or even less frequently; some communities argued about who should sit where during the service, others about who should have their heads covered and who shouldn't.

Hence, already by the time that the gospels were written there was not one precise, univocal view on the Eucharist and, seemingly, considerable variety in its practice, not to mention painful and sharp disagreements about it. Already then it was both a source of unity and a source of division within and among the various communities.

The Evangelist, John, tries to make an important point about all of this. By the time his gospel is written, there were already, strikingly parallel to today, many disputes about the Eucharist. More and more, the Eucharist was becoming as much a cause of division as a source of unity for Christians. What was John's response?

Where the other gospels place the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, John inserts a very different kind of 'Eucharistic' text. In place of having Jesus take the bread and wine and say 'This is my body, this is my blood,' John has Jesus washing the feet of His disciples – precisely as a 'Eucharistic' act. How so?

To the popular mind, this gesture is understood as a lesson in humility, namely, Jesus, the master, turns the mantle of privilege into the apron of service. That lesson clearly is there, but there's more. Jesus is also saying

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something important about the Eucharist with this gesture – which is why the church chose this text, rather than one recording the words of institution, as its gospel-text for Holy Thursday. What does the washing of the feet say about the Eucharist?

On Holy Thursday, the church matches this gospel text with a note in the General Instruction on the Roman Missal that says a collection is taken up for the poor. (GIRM #17) Taken together, they are reminders that the Eucharist is not so much something we receive as it is something we DO, in service, in love for the sake of others. All of our arguing is simply a distraction to service and love.

In essence, Jesus is saying this: “Acquiescing to each other in charity and service, in this way, is what the Eucharist really means. If we can’t do this for each other, perhaps we shouldn’t be celebrating the Eucharist at all. We can give up our right to be right!”

The Eucharist is an invitation to many things, but it’s also, as Jesus’ gesture of washing His disciples’ feet shows, an invitation to GIVE UP OUR RIGHT TO BE RIGHT, especially as regards our views about how the Eucharist must be celebrated. Simply put, Jesus tells us – shows us – that it’s more important to be in union with each other than to be right.

That’s an important challenge. We simply fight too much about the Eucharist. Everyone, it seems, has an important, non-negotiable, truth that he or she feels may not, at any cost be compromised: Catholics and Protestants fight over the real presence – at least over its vocabulary; feminists and traditionalists fight over language; liturgists fight with common folk over how a service should be properly done; artists fight with the pious over liturgical aesthetics; choir directors fight with pastors over the choice of songs; bishops and priests fight over placement of tabernacles, and people at Eucharistic services glare at each other and throw private tantrums because a certain song mentions dancing or names us as wretched sinners.

Too often what’s at stake under all this is more pride than truth, more the need to be right than the need to worship.

Jesus washing His disciples’ feet leaves this message: It’s more important be in union in Christ and each other than to be liturgically, aesthetically, and politically correct. What the Eucharist asks of us, among other things, is to acquiesce to each other, to give up our right to be right. And once we begin to do that, we will attend to the essentials – service to the poor, inclusion of all and love for all. Amen. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 2 June 2002)