

[Readings: Exodus 24:3-8; Psalm 116; Hebrews 9:11-15; Mark 14:12-16, 22-26]

No sound is as sweet to our ears as those three powerful words: "I love you." But as extraordinary and meaningful as those words are, if words are all we get, they can become pretty thin.

Every human exchange has to have more than words behind it. If we want to buy something, there has to be cash or valuables to back up the transaction. If we want to engage an organization, there's got to be paperwork. If we want to clinch the deal, we've got to sign a contract. If we really love someone, we have to produce a ring or a home or a hug or an hour of our time.

Words can be beautiful, but experience teaches us that words are not enough. If we don't see the **signs** that show us the words are for real, then they are no better than lies.

That's how rituals came into being, because of the human need for signs and testimony. We can say, "I love you" -- but are we willing to say it before the priest? We can call ourselves Catholic -- but do we join the assembly when it gathers? We might declare that we saw something at the scene of the crime -- but will we tell it to the judge?

Ritual is the difference between a private word and a public one, between talking and testifying. When we profess our commitments here, in the presence of the faithful, they become more than words. They become signs of our covenant. Covenants, in Hebrew and Christian scripture at least, are pretty simple. They're personal. They're unequal. And, as all three readings tell us today, they are BLOODY!

Blood indeed is what keeps us alive as it courses through our veins bringing in oxygen and taking out carbon dioxide. A simple transfusion of a pint of blood can mean the difference between life and death. Infections carried in the bloodstream can be deadly. How our blood works appears so simple yet is very complex. Exchanging blood made people "brothers" or "sisters." Blessing with blood of sacrificial animals provided strength or purification. Covering oneself with the blood of an enemy was believed to make you stronger.

To say that we become the Body and Blood of Christ takes a leap of faith that many are not able to make. To be transformed into the mysterious source of life that being the Body and Blood of Christ in our world demands is much more than many want to take on. Yet as Christians we must embrace it as we consume the Body and as we bring our lips to the cup and pray "Amen."

Most early covenants were between kings and their subjects. Most biblical covenants were between God and a person in leadership (like Abraham, Moses and David) or the nation as a whole (conducted through God's prophet). In all of these sacred contracts, there was much to be gained for the weaker party if the promise was upheld, things like protection, God's favor, and the good life.

The strong one also gained: in taxes, power, or, in the case of God, the delight of walking with the beloved people in close companionship.

But the breaking of the covenant could lead to bloodshed: The subject could lose his or her life. So, obviously, could the king.

But how could God possibly suffer if we broke faith with the divine covenant? Can God's feelings be hurt? Can God lose anything in glory or dignity or sovereignty? Certainly, when we are unfaithful, God can "smite" us. The Bible has lots of stories of "smiting," and the Christian teaching on judgment reminds us that there are definite consequences to turning away from God's love.

Perhaps a more accurate way of understanding this is to recognize that, in turning from the source of life and love, we "smite" ourselves. Remember that scene in the movie, "Bruce Almighty" when Bruce shakes his fists to the sky and cries out to God, "Smite me, O Mighty Smiter!"

But until the revelation of Jesus, it was hard to imagine that God had anything to lose by entering into covenant with us. God had no flesh to write into the bargain. God had only the divine word to give. When the divine word became flesh, however, the story took a radically different turn. Suddenly, the covenant with creation became deeply personal for God. And yes, there was blood in it.

The truth is, God always had a very personal connection to creation, the kind of love that desires and aches and celebrates and mourns along with the beloved. But, like a lover who is disregarded or whose attempts at love are regularly rejected, God found the pull of sin in our sphere to be too overwhelming for us. God's love for us was veiled like the sun behind a cloud, and soon we stopped believing in it. So God chose to become as visible to us as we are to ourselves.

Saint John Vianney, the Curé of Ars, once came upon a workingman sitting before the tabernacle. The poor man certainly had other places to be and other pressing matters to attend to, so naturally the priest was curious as to why he lingered in church so long. "What are you doing?" Father John asked at last. The man simply glanced back to the tabernacle and said, "I look at Him. He looks at me." That's what we do during what we call Eucharistic Adoration. We look at Him. He looks at us.

For those who don't know, here are some 50 cent words for your "Church talk" dictionary:

Monstrance: from the Latin word *mostrare* -- to show off, to put on display. We have a special container for the priest's communion host which allows more people to see the host because of the size and height of the monstrance.

Luna: from the Latin word for moon. It's a glass and brass, see-through orb holding the priest's communion host. It looks like a full moon.

Exposition: from the Latin word *exposare* – to expose, to bring out. The priest brings out the Luna, places it inside the monstrance, and puts the monstrance on the altar.

Adoration: self-explanatory. We look at Him and He looks at us. We adore each other.

Benediction: from the Latin word *benedicere* – to bless. At the end of the period of adoration, hymns are sung. The priest or deacon lifts up the monstrance from the altar and blesses the people with it. After that, the Divine Praises are sung, and the Luna is put back inside the tabernacle. Some call this the Reposition or “placing back” of the Luna in the tabernacle.

We have private adoration with the Luna in the tabernacle on Monday afternoons. We have Exposition, Adoration and Benediction on the First Friday of every month from 12 Noon to 3 PM. First Friday is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and recalls His 3 hours suffering and dying on His Holy Cross.

When Jesus became one of us, humanity had the chance to look God in the eye and to see God looking back at us. When we contemplate the image of Jesus on the cross, in the Sacred Heart, or many other wonderful artistic portrayals, we are assisted in making that same connection. But Jesus left a more eloquent and vital testimony of his love behind for us. “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim Your death, O Lord, until You come again.” We take part in a covenant of God’s love for us that speaks its commitment again and again.

Through this great covenant, we encounter God in ritual, but the encounter doesn’t end here. We **incorporate** – we take into our own bodies -- God’s life and love and **become** that Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity for others.

How is what I do aimed at liturgy, especially the celebration of the Mass? How does what I do flow from liturgy? How can I avoid making liturgy merely another thing I do?

In what ways do I find myself renewed by the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist? What is my understanding of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? How do I enter into that sacrifice, and how does it open up into the rest of my life? How can I lead others into it?

The root of the word *liturgy* comes from Latin for “work of the people.” And what is work? *Work* has its roots in the Greek word for “activity.” Thus the liturgy – the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass -- is the activity of the people. It is something we are charged to do. We must take, eat, and remember Christ’s life. That’s half of the job. The other is take it from “in here” to “out there.” This is each Christian’s responsibility. As Christians there’s no getting out of this work, but those who’ve been at it for a while say the benefits are worth it. AMEN!