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This afternoon we continue our journey reading the signs of the times.

And, you know, Vatican II, the Second Vatican Council, spoke of the Holy Eucharist as the source and summit of our lives as Christians. And so this afternoon I'd like to talk about real presence, the mystery of the Eucharist.

You know, Fr. Rick has been giving us a lot of wonderful metaphors, the Golden Road, or custody of the heart as we make this journey into the Kingdom of God. And so this afternoon I'd like to continue that journey. But first maybe a kind of an image, if you could imagine.

It's the backyard, it's late afternoon, and a little girl and her baby brother are playing in a sandbox. By the way, neither of them had a nap today, so you get the picture. And at one point both of them want to play with the same small red toy truck, and hurt feelings and angry words give way to a tiny fistful of sand about to be hurled at a sibling.

When all of a sudden Daddy goes into the driveway after work, he hears the commotion in the backyard and gently puts down his attaché case and hurriedly starts moving towards the sandbox, but he's hopping on one foot. He's rolling up his pants and untying his shoes, removing his socks, and very gently he steps into the sandbox to the absolute glee and delight of his two little ones. And all the anger and all the fear is gone.

You know, Andrew Lloyd Webber, a famous, one of his musicals, has a song entitled Love Changes Everything. And it seems to me that as important as canon law is, or maybe our

catechisms, our creeds, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, as important as that is, basically we're changed or transformed by love. And so real presence is important, but we must know what it means.

Some years ago, Peter Steinfeld is from the National Catholic Reporter, did a survey, a kind of poll among American Catholics, and with the NCR he discovered that 63% of American Catholics believe the Eucharist is a symbolic reminder of Christ rather than the elements transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Now, as disconcerting as those statistics are, Bishop Robert Barron said it's a wake-up call for us Catholics, and I agree, but this afternoon I'm not going to talk about the two-thirds or the 63% of us, but rather that 37% that claim they do believe. Because sometimes I feel that our understanding of real presence is so narrow, we somehow miss the full and rich meaning of this mystery of real presence.

For example, the definition of presence has something to do with spatial nearness. If you're standing in an elevator with three or four other people, you're present to them. Or if you're looking into a restaurant and see a couple at dinner and they're both on their cell phones, they're present to each other, but in a limited way.

A friend of mine was telling me the experience of giving her baby, her little toddler, a bath. And you know what two-year-olds can be like, because she's pouring the warm water into his cupped hands, and he'll say, again, Mama, again! You know, kids can do this forever. And she said, all of a sudden, the sunshine was coming through the window, and I was so in love with my little boy, I was like in harmony with all of creation.

She was present not just to her toddler, but to the grandeur of creation. You see, presence in our understanding of Eucharist is not just a spatial nearness. It has to do with relationship.

We must interact, different from riding an elevator or being on our cell phone. Thus, the starting point of Christ's real presence is not so much bread and wine or even the words of consecration. It's the already existing relationship between Christ and a faith community at worship.

Yesterday, Father Rick shared with us the richness of that passage. When the disciples come to Jesus in the house and they say, your mother and your brothers are outside and they want to speak with you. And Jesus says, who are my mother and brothers? Those who hear the word of God and act upon it.

So Jesus oftentimes gives a whole new meaning, a different definition to some words for the word. When someone asks, who is my neighbor? He doesn't say a fellow Jew. He talks about a good Samaritan who were hated by the Jews.

And his definition of holiness is not the scribes and the Pharisees. In fact, he'll tell them at one point, tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom before you do. He takes a small child, places it in their midst and says, this is it. And unless you become like a child, you're never going to understand the kingdom of God. Jesus is always turning their world inside out and upside down. He gives a whole new meaning to words.

And the meaning oftentimes has to do with stretching boundaries. What the synodality keeps alluding to in Isaiah 52, stretch the poles of your tent, greater inclusion, greater

listening. And so diversity or equity or inclusion is not a political or militaristic kind of a weapon for the culture wars.

It's simple gospel narrative. I'm always intrigued by the four gospels and how they differ. They contradict one another at different places.

But Matthew doesn't call Mark a heretic. They're not into that divisive kind of polarizing rhetoric that we choose to embrace. For example, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we call them the synoptics because they have a common source, the Q source.

John is a little different. The fourth gospel is more developed. It comes later.

Matthew, Mark and Luke of the Last Supper have Jesus taking a hunk of bread and a cup of wine and identifying himself with these elements. John, in his narrative, paints a Last Supper with no bread or wine. It's in his gospel that we read about Jesus washing feet and that becomes real presence.

That's John's understanding of how we are present to Christ and Christ is present to us. And we'll see this time and time again. Jesus very often will use images that kind of shake us up, pull us out of our comfort zone.

Remember that story of what we call the disciples, they're fishermen, Andrew and Peter and the others, but they're out one night and they catch nothing. But the empty boat is really a metaphor for their empty lives. They've worked hard, they have nothing to show for it.

Jesus comes along and this carpenter invites them into the deeper water. It's not a fishing story. It's a story about spiritual growth, human development, because once in a while, usually the difficult times, God invites us to leave our comfort zone, leave the seashore and journey with Jesus as into the deeper water of trust and faith.

Now once they do, not one but two boats are full of fish to the point of sinking. That's so often how Jesus will describe God's love. Too many fish.

Or we read about in John chapter 2, the wedding feast at Cana. They run out of wine. And Jesus, of course, through his blessed mother, continues the celebration.

Six stone water jars. Now I'm half Polish and half Irish, but even for us Polacks, 300 gallons of wine is a lot of wine. Too much, too much.

I call it the too much God. He feeds a multitude and there's baskets left over. We heard this, the sower and the seed the other day, and the sower is just scattering these seeds almost indiscriminately.

He lavishes us with love. The prodigal son, where the boy wastes the family fortune on wine, women, and song, and the father just welcomes him. He's so happy to have him back.

Put a ring on his finger. Let's have a party. So what kind of a God do you pray to? Because our God is a God who lavishes us with love.

Nathan Mitchell was a theologian at Notre Dame University. He wrote a little book many years ago called Real Presence. And in it, there's one line that just jumped out at me.

Jesus is not so concerned about what's on the table, but who is at the table. You see, over the centuries, we've objectified real presence. We've limited it to the bread and wine.

But St. Paul tells us in the letter to the Corinthians, you are the body of Christ. St. Teresa of Avila says Christ has no hands but yours. In the time of St. Augustine, when the sacred host was shared with people, the Latin, of course, was used, corpus Christi, the body of Christ.

The response then was ameni bosum. Yes, I am. We don't limit God's presence to a flat wafer of bread.

We're in. And so I think what the Gospels keep pushing us towards is to realize that we're in. We are the body of Christ.

You ever notice how often Jesus invites his people to come to him? At the very beginning of the Bible, after Jesus is watching the fishermen washing their nets, and he says, come, follow me. And they abandoned Zebedee, their father. They abandoned their boats.

There's something so magnetic about this Jesus that they want more, and they follow him. And all he said was come. There are people like Zacchaeus, a little guy.

Fulton Sheen, you're much too young to remember Archbishop Sheen, but Fulton Sheen spoke of Zacchaeus, the very short, he was a crook. He exacted a certain amount of money from the Jewish people, his fellow Jews, for the oppressing government of Rome, but then he took more and pocketed it himself. That's why Jewish people hated tax collectors.

They were defrauding their own relatives, their own neighbors. But Fulton Sheen said his small stature wasn't his only shortcoming. You had to know Fulton Sheen.

But Jesus sees him, he's climbed a tree to get a better view, and he says, come, Zacchaeus, hurry down. I want to stay at your house.

Let the little children come, Jesus tells his disciples when they try to shoo them away, and unless you become like they, you'll never enter the kingdom.

Come to me, Matthew 11, all you who are weary and find life burdensome. Take my yoke upon your shoulders, learn from me. I'm gentle and humble of heart.

Here you'll find rest. Over and over again, Jesus pleads with people to come to him. He weeps over Jerusalem.

Oh, I've longed to gather you, he says, as a mother hen gathers her brood, but you wouldn't come. And he concludes his ministry by saying, go, baptize all in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That's a pattern for all of us.

We come to the Eucharist to be nourished, strengthened, challenged, and then we go. We experience in God's word and sacrament the profundity of his love, and then we're asked to share it. We're commanded to share it.

And if we don't go, it's like what Father Rick said about sins of omission. I don't think we understand real presence. It's not me and Jesus kind of a private spirituality.

It's an invitation into depth. That's why Pope Francis kept talking about todos, todos, todos. Everybody's invited.

The young and the old, the black and the white, the straight and the gay, we're all invited to hear God's word and be transformed by love. It was my favorite quotation of our founder, St. Paul of the Cross. I seek nothing else.

I long for nothing else save that all things to be transformed by God's love. Let me conclude with a very simple story. In our Chicago newspaper some time ago, there was a full-page ad for one of the marketing firms.

It was actually a photograph of an outdoor swimming pool. And one of those inflatable toys in the backyard for little ones, you know, draped over the side was a garden hose. The caption for the photograph said, shallow is good for three-year-olds.

But then in smaller text beneath the caption was a question, want to swim in the deep end? And obviously it was a ploy to use their marketing firm. But it got me thinking, you know, as I travel the country giving parish missions and retreats, I think a lot of us are just tired of the shallow end. We're tired of a culture that can promise nothing more than whoever dies with the most toys wins.

It's not working. No matter how much we cram into our closets or our calendars, we're not happy. And what we've learned is, it's the power of God's word that transform us.

I think people are just tired of self-absorption and self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement no matter what politicians tell us. I've experienced it here at the Shrine already. It's called self-sacrifice.

And the generosity of people like you that are building the Kingdom of God, you're transforming our culture by love. So thank you for that tremendous gift of real presence.

Amen.