

January 1

Slick Willie

For most of us, the name Willie Sutton does not ring any immediate alarms. He died back in 1980, so it is no surprise that he is not featured on current TV programs. Mr. Sutton, also known as Slick Willie, was a financial withdrawal specialist. For those of you who are not familiar with politically correct language, that means a bank robber. By whatever technical, ethical and professional standards that profession might happen to boast, Willie was a pretty good bank robber. He robbed over 200 banks, collecting over \$4 million. Though he toted a Thompson submachine gun, no one was ever injured in any of his bank robberies. An enterprising soul, he escaped from prison three different times. His bank robberies were masterpieces of disguise and deception.

He would probably be unknown today except for a quotation which is attributed to him. Supposedly, some reporter asked him why he robbed all those banks. His answer, according to legend, is “because that’s where the money is.” In his autobiography Willie specifically denies ever having said it, and speculates that some reporter on a deadline just made it up. Whether he said it or not, he should have. It’s the kind of thing somebody named Slick Willie would say.

Christ had somewhat of a similar response on occasion. If you will recall, his troubles with the Pharisees centered around two things:

- He claimed to be the son of God.
- He partied hearty with all of the sinners, lowlifes, drunkards and prostitutes he could find.

In dealing with the second accusation, Christ gave an explanation very similar to what Willie might have. He said (Luke 19:10) that he had come to seek and save the lost — and at the moment, the lost were partying with him. If you want to seek the sinners, you have to go to the party.

Perhaps this seems trivial to you. But it has a great importance. Christ did not come to make perfect those who are righteous. He came to seek and save the lost; that’s his mission statement. If you want to know whether or not someone is successful, you have to know what he was trying to do. That’s what He was trying to do.

He accomplished this at the Cross. He established communion for us so that we might remember this fact. That fact includes the idea that he came for the lost. Communion is not just for those who have lived a perfectly righteous life, whoever those people might be. Communion is for those of us who are sinners. When we take the cup and the loaf, we see the blood and body of Christ, sacrificed for us. He sacrificed himself for the least, and the lost. And that includes all of us.

So may I ask you: as you partake today, be grateful. He came for you, specifically. He did not ask you to become righteous before you could participate; he made you righteous by his sacrifice. He asks you to participate today to remember what He has done for you.

January 8

Lordship

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:22-24)

In this passage of Scripture, St. Paul is making the argument for the husband to be the head of the household. His argument is that it's just like Christ and the church. We often refer to the church as the bride of Christ, and Paul extends this argument to say that therefore — just as the church is in submission to Jesus Christ — women should be in submission to their husbands. One of the things I would point out to you is that Paul makes no real defense of this; he sees it as a simple example. I doubt that he had in mind that women would ever decide that submission to their husbands is an evil thing. But one of the many changes that the church has seen over the last century is the change in attitude toward marriage, women and sexuality. It is no great secret that many women in the church make it a point of pride to tell people that they are not in submission to their husband. We have nothing like the time needed to debate this in a simple communion meditation. I bring it to your attention because one of the side effects of this change is that we have rejected the principle of Lordship. We call him Lord; but ask yourself — do you mean it?

Indeed, the change in marriage alone shows how far we have gone from Christ's commands. Many women (and many men) see "living together" as a superior option. There is no senior partner; therefore there can be no permanent partnership. If they do get married, they do so with the knowledge that divorce is common. Where the church once considered it a sin, is now viewed more as a right. It's something to which we are entitled. Our relationship with Christ, then, is one where we view him as Savior — but not Lord. The oldest lie in the world: sin is enlightening.

The effect on communion may seem subtle to you, but it is very real. We accept him as Lord only when convenient. The truth, however, is that it's a package deal. If you call upon him to be your savior, you must take him as your Lord. He didn't give you any options in that. If you want salvation, Lordship comes with it. One of the times it seems convenient to us to fail to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ is when we face communion. We may know that we are to forgive others, and this is Christ's command. But we approach communion with the idea that we don't have to do that — at least not yet. Do you think Christ will overlook this? No, I don't think so either. Therefore, do what you should: forgive. No matter who it is, forgive. For without forgiving, there is no forgiveness. Do not allow communion to become an empty ritual; rather make it a time to commune with your Lord and acknowledge him as such.

January 15

Belonging

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

(Galatians 5:24)

In the midst of Paul's description of the fruits of the spirit in the fifth chapter of Galatians, he uses an interesting phrase: "those who belong to Christ Jesus." We seldom mention the fact that we "belong" to Jesus — though it is of eternal importance that we do. It's just not often expressed this way. Just how can we say this; just how can we say that we belong to Jesus? Of course, any such reasoning must be based upon the Scripture, but here are three things we might bring forward to show that we do indeed belong to Jesus Christ.

- We have made Christ first in our lives. Just to give you an example, I love my wife. How do I reconcile that with my love for Christ? It's very easy; the dominant love of my life is the love of Christ — and my Lord commands me to love my wife. They fit together very nicely. Things usually do when you put Christ first in your life.
- We show the fruits of the Spirit. All those things that Paul lists here are to be evidence in our lives that the Spirit dwells within us. If we needed to prove in court that we did indeed belong to Christ Jesus, we would bring these things as evidence.
- We praise and proclaim Christ. It's not a secret; we tell others as we can. When you put him first, you acknowledge that fact others. That is public evidence that you belong to him.

May I suggest to you, however, that as important as our claim to belong to him might be, much greater importance should be attached to his claim on us. How so?

- Our claim on him is based on evidence; his claim on us is based on power. Only he has the power over the grave.
- His claim on us is one of purchase — he bought us at the Cross with his own blood.
- His claim on us comes also from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit — the same spirit which raised Christ from the dead lives within us.

He can say "mine" of us just as a shepherd says "mine" about his own sheep. And it is his claim on us, his proclaiming that we belong to him, that really counts.

In communion we recognize his claim is based upon the Cross. We might ask what his claim upon us has to do with communion.

- He commands us to partake in communion so that he might keep us together with himself. We commune with him, remembering his sacrifice of blood and body.
- He commands us to communion so that we might remain together with each other, so that his people might be one.
- Ultimately, when he returns, he will turn all of this from a claim into ultimate reality. We shall be his forever.

Until then, take the bread and the cup in a solemn and worthy manner. Worthy, of one who belongs to Christ Jesus.

January 22

Calendar

Most of us have a calendar we keep. It's somewhat of a misnomer; because we often use the same book or software application to record such things as to-do lists and names and addresses as well as the appointments we wish to keep. If you have a smart phone, or a computer, or some other electronic device like that you probably keep it on that device. But the purpose is the same as your grandmother's little booklet that she kept in her purse: contacts, appointments and a to-do list.

Perhaps you never thought about it, but you don't actually learn anything from your calendar. Think about it: if there are names and addresses in your calendar, you put them in there. You may have loaded someone else's list or typed it in yourself. The same sort of thing happens with appointments; you don't learn from them, you write them down. You put actions on your two-do list yourself. In a sense you don't ever learn anything from your calendar; your calendar remind you of the things you should already know. As Samuel Johnson once said, "Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed." So the purpose of a calendar really is to make sure you don't forget something that's important.

Communion serves much the same purpose. Like my calendar, it reminds me.

- It reminds me of who Christ is. Like my address book, it tells me who Christ is. This is God in the flesh, the suffering Savior, the Lamb of God.
- It reminds me that I have appointments — in particular, appointments that I have no choice about keeping. It reminds me that I am going to die, for that is appointed to mankind. It also reminds me of the coming resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. Last in sequence but not in importance, it reminds me of the Day of Judgment — and therefore warns me to be ready.
- If I am alert, it will also remind me of things I need to do. Do I approach the throne of grace without having forgiven someone? I need to be forgiving as Christ is forgiving. I also need to commune with Him. I need to establish a prayer life that thanks him for what he has done for me. I need a prayer life that tells me where and when and how I should obey.

Someday this will end. We are told that we are to remember him in Communion "until he comes." So until then we take the cup and the bread to remind ourselves of the sacrifice which made Christ our Savior. Until he returns, we live in his grace. Just thought I'd remind you of that.

January 29

Lamb of God

In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

(Revelation 5:12)

Most Christians today find the concept of the “Lamb of God” to be rather eerie. It’s an example of how the Jewish system of sacrifices has become foreign to us. First announced by John the Baptist, this concept tells us that Christ became the atoning sacrifice for our sins – a role played by lambs in the Old Testament Law. In this passage, John the Apostle shows us that, being the Lamb of God, Christ is entitled to our worship. It’s broken down here into seven points. If he receives these things, it’s only because we display them to him.

- Power. Are you one of those people who has the authority to command others? How you do this is a reflection of the Christ within you.
- Wealth. We take this to mean both physical wealth, of the earthly type, and spiritual wealth. Take a look at your checkbook and see where the money’s going.
- Wisdom. Related to the fear of God, it carries with it the idea that you listen to the counsel of the Scriptures in making your decisions. It may also include seeking out the advice of one who is older and more experienced. Do you do this?
- Strength. This could mean something physical; are you available to help when somebody needs something moved? It could be something emotional; are you the rock they can depend on? And it could be something spiritual. We all value the efforts of a great prayer warrior.
- Honor. Do you honor Christ in your conduct and in your speech?
- Glory. The word has almost gone missing from the English language. But is Christ the one in your life to whom you ascribe greatness?
- Praise. Do you acknowledge his blessings in all things? This is more than just lifting your voice and song; it’s living a life that praises God.

At Communion you proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior. You tell the world that you are relying upon him to come through at the last trumpet, raise you from the dead in the forgiveness of sins known as grace. But you also proclaim him as Lord, the one entitled to give you orders by his very nature. Looking over these seven different things, it may be fruitful to you to ask where you fall short. Think on these things; then as you partake give glory to God because he is merciful to sinners — even to the point of becoming the Lamb of God.

February 5

What Right?

But to the wicked God says, “What right have you to tell of My statutes And to take My covenant in your mouth?

(Psalms 50:16)

If you listen long enough, you will eventually hear most Christians complain of a common enough phenomenon: people that they consider wicked piously wrap themselves in Christian thought or even Scripture quotation. The most common form of this is fairly simple: the wicked compare themselves to those who are believers, but just barely. Every church has its members who are not quite 100% with the program. By comparing themselves to the worst of believers, the wicked attempt to justify themselves. It makes very little sense; they tell us “you’re bad. I’m worse. Therefore I am okay.” I don’t know how the minimal Christian feels about this, but the more serious Christian is quite irritated by this nonsense.

We have a solution, of course. It is the basic lightning bolt principal. We simply ask God why doesn’t he put a lightning bolt right between the eyes of that wicked sinner? It would solve many problems if God were willing to do this for us. It would get rid of one of the wicked, and provide a marvelous example for the rest of them. But consider well what this means: it says that for every person God hits with a lightning bolt right between the eyes, it was impossible for that person to repent and receive salvation. And nothing is impossible with God. To hit them with a lightning bolt says they can’t be saved.

God has already provided a solution for the problem; he has already done something about it. He paid the price of that wicked man sins on the cross on the hill of Calvary. He gave us no list of exceptions, he paid the price for all who will receive him. More than that, he has commanded his church — that’s us — to offer this salvation as a free gift to every human being on the planet. He has already told us what to do with the wicked: bring them the gift of salvation, make them into disciples and turn the wicked into the saved.

One more thing he has asked us to do: he has asked us to remember. We are to remember not only his sacrifice but the price of that sacrifice. The son of God, incarnate in a body like our own, lived and then died a horrible death so that we might become the children of God. Every time you take communion, every time you lift the cup to your lips and take the bread in your mouth, you are remembering the price he paid. He paid the price for you — and also for the wicked, so that each and every one of us might become a child of God.

February 12

Moderation

It may come as a surprise to you, but there is no verse in Scripture that says, “moderation in all things.” There is reason for this, which we will get to shortly. But we understand the principal rather well. There are some things in life that you just have to take in moderation, otherwise they will dominate your life and turn you into someone who is really unpleasant. The most common phenomenon is worldly ambition; so many of us love to dig, claw and scratch our way to the next level in the hierarchy that we fail to recognize we are overdoing it. If you’re an entrepreneur, this might be replaced by greed — the idea that more money, no matter its price, is always a good thing. And for those of us who are more biological in our thought, there is always the idea that sex is the ultimate good thing. Of course, there are other things that can take up this point of being a moderate; you can be overly passionate about model railroading, knitting or collecting teapots. The one thing that’s characteristic of everything from sex to teapots is this: it’s easy for someone looking at you to see that you have a problem. It’s rather difficult for the person with the problem to see it. So we usually settle for just reciting the proverb.

The truth is, however, that the existence of moderation implies the existence of a dominating thought. Moderation, by its definition, is something which is between two extremes. One of those extremes is usually “nothing.” The other one is usually, “everything.” Thus the existence of moderation implies the existence of at least one or two extremes. And if the extremes don’t exist, it’s difficult to tell when you’re being moderate. For the Christian, the extreme is obvious: devotion to Christ. It is the hub in which all the other spokes of life must fit. Without that one dominating passion, the rest of life makes no sense. But with it: moderation becomes obvious and easy to practice. In short, moderation in one thing (Christ) is a bad idea; extreme devotion is a good one.

How did this come about? How is it that Christ has earned this place of extreme devotion? There are three rather obvious reasons:

- He is God. It’s his universe; he made it.
- More than that, he came down to us in the same form we live in — a human body. He devoted himself to us so that we might devote ourselves to him.
- At the end of that, he gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He sacrificed all, for all.

As you partake of communion this morning, may I ask you to remember three things about Him:

- Remember the glory he gave up to come to you.
- Remember the condescension he made to take on human form. He who is God became one of us.
- Remember also the sacrifice of his body and blood, which is symbolized in the bread and the cup.

Take, eat — and remember.

February 19

Three Passes

There are three places in Scripture where God “passes over” — that is, overlooks — the sins of his people.

- The first of these is in the Passover as outlined in the book of Exodus. You recall that the Israelites were to feast upon a lamb, then take some of its blood and painted on the lintels and the door posts. The angel of death would see this blood and pass over that house instead of killing all the firstborn inside.
- Later, the Israelites were instructed to construct what is now known as the Ark of the Covenant. I would draw your attention to its lid — also called the “Atonement Cover” or the “Mercy Seat.” Underneath that cover was the evidence of the sins of Israel. By constructing this box at God’s instruction, the Israelites gave God a picture not of their sins but of their holiness.
- The third instance, of course, is the salvation by grace which is offered in the New Testament.

In each of these instances God is following a particular pattern. First, we should observe that God is not blind. It is not that he can’t see the sins of the people; it is that he has interposed something else between the sins and his view. He sees something else. That something else stands between sin and God, and therefore satisfies his requirement for our righteousness. The blood of the Passover, the Atonement Cover and the Cross are what he sees. Notice, however, that God himself has prescribed these three things. He has not only prescribed them, he has prophesied them. He is the one that chooses the way that allows his people to be saved. We are not privileged to say to him that we are counting up cosmic brownie points of righteousness; he tells us how it is to be done.

Communion is given to us to help us to remember that he does not see our sin. He has placed the righteousness of Christ between us and his view of us. Therefore he sees the righteousness of Christ, not our sinful lives. This is something that God had planned from the beginning. He had his prophets tell us about it throughout the Old Testament and we see it fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is his method; it is his plan.

So, as you partake this morning, remember the price that was paid to cover up your sins. The bread, his body and the cup, his blood, are given so that you will remember that the body and blood of Christ stands between you and God’s view of your sin.

February 26

Two Beggars

Luke 18:9-14

In this little parable Jesus is talking to an audience of Pharisees. The word Pharisee has passed into the English language to mean someone who is a pious hypocrite. Let me point out some additional details to you:

- They were confident of their own righteousness. In their opinion, God owed them blessing, riches and power.
- Their religion was not one of faith, but of works. It was a matter of following the rules that most people couldn't. If they felt "holier than thou" it's because their actions were in fact holier than yours.
- They look down on those who did not keep their set of rules. Do not think this is a phenomenon of the first century only; we just express it differently now. "Poor Joe, I hear he's been beating his wife again. What a sad situation!"

The men who approach the temple in this parable have surprisingly similar petitions. Their first agenda item — both of them — is to tell God what kind of person they really are. The Pharisee compares himself to others, not to the law of God. He lists his righteous acts. But see his opening statement: "God, I thank you..." It's as if God was lucky to have him. If you happen to be someone whom God has blessed with material things you might prefer to open with "by the grace of God..."

By comparison, the tax collector simply identifies himself as a sinner. It needs to be said, and that's all that needs to be said about the subject. We may give him points for brevity. But both of these men have come for the same purpose: to beg. The Pharisee came to beg for praise; the tax collector came to beg for mercy. They both got what they came for.

I bring this to your attention because communion is a time of self-examination. If you're going to go before Almighty God, do so confessing rather than bragging. Remember, it's not about "poor Joe." It's about you. The comparison to poor Joe might feel more comfortable, but you should be comparing yourself to what God has commanded for you. So how do you do this? First, admit that you're a sinner. Having done that, seek the mercy of God. Do this while you acknowledge the source of the mercy of God: the Cross. Look upon the bread which is his body; see the cup which holds his blood. On this basis alone do you appeal to Almighty God. "Lord have mercy on me, the sinner."

Examine your self; did you come to this communion to tell God how wonderful you are, and how lucky he is to have a follower like you? Or did you come to this communion to seek the forgiveness of your sins, asking Almighty God for mercy. You have the example before you which tells you which of these two is likely to be most fruitful in your life.

March 5

Nature of God

Romans 3:21-26

Christian philosophers have long puzzled over how to express the nature of God. One of the consistent ideas given is that he is the sum of all perfections. That means that he is not just righteous; He is righteousness. He is not just loving; He is love. This nature of God runs up very quickly against the difficulties found in the Scriptures, to wit:

- God is a God of justice. He defends the widow and the orphan; he has no tolerance for sin and his actions are always just and right.
- God is love; he is a merciful God. It is his desire to be forgiving — but not without dealing with justice first.
- We, one at all, are sinners. How does the righteous and just God bring mercy to the sinners that he loves?

The solution to this problem is known to us; anyone who becomes a Christian understands what God has done.

- He came *in the flesh*. He could've descended an angelic form and left us with a few notes, but that would not fully meet God's requirements. So he descended to earth in the form of a baby, born like the rest of us and living the life of a poor child until he was grown.
- He specifically came to be the atonement — the sacrifice which would pay for our sins. Throughout the Old Testament God taught the people of Israel that the atonement sacrifice was necessary. He also taught them that the animal sacrifice must be unblemished, perfect as a representation of innocence.

It beggars the imagination to say this. This is not something human beings would dream up; we believe in the possible. The author of the universe has a much greater imagination.

More than that: his mercy did not require us to memorize and follow a complicated set of regulations; rather, he told us to love one another — just as he loves us. It is mind-boggling to think that he *gives* us salvation, asking only that we trust him. This was designed to produce not only obedient Christians but devoted ones. Obedience may be commanded; devotion has to be inspired.

Before you now is a simple ritual. It is designed to portray what Christ has done. The bread represents his body, crucified for us. The cup represents his blood, shed for us. He asked simply that you remember his sacrifice, his atonement, by doing this. It is a reminder of the greatest set of facts on this planet. Great love inspires great heights.

March 12

Continually

Acts 2:42

The word “continually” carries with it in the original Greek the idea that someone is constantly diligent in doing something. It’s not something we did once; it’s something we do all the time. Here, Luke tells us the four things that the early church did continually.

The Apostle’s Teaching

This seems pretty obvious to us; after all, it is the root idea of all of the other items on the list. It’s rather convenient in this instance that the apostles are still around, so of course the early church took advantage of that but it’s very much necessary to do this. If you don’t, then everyone invents his own doctrine and division in the church is inevitable. If you will see it, the Apostle’s Teaching is a source of unity in the church.

Fellowship

Humans are social creatures. If you want them to work together you need to establish a sense of fellowship. You cannot do this exclusively in an intellectual manner, for Christianity is not just an intellectual pursuit. It’s wonderful that you have C. S. Lewis; sometimes you also need fried chicken. But when you have good Christian fellowship, it is a source of unity in the church. You may not understand the fine points of doctrine, but if you shared a meal with someone you come closer to them.

Prayer

If doctrine is eternal, then prayer is immediate. We pray for one another on the basis of what our needs are at the moment. Indeed, Christians almost instinctively reach out to other Christians to ask for prayer at the moment of crisis. It’s a form of sharing the load. When you beseech Almighty God for the same thing your neighbor is asking, that is also a source of unity in the church.

Breaking Bread

You might wonder why communion is on this list. The first three are pretty obvious, but the reason for communion being so important comes from the very nature of human communication. This is symbolic communication, which is the highest form of communication of which we know. Communion tells us the central fact of Christianity: Christ died for sinners — he is our Atonement. Each and every one of us needs a Savior; he is the only one that can do the job. And yes, this too is a source of unity in the church.

As you partake, ask yourself if you have anything against your brother. If you do, resolve to resolve it. Ask yourself if there is any sin in your life. If there is, confess it to God, repent and ask his aid in getting rid of it. Then, with proper respect take the cup and break bread with your Christian brothers and sisters, united in the church.

March 19

God the Merciful

One cannot go through the Old Testament without noticing a primary characteristic of God: He is merciful. Long before the ritual sacrifices in the law of Moses, Abraham gave sacrifices to God appealing to his mercy. When the law was established the ancient Jew was given a way to seek the mercy and forgiveness of God. This uniformly involved animal sacrifices, which of course are forerunners of the sacrifice of Christ. But I would ask you to focus this morning on something different; it's not just a question of animal sacrifices but of a ritual. The details are laid out in Leviticus, but the central point here is forgiveness comes with a ritual from God. Why? Maybe it's because he wants us to remember his mercy, and not walk away and sin again.

Perhaps a bit more likely is the fact that these people had a sense that they needed mercy and forgiveness. By establishing these rituals, God assured them that they had such forgiveness and such mercy. Without a ceremony of some kind, human beings feel a little bit incomplete. For example, can you imagine a marriage which did not start with the wedding ceremony? It doesn't have to be an elaborate one — it could be the county clerk's version. But rituals like that mark the point where you go from unmarried to married. The rituals that Moses gave took the ancient Jew from sinner to forgiven.

Most of us know this and file it away under the heading of "somewhat interesting knowledge." But do recall that the primary duty of a Christian in his daily actions is the imitation of Christ. Indeed, the word "Christian" means "a little Christ." Christ is merciful; therefore he commands his disciples to be merciful. More than that, he tells his disciples that they will not be forgiven unless they forgive others. If you want mercy, you have to give it. In addition Christ is the mediator of mercy. He's the one that argues our case in front of God the Father. If the world, then, is to see us and find Christ in us, there must be an imitation of that mediator. We are the ambassadors of Christ.

The ultimate example of mercy is Christ on the Cross. It is his atonement sacrifice that brings us forgiveness. But we have not lost the need for ritual. We need to be reminded of that sacrifice, and we need to have an exact moment in time where we can say yes, God forgave me. Communion is a ritual to help us to remember again. It is not an empty ritual; it is not just "going through the motions." It is the time in which you examine yourself and then present yourself to God asking for his mercy. You do so based on the sacrifice of Christ. It is as if to say, by this blood and by this body I claim your promises to be faithful and just to forgive me. Know that you are forgiven; the moment is at hand.

March 26

Common Ground

Noah Webster, in his original dictionary, gave as the first of the definitions of communion these words:

1. Fellowship; intercourse between two persons or more; interchange of transactions, or offices; a state of giving and receiving; agreement; concord.

We might well then ask, how does Communion promote communion within the church? What is its role in tying us together as one church? I submit that the answer is found in the fact that to take communion is to proclaim certain beliefs. It is the union of those who believe these things, who also proclaim these things, that ties the church together. So what are these things we proclaim in communion?

- First, by taking communion you proclaim that you (and all the rest of us) are a sinner. If you are not a sinner, you do not need a Savior. But if you are a sinner, there is only one true hope. By taking communion publicly you proclaim the baseline fact that you are a sinner.
- Second, having proclaimed that you are a sinner you acknowledge that you are in need of a Savior. You cannot save yourself by any means. You not only proclaim that you are in need of a Savior; you proclaim that you have found Him. You are stating that you have taken Jesus, the Christ, as your Savior — and as your Lord.
- Third, you also proclaim the Lord's death. You are stating that he died on a Cross for the sins of humanity. You are stating that he is our atonement sacrifice, by his death at Calvary. It follows logically that if you proclaim the crucifixion, you proclaim the resurrection as well. This is the man who rose from the grave just like he said he would. He is the one who has conquered death, and in so doing offers eternal life.
- You do this, finally, until he comes again. That means you are proclaiming the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the great Judgment to come. You proclaim this not as a casual matter of fact, but something of eternal importance: you will live eternally with Christ.

These things are not proclaimed casually, nor are they of any triviality. Indeed, they are the most astounding facts that a human being can assert. In doing this you acknowledge the divide in humanity: there are those who are sinners saved by grace, and those who are going to Hell. There are those around us, often friends, who are too proud to consider themselves sinners. They therefore see no need for a Savior. If you mention the crucifixion, they find it rather distasteful. And their only response to the second coming is, "why isn't He here yet?" So our message is not particularly welcome in many minds.

That's the problem with proclaiming the truth; it's often unwelcome despite the fact that it really is Good News. Since this proclamation is so important, we should do it with a clean heart so that those who observe know that we really mean it. To prepare yourself for Communion, examine your heart. Is there anyone you need to forgive? Anyone who needs to forgive you? Before you proclaim the unity of the church in taking communion, forgive and be forgiven. Then you will be an honest witness to the facts which are proclaimed in Communion.

April 2

Wrong Woman

Luke 7:36-50

The story is a familiar one to us. We might look at it from a little bit different angle this morning, beginning with the Pharisee. He comes to this meeting with a certain set of preconceived ideas, particularly concerning what Jesus would know.

- Jesus will know what kind of a woman this is — a prostitute. He could probably tell this from her clothing, and certainly the fact that she let her hair down in public was another indicator.
- Jesus will know that she is a successful prostitute — she makes good money at it. That perfume is not cheap.
- Jesus will condemn the sin of prostitution — which he does when he says “go and sin no more.”

The one expectation the Pharisee has the Jesus does not meet is that he expects him to condemn the woman like he does. If you condemn prostitution, don't you therefore condemn the prostitutes? This presents Jesus with a small problem: how to convince Simon, the Pharisee, that Christ's way is the right way?

Jesus chooses to use the art of parable to explain it. Parables are simple, and easy to understand; so much so that Simon is not quite sure this isn't a trap. And it certainly convinces him that those who have been forgiven much will love much. But there is another lesson in here. We also understand that there is no one too sinful for God's grace.

This leads us to a question for the church: is the repentant sinner welcome at God's table? In thinking this through there are a few points we might want to consider:

- Taking communion is, at least symbolically, taking sides in the great struggle of our world. By taking communion you say that you belong to God, not to the world and its pride.
- Taking communion in an “unworthy manner” is something which the Scriptures solemnly warned us not to do.
- There exists no scrutiny in the Scriptures for Communion other than this: “let a man examine himself.” I know of no Scripture which requires the church to be a gatekeeper for Communion.

Who knows? Unknown to others, you might just be that repentant sinner. It could happen to any of us; which makes it fortunate that all repentant sinners are welcome at God's table.

April 9

Fruit of the Vine

Of all the things that church denominations argue about, communion is certainly one of the greatest. Take, for example, how the communion is to be served. Are we going to pass trays, and if so must the trays be handled by a deacon or an elder? Or perhaps were going to put up a little station in several places around the sanctuary and let people approach that way. But when you get there do you dunk the unleavened bread in the wine, or do you take a sip? Or perhaps your church is of the persuasion which has people come to the front and kneel at an altar rail there to be served communion? These methods by no means exhaust the possibilities. We also debate who can take communion with us. Some offer open communion to all Christians, others believe you have to be a member of that denomination, and still others believe you must be a member of that particular local church.

But perhaps the greatest debate of all concerns the subject of whether or not you serve grape juice or wine as the “fruit of the vine.” The grape juice folks will tell you that’s what the Bible requires, and besides which it prevents the drunks from smelling alcohol. The wine folks will tell you this is exactly what was used and has been in every Passover ever. The debate generally leaves the average member of the congregation well behind. What you will notice is that each and every one of these churches considers its fruit of the vine to be the one, only and authentic one.

Rather than step into this debate, I prefer to tell you a little story about one church that used neither. We had just moved into the new building which contained rooms for the preparation of communion. One of the doors was open when I walked by (a rare thing, they were instructed to keep them tightly closed) and I stepped in to take a look. I noticed that the liquid being poured into the little tiny cups looked a little funny for grape juice. Examining the bottle, I found that it was made of pear juice, apple juice and cranberry juice — that last to provide the necessary color. I would not have suspected it, but the lady making the preparations told me that her instructions were, “as long as it looks good” she was to use the cheapest available.

“As long as it looks good.” You can take that attitude right into communion. A somber look of spiritual prayer on your face at all the right moments will go a long way in this. If you are called to a time of self-examination, no one’s going to see what’s in your mind. As long as it looks good, who cares?

God cares. If you are going to partake of communion, do so honestly. It’s not a stage ritual, but something given by God’s command. If you going to partake, I suggest these things:

- Examine yourself.
- Confess.
- Repent.
- Rejoice, for you are forgiven.

If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right. Do it right.

April 16

Tools

A tool is known and defined by its purpose. For a long time I took a magazine known as *Woodworkers Journal*. One of its features was a monthly picture of a tool — one that wasn't obviously part of everybody's toolkit. The purpose of the feature was to have you guess what the tool was supposed to do. Of course, the only way you could possibly solve the problem was to look at the thing and see what it could do, and guess from there. You can easily see the parts it was made of, but every craftsman knows that a tool is not just the sum of its parts. You can't classify a hammer as being something made of wood and iron; it doesn't tell you enough about hammers. You have to introduce the topic of nails.

In a sense, communion can be considered a tool as well. It is not just the sum of its parts, as our Lord, the creator of the universe, declared the bread to be his body and the fruit of the vine to be his blood. Here we begin to see the sense of purpose. So what purposes can we see in it?

- This is something instituted by Christ with the apostles. It is therefore of surpassing importance to the church. So clearly, it is meant to be used by the church.
- It is designed to be shared. It is a tool for groups, so to speak. Therefore, it must be something designed to promote the unity of the church.
- It offers an opportunity for self judgment. This is explicitly included, and therefore we must conclude that this tool is designed to provoke self judgment. A man should examine himself.

But its major purpose for the individual Christian is to remember the death of his Lord and Savior. Communion, by design, portrays Christ death. You might ask how; it's fairly obvious. The original design of communion includes a cup, which is his blood and bread which is his body. They are separate elements of communion. When you separate blood from body, the result is death. It is certainly fairly common for people to bleed to death.

But this is no ordinary death; this is an atonement sacrifice. As portrayed in the Old Testament we see Christ become the Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world. When you take communion, you proclaim that death. But that's not all you proclaim.

- If you proclaim the death, you also proclaim the resurrection. The death of Christ would be a historical footnote were it not for the resurrection.
- You not only proclaim it, you tell the world that you're confident of it. You expect that he will return, in the flesh, to take his church home to him (the bride of Christ) and bring the final judgment to the world.

This all sounds rather serious and somewhat dismal. The return of Christ is not dismal. If you go back into the Old Testament you will find that most sacrifices ended with a feast. Christ makes this clear when he talks about the wedding supper of the Lamb. So one last thing you proclaim: Christ's return will be a time of rejoicing for those who love him.

April 23

Ninety-Nine

It is commonly known among youth ministers that the testimony of Christians, sitting around a campfire, goes in a particular order. The youth minister will ask for volunteers, and then select the one with the mildest story to start. It quickly becomes a game of “Can You Top This?” The first person to answer is just setting the bar for the rest. If your story doesn’t match up to his or hers, you remain silent. It’s kind of like somebody is telling you the story of how he piloted a three masted clipper ship through a hurricane, while you were in the process of rowing a rowboat around in the eye of the storm. Christ tells us there is more rejoicing for the one lost sheep than the 99 that are already saved. It’s natural to think that we just missed something. And every Christian does like to hear those kind of stories.

What if you are the one in the rowboat? One of those who is forgiven little, not forgiven much? Like many of us, you are perfectly willing to pray for the missionaries overseas; but it seems rather trivial to ask God to get you the right painting contractor for your house. Most of us are “rowboat Christians”; we need to remember that God sweats the small stuff too. Even if you don’t have a thrilling testimony — the author of this meditation has an extremely dull and boring one — you still count. It’s like football; there are 3 or 4 men who get all the glory, but without the linemen upfront they get nothing.

That’s why our Lord instructed all of his disciples to drink from the Lord’s Supper that night. That included Judas, by the way (Matthew 26:7). You probably noticed in communion that it’s not restricted to just the super-Christians. For indeed, we are told that we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Remember, we are saved not by what we did, or what we experienced — but by his work of sacrifice. To take communion is to remember this. Those who meaningfully partake of communion are “on the team.” We are all his children. Indeed, as some have said, “the ground is level at the foot of the Cross.”

So, as you partake today, remember that this is his body and his blood. Given for you as an atoning sacrifice, you don’t have to be super-Christian. You just need to be one of God’s children. Therefore, examine yourself carefully; repent as you must — and remember the sacrifice He has given you.

April 30

Omnipotent

“...the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” (Revelation 19:6)

Webster’s dictionary defines omnipotent as, “Almighty; possessing unlimited power; all powerful.” The Christian must remember, however, that omnipotent doesn’t really mean that God can do anything. If you are a graduate of kindergarten, you will recall the question, “can God make a rock so big he can’t lift it?” It reminds you that omnipotence has its limits. There is an old joke about this.

A Bible class teacher was examining her pupils after a series of lessons on God’s omnipotence. She asked, “Is there anything God cannot do?”

There was silence. Finally, one lad held up his hand. The teacher, disappointed that the lesson’s point had been missed, asked resignedly, “Well, just what is it that God cannot do?”

“Well,” replied the boy, “He can’t please everybody.”

It seems that omnipotence, and the power thereof, is limited when dealing with people who have a free will. This is particularly true when it comes to the problem of dealing with sin. You can certainly use power to punish people for their sins, and this is common enough in the Old Testament. You try to teach them to stop doing something. It’s when you come to the problem of getting them to positively do something you want them to do that you run into the limitation. For example, let’s suppose you have a teenage child with a very messy room. What do you do?

- The simplest procedure is to rent a skip loader and clean up the room yourself. Most parents would then tell you that’s not quite what they had in mind.
- You want the kid to clean it up? Then get a bullwhip and stand over the kid until it’s cleaned up.
- What you really wanted was for the kid to want to clean up his room and do it by himself. You want him to voluntarily do what you want done. That’s more difficult.

Power, you see, can create *opportunity* but not *obligation*. God’s method is not the use of force, but the attraction of love. If it can’t be done with power, this is an alternative. The supreme demonstration of this is Jesus on the Cross. Calvary is God’s love in action, throwing open his arms to the repentant sinner. Nothing is impossible to God — but force is not his only method. If you want to work on the souls of men, you must woo them, not press them.

The great reminder of God’s love for us at the Cross is communion. The bread is a picture of Christ’s body; the cup is a picture of his blood, shed for you. It is his way of wooing you back into his love, by grace. It is fitting, therefore, that you should partake of this in a worthy manner. Do not do this lightly, nor automatically. Rather, do it with purpose and with gratitude. Examine yourself, see if there is something he needs to hear in the way of repentance, and then partake.

May 7

Cheerfully Merciful

Romans 12:8

It sometimes surprises the Christian to find that mercy must be given cheerfully. The word used here in the Scriptures is the same one used when God commands a cheerful giver. More than that, it is the root of our English word “hilarious”. This seems extremely strange, until you remember that mercy is an act of extravagance. It is not a “good bargain.” For it is still true, if there is to be reconciliation, the one who does the reconciling is going to pay for it. You might as well recognize it for what it is and be extravagant at it.

Why does God command us to be cheerful givers of mercy? One reason is that those who are in need of mercy are often people who don't seem very likable or grateful. You have the whiners and the complainers (“poor me!”) There are also those who are in need of mercy because of their own foolishness — and they don't like their pride stepped on. Often enough, the need of mercy is caused by an addiction. The temptation is to tell them just to stop, even though we know this usually doesn't work. Indeed, when you have occasion to give mercy, you should rejoice. You could be on the receiving end, you know.

More than this, being a cheerful giver of mercy helps prevent the onset of cynicism. This is particularly true if you have to show mercy over and over again to the same person. Sometimes it's hard for us to think like God and be merciful. We might then keep in mind that the merciful will be shown mercy. God rewards the giver of mercy with a bounty of mercy.

We may consider the Father's way of giving us mercy, at the Cross.

- His mercy comes from his compassion, his love for us. It is given willingly not grudgingly.
- His mercy comes to us in kindness. We did not receive mercy from the pillar of fire but from the Savior who loves the little children.
- His mercy comes to us in humility. Christ emptied himself of the glories of heaven and came to earth as a man for the specific purpose of dying on the Cross.
- His mercy comes to us in gentleness. Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling.
- His mercy comes to us with his patience. He is not willing that any should be lost, but that all should be saved.

All of this is displayed for us at the Cross. In communion, we are to bring these things to our minds. We are to contemplate the sacrifice he made for us so that we might have mercy. The cup is His blood; the bread, His body. In this we are to remember him. Therefore, as you partake, do so in a worthy manner, recognizing the ultimate mercy of God.

May 14

Navigation

One of the more significant symbols in Christian art is the lighthouse. Curiously, the lighthouse itself taken alone is not much help for navigation. What else might you need?

- First and foremost, you're going to need a chart. You need a protractor to draw the angled line back from the lighthouse to the position of your ship — but first you're going to need a chart.
- As a matter of fact, one lighthouse is nice to have but it really helps to have two landmarks. Maybe the second one isn't a lighthouse, but it's gotta be something readily identifiable that's already marked on your chart.
- One thing you'll find out: the value of a lighthouse and a chart in a protractor and maybe another landmark is much greater on a dark and stormy night than a warm and sunny afternoon.

There are certain parallels here to Christian life facing communion.

- We take communion regularly, and it is often a chance for us to examine ourselves spiritually. But communion alone is not sufficient; you need that chart, the Scriptures. And if I may stretch the analogy just a bit, you need the protractor of prayer as well.
- You do get two points here; the body and the blood of Christ. They should cause you to think about your relationship to your Lord — what he has done for you.
- And as I'm sure you have found out, communion often means an awful lot more when you are facing the crises of life — death, sickness and the things that can happen in human relations.

There are some images here that we need to remember as we partake in communion.

- Like reading the chart, do you read the Scriptures regularly, using your Bible as a guide to your life? Do those words mean something?
- Do you have more than one landmark? Do you rely on more than one person to guide you in your Christian walk? Nobody's perfect; it's best to have more than one counselor.
- Have you been through the test with Christ, the dark and stormy nights of the soul when the world swirls around you and makes no sense?

If you have, then you know the worth of the navigational tools given to you to examine yourself, therefore, so that you might partake in a worthy manner. And if the lighthouses in your life are flashing warning, take heed.

May 21

Platinum

James 2:1 – 4

Have you ever wondered what it would be like if the church decided to give out membership points somewhat along the lines of airline frequent flyer clubs? Envision it this way: we have three levels, silver, gold, and platinum. You get points for attendance; you get points for service and of course you get points for offering.

- When the ordinary churchgoer achieves his silver status, he moves up from a hard pew to softly padded ones — and his kids, no matter how young, are taken to the nursery.
- When he moves up to gold status, he gets the privilege of sitting in a theater chair. He can bring a cup of coffee in, and we will allow his children even into the high school ministry.
- Finally, there would be the platinum club members. They would sit in luxurious armchairs at the very back of the proceedings, with their own TV screen showing what's going on the platform and full surround-sound to hear the choir and orchestra.

The preacher, of course, will use the platinum members as good examples to the rest of us. We might even go so far as to let you redeem your points for heavenly forgiveness. Don't laugh; it's been done before. So you might ask what's wrong with this scheme?

- A system like this is going to promote the sin of envy in the church. Let's face it; my tithes and offerings don't add up to 1/10 of those who are around me. I'm at a permanent handicap when it comes to getting points to get higher up in the system. And I'm envious of those who do it so easily.
- This sort of system promotes complaining to. How many points for how much offering? Well that's fair for me, but not for the rich guy — we need a sliding scale, right?
- It isn't long before this is going to destroy the sense of family in the church. We call each other brothers and sisters because we are the family of God. This system will look like the foster care house on the way to hell.

God has taught us by example in communion what he wants. Do you notice that everyone receives the same elements, all made of the same ingredients? Did you ever notice that those ingredients are relatively cheap? Have you ever even heard of gourmet unleavened bread? More than that, all of us are taught to examine ourselves and see that we eat in a worthy manner. The point about self examination is that it skips no one and it is very personal to each of us. All of us are sinners. That means we are in need of the Lord's atoning sacrifice — and indeed the Lord's Supper.

May 28

Purpose

First Corinthians 11:24-25

I once had the privilege of taking my three-year-old nephew, James, for a walk. His mother and I took him next door to the college campus, which we proceeded to walk across. An adult could do this in 10 to 15 minutes; with James, it took quite a bit more than an hour. James liked to have a walking stick, but was permitted only one at a time. So before exchanging one walking stick for another he had to examine them both quite carefully. This careful examination also applied to every insect along the way; and you can imagine how much time he spent on the various public artworks on display — especially the 12 foot high ice cream cone.

Now, if your purpose was to transport the three-year-old across the campus then a stroller would've been much more efficient. Our purpose was to get to know James a little better, and therefore we benefited from the way we did it. If you didn't know the purpose, you would see the walk as a waste of time. It was actually time well spent. It all depends upon the purpose of the walk.

Communion in many churches runs up against the same problem. Depending on how you see its purpose you come up with a different answer for how it should be done.

- If it's just something that "must be done", then we want to do it as quickly as possible to get onto the main point of the worship service, the pastor's sermon.
- If we're using it to get the congregation into a "more appropriate mood" for the sermon, it can be a little longer as long as it's a lot more somber.
- If we're just satisfying a tradition, then we make it look like last week. Until the revolution starts, of course.

Communion has its own purpose: the remembrance of the sacrifice of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. We are to remember Christ:

- We are to remember the Incarnation itself. Ponder the fact that the Lord of the universe was found in human form so that we might become like him.
- We are to remember that he is the Son of Man. He endured the trials of life just like we do; he knows how we feel and gave himself for us.
- He is the atoning sacrifice, the one who takes away the sin of the world.
- He is the one who came forth from the grave by the power of the Holy Spirit — and will someday call all his children out from the grave.

As you partake today, call these things to your remembrance. That is why he established the Lord's Supper.

June 4

Baby Food

John 6:53-58

Those who have never had a child might find this somewhat unusual. But it is a well-known fact of life that, out of every jar of baby food, the baby gets only about a third. The rest will be used for scientific and artistic investigation. You will begin to wonder how a child that small can get strained peas inside his shoes. He also gets them inside his eyebrows, his nose, his ears and for good measure his surroundings will be covered with this green substance labeled "strained peas." But if you want to feed the baby, these are the terms in which combat must be accepted.

When you look at something like this, should someone ask what that person is doing, you tell them that she is feeding the baby. Feeding the baby isn't just a straightforward sort of thing. It is the nature of communion to be one of those things that looks straightforward and simple, but carries a lot of meaning with it.

- Even if your beliefs include transubstantiation in a crude physical sense, there is also the symbolic side of communion. Those symbols mean something.
- Why is that? Because the creator of the universe, in particular the agent of all creation, said and we may quote, "this is my body." And then "this is my blood." If the one who defines existence by his very nature says "this is..." then who are we to argue?

So seriously does God take this simple ritual that he makes it a necessity. There is no place in Scripture which says that communion need be offered only once a year, or for that matter once a month. As far as we can tell, the apostles did it every week (and probably more often than that.) It is commanded, and with good reason:

- First and foremost, it is a communion with Christ. It is a time for you to bring your sins and your sorrows too, your triumphs and your tragedies to the foot of the cross and lay them there surrendering all to Him.
- In a curious sense, it is also a time for us to have communion with each other. At the very least we should recognize that we are not "solo Christians."

Communion is an essential piece in the resurrection life. By taking communion you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. Doing that confirms that you believe in the resurrection and the power of God. Likewise, you understand from those same scriptures that there will be suffering on the part of the Christian; the servant is not above His Master. If Christ suffered, how can we avoid it? Ultimately, out of this experience, Christ shall return and bring us all through the resurrection of the dead. Every time you take communion, you proclaim that fact.

It is most necessary, therefore, to take communion in a worthy manner. Sober your mind, cleanse your heart and appear before your Lord, asking his forgiveness for your sins, and his blessings on your repentance. Then go forth from this place to be salt and light to the world.

June 11

Trademark

It's one of those things that you recognize instantly. Even if there was no lettering on the bottle, the shape of the bottle tells you right away: it belongs to Coca-Cola. Even aeronautical engineers make reference to it when they tell you that the fuselage of a supersonic aircraft must have a Coke bottle shape. That bottle is one of many millions of trademarks. A trademark can be a slogan, can be a picture, can be almost anything as long as it serves the purposes of a trademark.

- It serves as a badge of origin — it tells you what company made this so you can tell the distinctive from the generic. It is some visible sign that let you know that this was really made by Coca-Cola, not somebody who just happens to have a bottling plant.
- It is exclusive. You know that nobody but Coca-Cola is going to use that shape of a bottle. It tells you where it came from and that it came from nowhere else.
- One thing it must be, however: it must be sufficiently distinct that it is clear to its customers where this product originated. A trademark which is confusing is no trademark at all.

In a very real sense, communion is the trademark of the church.

- As a badge of origin it tells you that the church originated in Christ. It is founded upon his sacrifice, and marked by this particular ceremony. Communion does not necessarily guarantee soundness of doctrine, but it does tell you that you are in church.
- It is exclusive. No other religion bases itself upon such a ceremony. Christianity sees its founding in the sacrifice of Christ. Communion, as such, would make no sense in any other religion. The ceremony itself tells you it came from Christ.
- It is distinctive, because it is so simple. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood. Everything else is just a detail. There is no requirement for silverplated communion trays; there is no requirement for a particular variety of wine. Just, simply, the bread and the cup.

It is important to recognize, though, that **we** are the church. So I might ask you:

- Do we, as the church, show where our values came from?
- Can the world see us as “exclusive” — meaning “one-of-a-kind.” The church is not to be an echo, but a voice.
- As a trademark must be a clear indicator of what it represents, we should be clear indicators that we represent Christ to the world. We are ambassadors of reconciliation and in this simple ritual we tell the world the price paid for that reconciliation.

Therefore, examine yourself to see that you are indeed a living trademark of Jesus Christ and his church. May the world see Christ in you.

June 18

Stones

The book of Daniel is often considered to be the key to prophecy in the Bible. One of the most enduring pictures that Daniel gives us, in Daniel 2:34-45, is that of the smiting stone. You will recall that the stone hits the statue on the feet, destroying it. The image is repeated not only in Daniel but also in Isaiah, Zechariah and the Psalms. We may note two things:

- The stone itself is generally interpreted to be Christ. The destruction of the kingdoms and the establishment of the everlasting kingdom is held to be the work of the Messiah.
- The kingdom that is established is, of course, the church. Please note that it is specifically prophesied that the church will last forever. Western civilization may crumble and decay (it certainly looks to be doing that right about now) but the church will last forever.

But see how the kingdom was established! Despite the violence of the imagery, the church was not established by force or power, but by the atonement of Christ. This was prophesied too.

So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.

(Zechariah 4:6)

Communion specifically commemorates this triumph of the Spirit. In it we see the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood. This reminds us of the greatest event in history; you can find nothing greater looking back. Because the church will last forever, you will find nothing greater looking forward until the return of Christ. When you take communion, you commemorate the eternal nature of the church and its Lord.

Given that, when you leave this place this morning, how should you behave? Peter extends the metaphor of the stone in first Peter 2:4-10. He tells us that, like Christ, we are the living stones of God's house. You and I are the church; we proclaim it in communion. So then, how should we behave?

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

(1 Peter 2:11-12)

There you have it: by taking communion you have proclaimed the kingdom of God. Therefore, go from this place and be the living stones of the kingdom.

June 25

Trinity

In the midst of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln gave a reception at the White House. One of the invited guests was Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Greeting her, Lincoln said, "Oh ho! So you're the little lady who started all this fuss." He was referring to the impact her novel had on the American people. It could almost be said, then, that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* caused the Civil War. But I would have you know that there are three possible meanings to the phrase, "the novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

- Most authors will tell you that they have a pretty clear idea of the organization, content and outline of the book they're going to write well before they put anything on paper. So this phrase could refer to the novel as it was in Harriet Beecher Stowe's head.
- Of course, you could also refer to a physical copy of the novel. I might say, "I have a first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."
- Lincoln, of course, used it in the sense that was different — he meant the impact it had on the American public.

May I point out to you that this Trinity is very close to the Trinity we meet in Scripture. The novelist has a "Father" idea; the printer turns it into an incarnation, a physical novel; and of course the public that reads it turns it into an idea to be spread. It's a nice picture of the divine Trinity.

Most important in this example is the fact that while there are three different meanings, ultimately there is only one novel with three manifestations. That oneness is essential to our understanding of God. Why is the oneness of God so important to communion, then? See how the unity of the Trinity is exemplified in the events commemorated by communion.

- God the Father, throughout the Old Testament, made promises to the people of Israel through his prophets that one day the Messiah would come, and that he would deal with the sins of the people. That happened on the day of the crucifixion.
- Jesus, the exact representation of the Father, physically demonstrated God's love for us in that act of "no greater love" — his sacrifice on the cross.
- The Holy Spirit carries this forward by transforming us into a new creation; we are to be the imitators of Christ.

We are in deep waters; but our Lord does not demand brilliant theology but asks us as we partake to remember the sacrifice which made it happen. That sacrifice is the great pivot of history. Looking at how God dealt with the human race before and after will show you this.

- God's love before the cross was expressed to one nation, one race in a hierarchical way — a priesthood. There was a high priest; regular priests and ordinary laymen. Now we are a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood. We are one.
- Before this time animal sacrifices represented what was coming. After the Cross no more sacrifices were needed.

- Before the cross the Holy Spirit came only upon particular people at particular places and particular times. After the cross the Holy Spirit indwells every Christian.

So as you partake this morning, remember. Remember that God intended this from the beginning; remember that Christ made atonement once and for all; remember that the Holy Spirit is within you. God's love — and there is no greater — has been shown to you; communion is given that you might remember it.

July 2

Joy

The Fourth of July in America holds a unique position in American hearts. It celebrates the Declaration of Independence, issued July 4, 1776. We celebrate:

- We tend to do it in large groups. Celebrations are seldom a solo event.
- We eat! A celebration often does have a feast attached.
- We celebrate the Fourth of July in our own unique way. It's not so much a remembrance as a party — a joyous party.

The holiday has its own music, written by John Philip Sousa and its own method — fireworks. It is a uniquely joyous celebration for Americans. Have you ever considered the parallels this has to the celebration of communion?

- We do it in large groups.
- It is a ceremonial meal that we eat.
- It has its own unique way of being celebrated.

But, is it joyous? It certainly doesn't seem so by the way most of us approach it. Perhaps you might consider it from our Lord's point of view:

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who **for the joy set before Him** endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:2)

(Emphasis added.) What joy could Jesus see in the shame of the cross? We might look at these items:

- After the cross he will return to the Father, and the glory he had before the incarnation.
- When the cross is through, the atonement was accomplished. Anyone who has known the joy of bringing someone to salvation through Christ can understand, in a small way, how joyous that must've been for him.
- Jesus looked past the struggle to the reward — the name above all names, being Prince and being Savior.

Likewise, we too should look beyond this life and see the joy that is coming. For those who put their trust in Christ, communion reminds them not only of the atonement but of the return of Christ in glory. The dead shall rise; the living will be transformed and we shall reign with him, as it is promised in the Scriptures. The joy ahead is far greater than the suffering behind.

July 9

Comic Books

The evils of the common comic book were well known to my mother. Like many another boy of 13 years of age, I read them under the covers with the aid of a flashlight. My mother's objection was rather straightforward; she said that comic books preyed upon the minds of 13-year-old boys who were not ready for what was said. It's all too easy at the age of 13 to pretend that you are Superman. The purpose of this, of course, was to sell comic books. The publishers knew what their audience wanted and gave it to them. Why? To make money, of course.

Another form of making money and comic books came at the end of each of the comics. There were a series of advertisements — do any of you remember the magic sea monkeys you could order by the mail? Another such advertisement came from an Italian bodybuilder by the name of Charles Atlas. The ad was always the same. The big bully came by and kicked sand in the face of the 90 pound weakling, and then walked off with his girl. (This doesn't really say very much for the girl.) But, help is at hand! For a few bucks you could order the Charles Atlas system for bodybuilding. A few weeks later you would be able to handle the bully quite well (remember "love tap"?)

This raises a question for us. If Charles Atlas and his method works so well, how is it that we are still loaded with 90 pound weaklings? It's pretty simple. The Charles Atlas method is performed in three steps:

- Buy the system.
- Start the system.
- Abandon the system.

The main reason for the last step is that there was usually no one around to encourage the 90 pound weakling to take the dull, boring steps of exercise. Anyone who has ever gone to a gym knows that without a little encouragement you quickly give it up. You usually look for another solution, but bodybuilding always seems to involve exercise.

The Christian life has some similarity to this. We need encouragement if we are to continue to practice Christianity, and become better at it. For this reason Christ has given us the church. You also need an expectation of success; if you don't see this getting better, you're likely to conclude that it doesn't work and therefore you should look for something else. That expectation of success is the return of Jesus Christ.

Most of all, however, we need a reminder. We need something that connects us with God on a regular basis. That reminder is communion. We are to remember the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which performed the atonement for our sins. By this example and reminder we are taught the Christian life. From this, then, go forth to the Christian life in your regular, daily affairs. As he forgave us, we should forgive others. We should go alongside them in their times of trouble. And the praise of God should always be on our lips. Go; you have been reminded of the core of the faith.

July 16

Curious Habit

Romans 4:17

It is a curious habit on the part of the Lord God Almighty: he says that things are when they clearly are not. It seems that this is somehow intrinsically related to his desire for us to have faith in him. He's asking if we're willing to believe something that does not appear to be immediately correct. It's his fondness for "future facts" that sometimes puzzles us.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Remember Gideon? The angel comes up to him and says, "Hail, Mighty Warrior!" Gideon's reply is rather lacking in confidence, something along the lines of if I'm a mighty warrior then why are we getting our rear ends kicked? You might also remember the ruler whose son was deathly ill. He approached Christ who simply dismissed him with the word that his son would be well. No handwaving, no fervent prayer, no anointing, just "go." Perhaps the greatest example is that of Abraham, who was approaching 100 years of age when he was told that he would become the father of many nations. His wife laughed; Abraham was probably looking into his Medicare manual to see if it covered pregnancy. Yet in each of these cases God knew what he was talking about; he was finding out whether or not we believed it.

Perhaps you hadn't noticed it, but one of those extreme examples is communion itself. You are told in explicit language that "this is my body" and "this is my blood." What could he possibly mean by that?

- If you are Roman Catholic, it means physical transubstantiation. This is not without its problems; at the Last Supper it would seem to be somewhat difficult to interpret that way. The Orthodox Catholic is told that transubstantiation happens just after it becomes impossible for him to see it.
- Most Protestant communions take this in the symbolic sense — and are not quite sure what it means. The creator of all things said "this is my body" so you can't just say he was kidding around. But the use of symbolism has declined so much now that we are often puzzled by just what he meant.
- One way to look at it is this: college students will remember that "you are what you eat" — which can be rather terrifying if you live in a dorm. But if your symbolic meal is Jesus Christ, it should at least imply that you are becoming like him.
- This is extremely important because the time is coming when we will be like him in his resurrection. At his return the influence of his body and blood will be seen in our new bodies.

What should we do about it, then? First, remember that in taking communion you are proclaiming the Lord's death. The body and blood he references were sacrificed for you. If you proclaim his death, you proclaim his resurrection. If you proclaim his resurrection you proclaim his return in glory — even so, Lord, come soon. Therefore, conform your self to the Holy Spirit's conviction so that you might become more like Christ. You are what you eat — embrace that. Prepare yourself for his soon returning — and the Day of Judgment. Repent what needs to be repented, seek forgiveness from those who should forgive you and ask for strength to "go, and sin no more."

July 23

Children

One of the things the Old Testament covers is the task of making sure that your children understand what Passover is, what it means and why they should honor it. First and foremost, they are to be told that it is a memorial of the good things God has done for the people of Israel. Anticipating that the children will come up and ask why we keep the Passover, the Jew was given these answers:

- You were to answer the children immediately, when they asked. It's a teachable moment and you were to use that moment to carry on the faith.
- You were to give them the primary answer that this is a sacrifice to the Lord. They were to be reminded of how the Lord killed the Egyptians and save the people of Israel. A child's favorite question is very often, "why?"

The other rules about Passover — and there were many — such as being required to be circumcised, were taught to the child later, in a formal setting.

But why did they teach the *children*? There are some things that have to be taught in childhood so that they might have time to grow in the child's mind and be effective when the child becomes an adult.

What were they taught?

- They were taught to put their confidence in God. They were to trust in the Lord with all their hearts, and this is best started when the child is young.
- They were not to disconnect themselves from their ancestors, but remember the works of God by which he established the people of Israel.
- In so doing, they were to learn to keep his commandments.

The same principles apply to teaching our children and grandchildren today.

- Teach them when they are curious; do not put them off. Answer their questions now.
- Teach them to trust in God; teach them that they should never forget God's work on Calvary; and then teach them to keep his commands.
- Then teach them to pass this knowledge on to their children and grandchildren.

This is not an easy thing to teach; indeed, it's rather difficult. The best way to teach it is by example. How's yours?

July 30

Icon

One of the more significant inventions in the computer business was the WIMP (Windows, Icons, Menus, Pull Downs) interface. This is the familiar interface you have today if you have a Windows PC or Macintosh. In particular, the use of an icon replaced the previous method of starting a computer program in which you had to know the exact file location and the correct spelling of the computer program name. The icon simply represented the program, and did so graphically — a picture.

That's where it got its name. The original word "icon" came from the Greek, and it means a picture. To this day the Orthodox churches paint and distribute icons — not the computer type, but pictures of Christ or the saints. Interestingly, they are not just pictures. A true icon must be something that causes the person looking at it to want to pray. In a sense, it invokes the power of the object pictured.

Taking both of them in common, you see that an icon:

- Stands for something else.
- Lets you access that something else, in some sense.
- And it is not a copy of the thing for which it stands; it is a picture of the thing for which it stands.

Communion can be thought of as an icon — for the wedding supper of the Lamb. You can see the connection when you remember that Christ told us to do this "until He comes." Communion therefore points forward to the return of Christ and of course the wedding supper of the Lamb. It is no secret that communion deeply touches (or should) every Christian who participates, for it is our access to the core of Christianity — the sacrifice of Christ. And like the icon, it is an accurate portrayal — but not yet a complete one. Not until the Lord returns will communion, the picture, be replaced with the wedding supper, the reality.

So, as you take communion, remember that you are invoking the idea of the atonement. You are saying to the world (and to yourself) that it is the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross that you are celebrating. In that way communion looks to the past, but you also invoke a view of the future — the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment. It may seem to you that this is a little bit hard to comprehend. This is normal, as the Scripture says today we see dimly, like in a clouded mirror, but in that day we shall see Him face to face. The picture, the icon, is before us. Let us look through it to see the reality: the atonement of Christ preceding the return and the Day of Judgment.

August 6

Death

Communion brings forth out of the human being some of the deepest emotions available. It calls up our sins to remind us; it calls up our Savior to remind us of his forgiveness. In this discussion there is a simple question: why is communion about the death of Christ, not the resurrection of Christ? The two, of course, are deeply connected. It is clear, however, that communion concerns itself with the death of Christ and has practically no impact with regard to the resurrection of Christ. Why did God arrange this that way? We might take a look at two parallels to find an answer.

- First, look at Passover. Of all the events of the Exodus that might have caused the celebration, God picks out the one which involves the death of the firstborn and tells the Israelites to remember this. It is the tenth and last plague, but more than that is the phrase “death of the firstborn.” God holds the firstborn of every flock and family to be his. To him, the most significant event would be the death of the firstborn, those who should be dedicated to him.
- Next, look at the American holidays of Veterans Day and Memorial Day. On Veterans Day we congratulate the veteran (even those of us who served sitting at a desk) but on Memorial Day we take a much more solemn approach. Veterans Day rates a parade; Memorial day is celebrated in a cemetery. Celebrating victory is a different thing than celebrating sacrifice.

Communion is not about the resurrection. You might ask why God didn't involve both events. One reason is the effect of the resurrection on evangelism. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Abraham tells the rich man that even if someone came back from the dead his brothers would not believe. Those to whom we speak may not believe the resurrection at first, but the crucifixion is altogether much more believable. Why? It's because we have no experience with resurrection. We will experience it someday, those of us who love the Lord, but right now we don't have any firsthand experience with it. Death, on the other hand, is something most of us know about personally. It touches us much more directly.

Indeed, there is a divine reason as well. Resurrection belongs to the Son of God — death to the Son of Man.

Communion is about the death of Christ because it portrays to us the price he paid for our salvation. In the pain he suffered in the death he endured he purchased our pardon.

- Even if an inquirer could not believe in the resurrection, he could see the “no greater love” in the death of Christ. If God the Son would do that, why is it so hard to believe that God the Father would raise him from the dead?
- It also reminds us that we will join him in death someday, unless he comes again before then. And if we join him in death, we will join him in his resurrection.

The victory party will start when he returns. In the meanwhile let us honor his sacrifice which bought our freedom from sin.

August 13

Accusation

Years have gone by, but the old man remembers it like it was yesterday. He was a young soldier who attended a nearby church. One day the pastor of that church encountered him and in the course of conversation mentioned that one of the elders in the church — by name — was having incest with his daughters.

Surprisingly, the accusations were very believable. After all, this particular bit of gossip came from the senior pastor of the church. What he was doing sharing it with the soldier is another question; but the pastor felt that the phrase “in confidence” covered the possibility of the gossip being repeated. It’s an accusation which is impossible to disprove, and is therefore all the more believable.

It brings to mind the fact that in such circumstances there is a strong temptation to be judgmental. Just hearing the accusation — it is rather juicy, isn’t it — is enough to cause judgment to rise in the mind. The soldier could never look at the man again with the same eyes. It was many years of experience before he could realize that this accusation was just that: accusation. But it was enough to provoke judgment.

Just how does God want the church to deal with something like this? Christ lays out one very basic principle in Luke 6:38-42. The first thing to do before you attempt to correct something like this is to make sure that you are coming in with clean hands. That may mean that you have to correct the fault in yourself. In the process you will need to ask God for forgiveness and for cleansing. In all things like this you must remember: judge the sin; reconcile the sinner.

It may surprise you, but Communion plays a large part in this. We are taught that we must discern the body and blood of Christ in the elements of communion (First Corinthians 11:29). We are to see his sacrifice in these things. To see the sacrifices to ask what was the sacrifice for. If you do this, certain things will come to mind:

- First, that there is such a thing as sin.
- Second, that each and every one of us are sinners.
- Third, that all being sinners means that all of us need grace.

So let me urge you this morning: if you are faced with the difficulty of correcting another sinner, seek forgiveness in this communion service this morning. Do this before attempting to reconcile another sinner. As Christ said, “Remove the plank from your own eye first.”

August 20

Blessing in Disguise

At the end of the Second World War the British people were given their first chance in ten years to elect a new parliament. The Prime Minister at the time was, of course, Winston Churchill. Churchill himself was quite popular with the British voters, but his Conservative party was not. They were held to be at fault for the lack of preparation for the war. As a result, the Conservatives lost and thus Churchill found himself out of office. As the results came in, his wife tried to console him with the thought, “Winston, it is a blessing in disguise.” He replied, “Madame, at the moment it is quite effectively disguised.”

Perhaps the greatest instance of “blessing in disguise” might be found on the evening of Good Friday. The apostles were in hiding, fearful for their lives, having just seen their leader crucified. They knew that if the authorities could find them they might follow very quickly. From that point of view, Good Friday was a total disaster. Yet we still call it “Good Friday” because it was a blessing in disguise. The blessing was revealed on Sunday morning — Easter Sunday. So immense was this blessing that it had to be almost leaked out. Instead of a choir of angels, Christ chose to reveal his resurrection first to those women who had come to his tomb to embalm his body.

Sometimes we don’t know a blessing when it’s staring us in the face. It may seem strange to you that Christ reacted to the crucifixion with joy, but here it is:

fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who **for the joy set before Him** endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

(Hebrews 12:2) (emphasis added)

The apostles saw disaster; Christ saw the joy to come. As Christians we are told to imitate this attitude. For example, as the apostle James put it,

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(James 1:2-4)

It’s hard to translate this into modern English and experience, but look at it this way: if you are suffering for Christ, you are on the team. Satan does not pay attention to Mr. Nobody. So it is that we are taught that we should “rejoice in the Lord always.” May I submit to you that one way to do that is in the taking of communion? What is in communion that we celebrate — isn’t that the word that we always use for communion? — Celebrate.

Communion celebrates victory. How so?

- It celebrates our victory over Satan (see Luke 10:18).
- It celebrates our victory over sin. Before Christ there was no known cure for sin.
- Perhaps most joyous of all, it celebrates our victory over death (see First Corinthians 15:54).

As you partake this morning of the body and blood of Christ, remember that your blessing, your victories, came from Christ's victory through his sacrifice on the cross.

August 27

Rock of Ages

Exodus 23:18-23

Christians of a certain age will recognize the hymn, *Rock of Ages*. In many churches today the song is essentially forbidden since it is not normally accompanied by drums, guitars and other modern instruments. Let us take a look at this old hymn.

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure.

The story of its writing, as told to me, is that Augustus Toplady, the author, was taking a walk in nature when a sudden rainstorm came on. He found a crack in the rock formations nearby which allowed him to shelter until the rain went on. This given the inspiration for the hymn. When he played it for one of his friends, the man told him, "God has given you a hymn that will never die." For many years this hymn was quite popular in many different denominations. Toplady extended a physical cleft into a niche large enough to contain all the sinners of the world.

Perhaps the author was influenced by the experience of Moses. Moses asks God to show him his glory. God replies that he will show him instead these four things:

- His goodness.
- His Name.
- His graciousness.
- His compassion.

But not his glory. When that passes by, Moses is covered by the hand of God so that he may not see it. God tells him that no one may see his glory and live. The passage is dark and rather mysterious and has given rise to a number of interpretations.

Communion, in a small sense, reflects this too. God wants to show you his glory, but you can't handle it — not yet. So he shows you his goodness and his compassion, his grace and the power of his Name. For in communion you are handling the body and blood of Christ, sacrificed on Calvary for your salvation. Until Christ returns, and we are transformed into what his children will be, we are to look instead at his body and blood as evidence of his grace and compassion. He took pity on us; by his power he forgave us. Thus is his goodness satisfied and sworn by his Name. So as you partake this morning remember that he has provided you a place in the rock where the wrath of God is kept at bay by the goodness and grace shown at the cross.

September 3

Shadows

One of the most dramatic fight scenes in movie history came in the 1940 movie, *Adventures of Robin Hood*. It was a difficult one to stage, primarily because Errol Flynn had very little practice in swordplay, despite the number of swashbuckling roles he had played. His opponent, Basil Rathbone, was an experienced fencer and generally considered an expert on stage swordfights. The fight lasts for several minutes, and it was essential that Flynn, who played the hero of the piece, had to look every bit as good as Rathbone, the villain. The fight choreographers came up with an unusual solution. Most of the fight is actually shown either in close-up shots of the face or in the shadows of the two combatants. The scene is still considered a classic today.

The entire scene depends upon the human ability to look at shadows and perceive what causes them. There are number of reasons a director would use shadows; it might be that the action is in a light too bright to be viewed by human eyes. You might not be able to look at that light directly, but the shadows would tell you what was going on. You know that there is more information available; your brain, however sort of “fills in the blanks.” It’s an excellent way to convey a general impression without giving specific details. You don’t have all the facts, but you do know what’s going on.

God takes a similar method in teaching us. Think about it: many of the things of God has to say to the human race are so deep and so profound that we are not yet able to comprehend them. So he uses methods which engage our entire thought and leave out some of the details that we should not yet know. Communion is an example of this technique.

Communion casts its shadows in many directions.

- It casts its shadow on the past, looking back to the price paid on Calvary by our Lord. It tells you how much it takes to atone for sin and satisfy the wrath of God.
- It looks forward to the return of our Lord and the general resurrection of the dead. It will be a day of joy for those who have accepted the grace of Jesus Christ. It will be a day of wrath for those who do not believe.

Today we see the shadow, and from it we know the reality. The light of God shines from behind the reality, showing us its shadow and the outline of things past, present and future. When you partake, do so in a worthy manner. You are handling the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if only in shadow.

September 10

Right Response

1st Chronicles 29:10-13

It is a rare thing to encounter a gray fox in the western United States. They are indeed beautiful creatures, noted for a long, full tail. My wife and I encountered one at a roadside park while on vacation. It was early in the evening which is apparently the best time of day to hunt for mice. We tried not to get too close and frighten the animal, but watched it from a distance.

As we were leaving the park, chatting about the fox, a couple came riding in on rather loud motorcycles. We stopped them, explained that there was a gray fox over there and invited them to take a look quietly. They immediately silenced their motorcycles and walked delicately over to where the fox was. They, like us, had the right response to seeing a rare and beautiful animal. It is natural for the human being to admire such a thing. It is also right for the human being to praise the Creator of such things. If you admire the works of the Lord, then you should be willing to give praise for the worker who gave them to you.

In the matter of praise we may take our example here from King David. At the end of his life he has provided the material that Solomon will need to build the temple. When it is clear that nothing now stands in the way, David praises God in these three ways.

- He praises God for his eternal nature — unchanging, and therefore constantly to be relied upon.
- He praises God for his perfection, his perfect greatness, power and glory.
- He praises God for his care for his people.

May I suggest to you that communion deserves this same kind of praise? It reflects God's nature as well as being his creation.

- By his eternal nature, we know that the offer of grace will not be withdrawn until the time set for it.
- By his perfection, we know that there are no hidden items in his grace, but rather all is displayed so that you might know the nature of grace.
- And it is a reflection of his eternal love, shown on the cross, and now symbolized in the bread and the vine of communion.

It is the right response of mankind to admire the work done at Calvary, to be grateful for it and to praise its architect as He rightly deserves. Communion is an act of praise for the God who came among us, and sacrificed himself for us. It is praise as well as remembrance.

September 17

Sharps

Older listeners will be quite familiar with the fact that the medical profession sometimes uses an injection of cortisone to help relieve the pain of various joints such as the knee. The needle that is used on the injection is quite long, though very thin. If you left one of those needles lying around somewhere you might find that it's small enough to ignore — until you sit on it. The medical profession is aware of this as well, and in accordance with standard procedures they attempt to dispose of the needle and the hypodermic so that they can cause no further trouble.

If you pay attention carefully you can see how they do this. In most medical examination rooms there is a red colored box hanging on the wall. It is referred to as a "Sharps container." There is a warning symbol on the outside that looks, somewhat stylistically, like an invasion of scimitars. It tells you of the dangerous materials inside. The manufacturer hopes you have sense enough not to go sticking your fingers into a box full of needles and razor blades.

One particular characteristic of this box is the fact that once you put something in it it requires a special key to unlock the box and get it back out again. In short, those hypodermic needles take a one-way trip to the Sharps box. It's not like throwing them in the wastebasket; this is hazardous waste material, and is treated as such.

That box is a picture of what many of us long for in life. Life brings us problems, pains and troubles — and along the way a fair share of guilt. All of us are sinners, all of us have that guilt, and the sane among us want to get rid of it. We not only want to get rid of it, we want to make sure it doesn't come back. We want that guilt to make a one-way trip. That trip is possible only through the grace of God. If you will, picture your sins as razors and needles. You want them to go into that Sharps box and never get back out.

Remember that guilt is not a feeling, but a fact. Modern psychiatry disagrees; a common question from psychiatrists is, "why do you feel guilty about that?" Their assumption is that guilt is a feeling and can be treated to go away. The Christian knows that guilt is a fact, and must be removed by the grace of God.

Communion is a reminder of that removal. It teaches us again, every time we partake, that the atonement has been made for our sins. That atonement is perfect by God's standards, and therefore unreachable by our efforts. Grace is freely offered; there is no other way we would ever receive it. Like the Sharps box, grace offers a one-way trip to guilt. As you partake this morning, remember that the bread remind you of the body broken for your guilt, your sins; and the cup remind you of the blood shed so that Christ might make atonement for you in accordance with the Law of God. Think on these things; when you partake, do so in a worthy manner.

September 24

Cover

Most of us have heard, many times, that we must approach communion in a “worthy manner.” For most of us, this starts with confession of sin and repentance. We have to get things right with the Lord. Often enough, this concept sometimes excludes thoughts of others; we look at it as being something we do individually. That includes, of course, the necessity of our forgiving others. Many of us have struggled through the process of forgiveness; often enough, we have to repeat it “7×70” as Christ told Peter. But we do so, and we think we’re okay in our conscience. But there is one nagging little thought that shows up when we arrive at communion.

That thought, of course, is the fellow who is taking communion next to us. We look at him and realize that, despite our forgiveness, he continues to offend us. He persists in doing those things that really bug you. Even worse he may be persisting in things which show his pride and no opportunity for you to show your humility. What can you do about this?

- You could take the high road on this. While communion is going on, you can say to yourself that you will be charitable and forgiving — and only later will you confront him. Of course, you will do this in a decent Christian manner, one on one. No one else need step into that argument. One might ask, however, whether or not you really have all the facts. It is even more deadly to ask whether or not you are speaking the truth in love.
- There is also the low road. You can just decide to let everyone else in the church know of just what a stinker this fellow is, and how kind and charitable you have been towards him. I will let you worry about where the limits of slander and gossip might lie.

The truth is, you are borrowing trouble. Paul puts it this way to the Romans:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

(Romans 14:4)

This is the Lord’s Table, not yours. He has burdened you with the duty of righteousness and forgiveness; he has not burdened you with another man’s sin. Render unto God the things that are God’s.

The truth is that our Lord desires to have fellowship *around* the table as well as *at* the table. What should you really be doing about the other fellow’s sin? You of course are expected to forgive. But in addition to that may I suggest to you Peter’s admonition to his followers.

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

(1 Peter 4:8)

if you cannot cure it, cover it with love. Your great love for your Christian brother and sister should be sufficient to keep harmony at the Lord’s Table. If you will consider how essential it is for the harmony of the church that you love one another, then you will know that communion is one of the most important times to let love cover a multitude of sins.

October 1

Teapots and Tommy Guns

Perhaps you have never met one, but there are people in this world who collect teapots. There is a surprisingly wide variety of teapots, not all of which would actually make a good cup of tea. But collectors of teapots have a number of things in common.

- They seek out the rare and beautiful among the teapots. Some of the rare ones are things that look like log cabins; the beautiful teapots often look to be elegant compositions of roses. The ordinary teapot usually doesn't find a place in the collection — though it may find a place in the sink.
- Teapots are carefully stored and cared for. They are not kept lying around in whatever odd corner, but if not on display are carefully boxed and kept in boxes to protect them.
- They inevitably become a frequent (and sometimes obnoxious) topic of conversation. When you spend that much time on teapots, they tend to occupy your conversation.

There are also people out there who collect Tommy guns. Firearm collectors share a number of things in common with teapot collectors. One of the things that is a little bit different is that collecting Tommy guns requires a federal license — an expensive federal license. In addition there are boatloads of regulations concerning what can and cannot be done with firearms collected under such license. But one thing the teapots in the Tommy guns have in common: they are usually on display. If you have a prize specimen, it is placed in a location where everyone can look at it. Some collectors even go to the point of building in special lighting to show off their collection. Real collectors display their collections.

Why do we display our collections? This is very much a part of human behavior. Whether it's teapots or Tommy guns, we display things which are a part of us. Those who collect Tommy guns are often military men, and some of the weapons will have personal connections. Teapot collectors tend to be those who appreciate beauty. We're showing off a part of us.

It's also perfectly normal for any collector to be completely enthusiastic about his collection. Often enough the obtaining of a rare specimen is something to brag about — and we do.

More than that, it makes us part of a special group. Nothing so pleases the Tommy gun collector as a group of firearms enthusiasts looking at his collection. I suspect the teapot owners feel the same way about teapots. It makes us part of a special group, and we are proud of that.

Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way, but in communion we display the body and blood of Christ. We say to one and all who see it that this is an important part of us. It is essential to our character that we recognize the sacrifice made for us on Calvary. We take the time and trouble to go to a specific place at a specific time to do this, which would tell anyone that we must really want to do it. But the biggest reason we do it is that it unites us as the church. We are like those collectors: we are enthused to be a part of a special group.

So, as you take communion today, consider that you are displaying to the world your love for Jesus Christ. It's something you want to talk about. It's something that makes you part of a special group — the church. And like our teapot collections it's something we want to share.

October 8

Cheerful Sinner

Luke 5:4 – 11

I suppose there are many different kinds of sinners, but let's take a look at three different kinds this morning.

- First, there is the legalist. He follows all the rules, including some of his own imagination. But have you ever noticed that the legalist always *knows* that he is holy? There is no doubt in his mind that he is a true man of God.
- Second, there's the hypocrite. He looks like a man follows all the rules but is not. Deep down inside, he knows that he's *not* holy.
- Then there is the subject of today's communion meditation: the cheerful sinner. He doesn't know if he is holy or not, and he doesn't think it's something he can really achieve. He does the good thing when he has the chance; he avoids the really serious sins and for the rest he acknowledges that he is a sinner and that Christ as Lord and Savior.

In this passage we see Peter as just such a cheerful sinner. This instance gives you an idea of the reaction the cheerful sinner makes to meeting the awesome God.

- At first, he does what he's told. He follows instructions — in this case expecting no better results than he had gotten on his own. He's not sure this is going to work, Lord, but he's willing to try.
- Then comes the dawn. His first reaction is to ask Christ to leave. He understands that no sinner can live in the presence of the holy God. It's his lake so he asks Christ to leave. Note, please, that Jesus pays absolutely no attention to this whatsoever. He has — if you'll pardon the expression — bigger fish in mind.
- Evidently Peter is distracted by the fact that Christ has called them to evangelism. But his reaction is that of a cheerful sinner: when called, he leaves everything and follows his Lord.

Communion, in a very real sense, is the place where we meet the holy God. We meeting in the Lord's supper, for our Lord said "this is my body." The sense of that is debated, but the Christ behind it is not. We certainly meditate during communion in our attitude of prayer and reverence; and if circumstances permit, in the contemplation we should have for this. If we really look this thing in the face, with true regard for the facts we find that we have met the awesome God.

- He is awesome because he went to a horrible death on the cross for you.
- He is awesome because he rose from the dead — and told us it would happen before hand.
- He is awesome — and will be visibly so — because he is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

Therefore, know that this is Christ you are meeting in communion. When you take and eat, do so in awe and reverence of the mighty God. As you do, do it in remembrance — and anticipation.

October 15

Forgiveness

Forgiveness. It is a common theme in the Bible, but much less a common theme in our lives. It might profit us to look at forgiveness before we partake of its supreme example.

Power

We don't normally think of forgiveness as having a certain power to it. It generally strikes our mind as something "nice to do"; but it is much more than that.

- When we grant forgiveness, we are following Christ's command. Experienced Christians know that the power of the Christian life is unleashed by obedience. Do it God's way the first time — it works.
- More than that, by our forgiving others Christ has guaranteed us that he will forgive us. So we unleashed the forgiveness of God by forgiving others.
- Personally, forgiveness is beneficial for us. Done correctly, it relieves us of the bitterness, anger and strife of a long-term feud.

Even more when Christ forgives us, we find that he tells us our sins are swept away; he remembers them no more. It gives us a fresh chance — and most of us need that fairly frequently. Greatest of all, his forgiveness is eternal, and thus has eternal consequences, good or bad. The power of forgiveness is there; we just have to release it. We release it by accepting it in our own lives (and, I hope, thanking God for it at the time) while we forgive others as well.

Price

There is one consistent theme to forgiveness: the one who wants reconciliation is the one who pays for it. If you wish to forgive, you are the reconciler. And you're going to pay for it. For when you forgive, you in effect bear the consequences of the sin of someone else. If they have offended you, you forgive but the consequences of that sin, and its impact on you, are still with you.

The great example of the price of forgiveness is Christ on the cross. For the sins of mankind he gave up his life — and not at all pleasantly. The nails, the blood, the wounds and the agony are the price of your forgiveness. Placed in perspective, you forgiving someone else will never rise to the price of Christ forgiving all of us.

Promise

Forgiveness is not just the matter of letting bygones be bygones. There is an effect on the one forgiven which can be quite striking. Christ tells us that he who is forgiven much, loves much. When the forgiveness is very expensive, or the sins very great, the love which results from reconciliation is also very great. Sometimes we are reluctant to forgive because of the greatness of the offense. God's promise to forgive us is contingent upon our willingness to forgive others. If you wish to receive his mercy, you must imitate his mercy. But unlike our forgiveness, God's forgiveness is eternal. We have no power over anything but the time we have; he has power over all time.

Communion is first and foremost a reminder of the price that was paid for our forgiveness. This was not an example of weakness being forced to forgive. Indeed, the power of God is shown to be very great by

his raising Christ from the dead. We can receive that power of forgiveness by accepting the promise of God; the promise of which communion is a reminder every time we take it.

October 22

Human Sacrifice

It is a consistent pattern among primitive human beings: there is a hierarchy of things which can be sacrificed to the gods. You can sacrifice grain; you can sacrifice wine, but the highest level of sacrifice — most pleasing to the gods — is a blood sacrifice. There seems to be some preference for a live blood sacrifice; the chicken squawking on the altar seems to amuse the gods, somehow. Of course, the highest level of blood sacrifice is human sacrifice. It seems that humans are the tastiest of morsels to the gods.

That, naturally, brings up the question of where you're going to get all those human sacrifices. The usual answer is we will start at the lowest level with captives from the last war. While these are less valuable than other kinds, they are usually abundant in the winning culture, and any deficiencies can be made up by the cruelty used in sacrificing them. But eventually you get to higher levels of human sacrifice; female virgins are a popular item. But as those usually don't belong in your own personal family, the most expensive item is one of your children. If you think it didn't happen, see Jeremiah 35:25. The kings of Israel took their infant children and threw them inside a hollow idol which was being heated. This was accompanied by loud music, so the parents wouldn't hear the screams of the children.

Into this world full of human sacrifices came the story of Isaac. At first it looked like Abraham was going to have to sacrifice Isaac like so many other children had been sacrificed. But Abraham was confident of God; "God will provide the sacrifice." By its very example it prohibited human sacrifice for the children of God. One reason for this, quite simply, is that contrary to what most people thought human sacrifice was not considered excessive. It was considered not good enough. The sacrifice that takes away the sins has to be perfect, and none of us are perfect. The only way there could ever be a perfect human sacrifice, a perfect propitiation for sin, was if God provided the sacrifice. He provided a ram for Abraham; he provided Jesus Christ for all of us.

Think of that: all the chickens ever sold to Colonel Sanders, all the cows and potatoes sold to McDonald's, all these things combined cannot possibly atone for the sins of mankind. The only effective sacrifice is Jesus on the Cross. That is the price God paid for your salvation. When you partake of this communion, you see symbolically the blood of Christ in the cup, the body of Christ in the bread. He asks that you do this to remember the sacrifice he made. Until he returns again, this will always be the most important event in human history. Please, examine yourself and take this communion in a worthy manner — not lightly, not bored but eternally grateful.

October 29

First Fruits

Proverbs 3:9-10

One of those principles in the Old Testament which puzzles some Christians is the principle of “first fruits.” We might note the following:

- First fruits must be unblemished — perfect.
- First fruits belong to God — and they go to the priests. The priests are uniquely the ones who are totally dependent on God for their living.
- First fruits are a test of faith. Just when you are the most hungry after the winter, you give away the first stuff to God — and worry about a hailstorm ruining the rest.

All this would be old and interesting stuff were it not for the statement that Christ is the first fruit of the resurrection of the dead. Do you see it?

- Christ is the only unblemished sacrifice fitting for our sins.
- It’s a sacrifice that is made to God — but is effective for us.
- The blessing of that sacrifice goes to the “royal priesthood” — those believers who are totally dependent upon God. Give us this day our daily bread.
- It’s also a test of faith; our resurrection hasn’t arrived yet.

Communion is a reminder of the sacrifice of Christ. The first fruits of the resurrection were presented on Easter Sunday morning. We are next. Communion is a reminder of that promise; when you take the cup and the bread you do so “until he comes again.” His return heralds our resurrection; communion is the reminder of the promise he made.

Meanwhile, we are to live that “totally dependent” life. We are to acknowledge him as the source of our every blessing and comfort. If you’re still in the mode of doing it yourself, depending upon your own intelligence and efforts without acknowledging God, may I suggest that you need to examine your self in the light of the Scriptures. You are his child; you need to act like it. Time for self-examination is provided so that you might take advantage of his forgiveness by your repentance. Examine yourself, then take the cup as a reminder of his blood and the bread as a symbol of his body — until he comes again.

November 5

Aliens

Mentioned the word “alien” and you get one of two definitions.

- It is frequently used in a discussion of those who cross our borders, whether they do so legally or not. An alien is someone living in the United States who is not a citizen of the United States. We presume their loyalty to lie towards another country.
- It is also used to describe extraterrestrial life forms — as in “space aliens.” I have it on good authority that these are the leading cause of cookies disappearing from the cookie jar.

It’s the same word, “alien”, but the meanings seem quite different. What they have in common is this: both the immigrant and the extraterrestrial belong someplace else. We can safely assume that their loyalties are towards wherever that “somewhere else” might happen to be.

Christian should be able to understand this. As the old hymn put it, “This World Is Not My Home.” We are on our way to heaven, and that makes us pilgrims in this world. As the Scripture tells us, we are to be “in the world, not of the world.” Heaven is where we belong; the kingdom of God should claim our first loyalties. That makes us aliens in this world.

Of course, in any discussion of aliens you need some way of deciding who is the real alien and who is not. You need some sort of credential to define your aliens. Some years ago, the Los Angeles Times ran a picture of people protesting a state constitutional amendment concerning aliens. Thousands of people were shown with little Mexican flags in their hands. It had exactly the opposite effect the Times wanted. The issue came up in another amendment some years later; they ran an almost identical photograph, this time with American flags in evidence. If you’re waving the Mexican flag, we can assume you’re loyal to Mexico. I’m not exactly certain what the equivalent would be for space aliens.

Communion, in a way, is our set of credentials to be identified as a Christian. No one but a Christian would want to do this; it only makes sense for the Christian. The bread and the cup are identified as the body and the blood of Christ. Indeed, we are told that by taking communion we proclaim the body and blood of Christ until he comes again (1st Corinthians 11:26).

So let me ask you: when you do this, are you portraying your real loyalty, or just going through the motions on Sunday morning? Do you see in communion the sacrifice that your Lord made so that you might be a pilgrim on the way to heaven? Those are serious thoughts; so it is we are given time to examine ourselves that we might not take this lightly. Think before you partake; then take the body and blood in all seriousness.

November 12

Who Do You Say He Is?

He was an old friend, though a priest of the Old Holy Catholic Church. We used to do our prison ministry together, before he died. He once made a rather profound statement: “there is really only one question: Who do you say He is?” In eternal terms, it really is the only question that matters. If you say he is the son of God and follow him, yours is eternal life. If not, not. You might think that we rarely get the chance to actually make such a proclamation. This is not so; we make such a proclamation every time we take communion. Rituals have meaning; to partake in a ritual means that you accept and proclaim that meaning. So we might ask, then, what do we say when we partake of communion?

First, we proclaim that he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. This is not just because he said so, but for a whole history of reasons.

- He is the atoning sacrifice in accordance with the Old Testament law. He came to be with us underneath that law, in the land full of people who should’ve understood who he really was.
- He is the atoning sacrifice in accordance with the Old Testament prophecy. Over and over again the Old Testament tells us what the Messiah would be like. There are no other real contenders for the title.
- He is the atoning sacrifice because that is exactly what he said about himself.

Second, we proclaim that he is Lord and Savior.

- He is Savior because we have accepted him as our atoning sacrifice. In the process of taking communion we portray that fact.
- He is Lord because he tells us this is his body and blood. In some sense we take him into our own bodies at this ceremonial meal. This means that we will become like him; he is the example we imitate. He is not Lord by fear and terror, but by admiration and wisdom.
- He is Lord because he told us he is the only way. “I am the way, the truth and the life” he said. We proclaim to the world that he is the only way every time we take communion.

Finally, every time we take communion we tell the world that he is coming again. The prophecies are not yet fulfilled entirely and we know about his return.

- He is returning in power. The world into which he came the first time treated him as a common criminal and executed him on a cross. This time, things are going to be very different.
- He is returning to judge the living and the dead. He is Lord; he is also justice — and will see to it that justice is triumphant. If you think Adolf Hitler didn’t get everything he deserved, just wait.
- He is returning to take his followers home with him. Paradise awaits us, as he promised.

Take, then and eat — and do so knowing what you are telling the world with every bite.

November 19

Legos

Many a grandparent can tell you the pain of walking barefoot over a floor which contains Legos. They never seem to get put back in the box, but the kids just love to play with them. Man is a creating creature, and our little ones share that.

One of the things the children like to build from Legos is a bridge. They quickly find out that stringing Legos together is not something that will stay together in a bridge. You have to have some support for it. So, like their adult engineering friends, they build a tower on each side and put the collection of Legos that make the bridge so that they are inside those towers to start with. Two towers and one platform make one bridge.

May I suggest to you that communion can be viewed as a bridge between God and man. We need two towers and a platform between. The tower that is closest to mankind, I suggest, is that which is symbolized by the bread of communion. Bread is a very common element, but its significance in this case comes from Christ telling us that "this is my body." The earthly side of our bridge is the side which has bodies on it. Bread anchors the bridge on the earthly side.

The cup on the other hand belongs on the heavenly side. We know that Christ told us that his blood established the new covenant. What is a covenant? A covenant is something that God creates as his relationship with mankind. It is not a contract; it is not negotiable. Therefore, based on this idea of covenant, we can say that the cup stands for the heavenly side. Indeed, in the Old Testament the Jews were taught that life is in the blood of the sacrifice — and this bridge leads to eternal life.

The platform in between can only be Jesus himself. He is the only one who touches both sides; the only one who is at home on this planet and in heaven. Note, please, that he is the only platform; as he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me." Jesus is not one of many ways to heaven; he is the only way. So our bridge is complete; bread for the earthly side, the cup for the heavenly side and Jesus the only way in between.

So, as you partake this morning, do so in the full recognition that you are claiming the blood and body of Jesus Christ as your bridge to heaven. The reason his grace is extended to you is the blood of Christ shed on the cross. This is serious, and we should take it in a serious way. Examine yourself and see if you are entirely what Christ wants you to be. If not, ask forgiveness and proclaim your repentance — and then take, and eat.

November 26

Writing

Professional writers will tell you that in writing a story it is most important to have good character development. For instance:

- Characters must have a back story. You don't want to character just suddenly appearing from nowhere and disappearing the same way.
- Character is best developed in showing its relationships with other characters.
- They must have a definite place in the plot, no matter how minor.

Moses, the author of Genesis, must've had some real trouble with Melchizedek. This is a very important character, but he comes out of nowhere — no back story. In fact, that turns out to be an essential part of his value to the writing — he has no back story which means he has no genealogy. In Hebrews the writer tells us that this means he is, like Christ, eternal. One incident, with no character developing details, defines the character. He then disappears. About 500 years later David mentions him in the Psalms. About a thousand years after that the author of Hebrews explains him. The only character development Melchizedek gets is what professional authors call “markers” — little details like his titles. He is King of peace; he is king of righteousness; he is a priest of the Most High God.

He is considered a “type” of Christ. We can also see within him the blessings of communion. For example:

- He is a symbol of righteousness. In communion we see the body and blood of Christ giving us the righteousness of Christ in the eyes of God the Father. We, the sinners, attain that righteousness by the gift of God — grace.
- He is a symbol of peace. In the sacrifice on the cross, Christ restored peace between God and his human children. We are at peace, therefore, with God — and we hope also with our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- We see this most clearly in what Melchizedek brings with him: bread and wine. Considering that Abraham (then known as Abram) had 318 warriors with him, Melchizedek probably brought more than a small bottle of wine. But long before Passover the priest of the Most High God brings forward bread and wine as the blessing of God.

As you partake of communion this morning, remember that that the sacrifice of Christ caused righteousness to be accounted to us. We have peace with God and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Melchizedek shows us that this was God's plan from the beginning. Communion is something eternal. Therefore, examine yourself seeking the righteousness and peace of God. Then partake with gratitude for your Lord.

December 3

Bach

Most of today's young people have probably never heard the name Johann Sebastian Bach. He was a music composer about 350 years ago. Classical musicians rank him in the first tier of composers ever. Douglas Adams, the fellow who wrote *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* once said that Beethoven taught us how to be Beethoven; Mozart taught us how to be everybody else and Bach taught us how to be the universe.

Bach was a devout Lutheran, which showed in his selection of material. One thing which may strike you is curious was that every piece of music he ever wrote had the annotation at the bottom, "Sola Deo Gloria." It's Latin for "to God alone be the glory." He wanted everyone to know that he wrote this for the glory of God. The correct feeling seems to be that he got the credit, but God indeed gets the glory. You might think it strange that music could be written to the glory of God, but the principle is an old one. St. Paul taught it this way:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

(1 Corinthians 10:31)

We have an apostle's word for it: whatever you do, it can be done for the glory of God. So we might ask how we bring glory to God in Communion. One author said that the glory which is to be given to God is a compound of four things: dignity, honor, praise and worship. The worship portion of this is fairly obvious; we do it in a worship service. Dignity, one would hope, would be a strong point of communion. While reverence has greatly declined in our time, it's still a little bit difficult to imagine hip-hop dancers cavorting about carrying communion trays.

The two most prominent portions of the glory of God in communion our praise and honor. Praise concerns itself with things someone has done. We praise Christ in communion for the sacrifice he made on the cross. By that sacrifice, we have God's grace and forgiveness, justification in his sight and eternal life. That is a mouthful for praise. Honor consists in noting the character of the person you are honoring. Many have sacrifice themselves for various noble causes, including a large number of Christian martyrs. Christ is the only one who has ever come back from the grave. This is because he is both God and man, and was resurrected bodily by the Holy Spirit. This is why Christ deserves the glory in communion.

So what should we do about this? As you partake this morning, do so with dignity. Don't treat it as something routine, or is something to be hurried through to get on with the rest of the service. As you do, remember Christ's sacrifice in your mind. Let this be a spur to you to spread that as you leave; the world needs to hear of this. Then, let everyone know that you do this in honor of Christ. He alone is worthy to receive this kind of honor and praise, for he is the one who rose from the grave.

December 10

Draw You A Picture

Have you ever heard somebody tell you, “let me draw you a picture.” They’re not offering to send something to you by Leonardo da Vinci; it’s more likely to include stick figures and happy faces. The technique, however, does have its usefulness. In fact God seems to be rather fond of drawing us a picture. For example:

- Moses and the Tabernacle is a great instance of this. God provided Moses with a detailed set of plans in the form of a picture, or as the modern versions put it, a template.
- Sometimes God does this in the form of living human beings who represent something. He was fond of doing this in the Old Testament with the prophets (see Hosea, for example.) Good example of this is in the Transfiguration. It teaches us that Christ has supremacy over both life and death; life, represented by Elijah who never died and death represented by Moses.
- Sometimes he uses us as his picture. In marriage, he has drawn on the living canvas of our bodies a picture of Christ’s love for the church.

Why do you suppose God does this? Well, there are a few simple reasons which he might use. For example:

- Some of us are visual learners. You can tell us what to do and we just don’t get it, but if you show us what to do we get it the first time. Do you know anybody like that?
- There is an aspect here too of simplicity. If you want people to remember things well, keep them simple. Pictures are simple.
- There is also this: if it’s in the picture, it’s important. So if you want to know what the small stuff is in the big stuff is, look at the picture.

Communion is just such a picture. It is a marvelous subject for art, as Leonardo da Vinci showed us. You can take this to the top of the art world as a topic. But for most of us, it is a simple picture with deep meaning. In the time of Christ, the wine in the cup would almost certainly have been deep red. You can imagine the disciples looking into the cup and seeing with the mind’s eye the blood of Christ. Bread, too, resembles the body. A loaf of bread baked in an oven often comes out with the same sort of color that people have. So it is no wonder that the body and blood of Christ are seen so clearly in the bread and wine of communion.

As St. Augustine once put it, “Feed on me, for I am the food of a grown man.” In a simple picture you take in the body and blood of Christ and thus become more like him. The old saying, “You are what you eat” seems to be true spiritually as well as physically. Remember, then, the meaning of this picture and the price Christ paid to give it to you.

December 17

Bread of Life

John 21:13

Most of the older Christians in the church today will remember a communion hymn, “Break Thou the Bread of Life.” The hymn itself is too patient for these rock ‘n’ roll days but worth examining:

Break Thou the Bread of Life,
Dear Lord, to me,
As Thou didst break the loaves
Beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page
I seek Thee, Lord;
My spirit pants for Thee,
O Living Word.

From the language you can tell that this hymn comes from the era of the King James Version of the Bible. Its author, one Mary Lathbury, was actually better known as a commercial illustrator than she was for writing hymns. She wrote less than a dozen. She was part of the Chautauqua movement, and the leader of that movement asked her to write a hymn specifically. What may surprise you is that the hymn was not designed to be a communion hymn, but rather a hymn to start a Bible study. If you study it carefully you can see this; this hymn has Christ breaking the bread “beside the sea.” The Last Supper of course was in Jerusalem. The hymn actually refers to the time when Christ met his disciples by the Sea of Galilee and offered them fish and bread to eat.

In that context, then, I would have you note that this is a meal provided by Jesus for his disciples. There are certain characteristics of this that I would point out:

- Jesus provides the fish and the bread. He was anticipating them and had the meal ready — always a gracious host. The character of Jesus is herein proclaimed.
- Notice also that Jesus approaches the disciples and asks them to dine. He takes the initiative to call his disciples to him. It’s clear from the passage they would hang back, knowing who he was but still afraid to approach him.
- The 13th verse is usually skipped over in most Bible studies, but it should not be so. This is a preliminary to the restoration of Peter. In this we see the concept that sometimes disputes and failures can be resolved more easily over a breakfast table than over a negotiating table.

Communion shows us parallels to this.

- Jesus provides the communion feast to us. He tells us that this is his body; this is his blood. He is the one who has brought the foodstuffs of the meal. And please note: the gracious host asks for no payment.

- His church — his body — approaches you with this. This is not a matter of you qualifying to take communion by your good works but rather the church coming to you and offering the forgiveness of God.
- Communion is a preliminary to the restoration of fellowship with those who have sinned. We are taught to examine ourselves and repent, then accept his forgiveness. It is as if Christ wanted us to work our grievances out over the breakfast table.

The hymn we mentioned is slow and stately, deep and profound. There is a sense of dignity to this hymn. Consider then that the communion you are about to partake has that same dignity. Examine yourself; repent as needed; and receive the body and blood of Christ.

December 24

Purpose of Christmas

Christmas is, for most of us, a cheerful time of year. God as a little baby in the manger doesn't seem to threaten anyone, nor demand of them anything much more than a smile. It's a wonderful time, and it seems to leave no lasting impact other than a large surplus of used wrapping paper. But the truth is different: Christmas, the incarnation of Christ, was part of God's plan and not an incidental part. CS Lewis called it "the supreme miracle" — from the miracle of the incarnation all other Christian miracles depend. This is the birth promised throughout the Old Testament, by prophecy and by song. It is not an afterthought on the part of God. Indeed, the birth of Christ was a virgin birth. Jesus had no biological father except God the Father. Many students of the Scripture hold that this is very important, because it means that Jesus would not inherit original sin as descended from Adam. The birth of Jesus is part of God's preparation of the salvation of mankind.

This is best seen in the light of the Atonement. Some 33 years later Jesus will go to the cross to be the atonement sacrifice for all mankind. See how his birth and ancestry affect this:

- Jesus is God in the flesh. God being the sum of all perfections, this implies that Jesus is sinless and had a sinless life. Viewed as a sacrifice, he would be considered an unblemished sacrifice suitable for atonement.
- He is also fully human. You will recall in the Old Testament that certain animals were acceptable for sacrifice; others were considered unclean. By the example of Abraham and Isaac, the human being is an acceptable sacrifice. Christ was born of Mary so that he might be that sacrifice.
- He is also the sign of God's love for mankind. We know that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend; that is exactly what God did on the cross. It could not have happened if there had not been a manger scene.

So you see that this was the plan from the very beginning of time. We are commanded to remember the sacrifice at Calvary. We are to eat the bread and drink the wine in memory of the sacrifice he made. Is this important? Let's put it this way; salvation comes by the cross — there is no other way. The birth of Jesus in the manger was just as essential to this as the rest of his life. Jesus Christ was born to die.

Without Christmas there is no Easter. Without Easter, there is no hope.

December 31

Until Then

It is the last day of the year. While we like to think of our New Year's resolutions, most of our thought dwells on what happened this year; a review of the past. May I cast your eye instead to the future:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.
(2 Peter 3:10-14)

It is fashionable these days to ignore any passages concerning the return of Christ, the Day of the Lord. But as is clear from what Peter has written here, this is not something that simply occurs in Revelation, shrouded in symbolism. Peter is pretty explicit here:

- The Day of the Lord, his return, will surprise us all when it happens. Any number of people think they have mathematically calculated the date. They're wrong. We will be surprised.
- This current universe in some fashion will be destroyed and remade into the New Heaven and New Earth.
- In light of this, we are to live lives that produce Christians "without spot or blemish, and at peace."

Until then, we must live the life of the Christian anticipating the Lord's return. There are many things that the Scriptures tell us we should be doing, but only one particular ritual is performed in anticipation of his return. This ritual is so important that Christ instituted on his last night before the Cross. He told his disciples that this would be the last time he would eat Passover until he did it again in the renewed kingdom. In the meanwhile he has left us this ceremony.

Why this particular ceremony?

- The bread and wine recall his body and blood, reminding us of the supreme sacrifice that he made for our atonement.
- We are taught to examine ourselves — a call to repentance — so that we might do this in a worthy manner.

So then, look back upon your life, examine yourself and see if there is need for you to repent. Bring that need to the Lord, and take this communion in a worthy manner — until He comes again.