

MEDITATIONS ON
THE LORD'S SUPPER

*DO NOT BE INFLUENCED BY THE IMPORTANCE
OF THE WRITER, AND WHETHER HIS LEARNING
BE GREAT OR SMALL, BUT LET THE LOVE OF
PURE TRUTH DRAW YOU TO READ. DO NOT
INQUIRE, "WHO SAID THIS?" BUT PAY ATTEN-
TION TO WHAT IS SAID.*

*MEN PASS AWAY, BUT THE WORD OF THE
LORD ENDURES FOREVER.*

*- THOMAS À KEMPIS
THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*

ON CELEBRATIONS

(January 5)

New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are traditional times of celebration for us. Have you ever thought what the word "celebrate" means?

- We always want to celebrate with a crowd of people -- usually friends and acquaintances. Celebrating by yourself just doesn't seem to have the same feeling.
- We need a reason to celebrate. We celebrate the start of the year; we celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, holidays that roll around once a year -- but always, there is a reason for our celebration.
- It's most common that the reason looks to the past -- such as birthdays or anniversaries, or national holidays. Even New Year's Eve, with its resolutions for the coming year, shows old Father Time on the way out as well as Baby Time coming in.
- Sometimes we celebrate a person, rather than an event. Memorial Day is for veterans; Labor Day for workers; Valentine's Day for lovers -- and St. Patrick's day for anyone who can recognize the color "green."
- Nobody celebrates with a diet. The diet starts January 2nd, not New Year's Day. Food and drink -- often too much food and drink -- are a very real part of a celebration.
- Finally, a celebration is a happy time -- even a joyous one. The Fourth of July may have its solemn moments of remembrance -- but it must have fireworks.

We use that same word, "celebrate", to mean that we are taking the Lord's Supper. We often speak in our public worship of "celebrating Communion." When I first thought about that, my reaction was, "a completely different meaning of the word." But think about it:

- We celebrate the Lord's Supper in a group. It may be a small group, even as small as two people, but a group is required. How many do you need for an anniversary?
- Do we celebrate for a reason? The greatest reason in the world: Jesus, the Messiah, died on a cross that we might have eternal life. If eternal life is not worth celebrating, then nothing is.
- That reason looks to the past, just like our other celebrations -- to the hill at Calvary. It is a greater celebration in that it also looks to the present, as we examine ourselves. It is greater yet, for it looks to the future -- when He returns.
- Some celebrations are for events; some are for persons; ours is for both. It is the celebration both of the Crucifixion and the Crucified.
- Surprisingly enough, even this most sacred of celebrations must be done with food and drink. In its roots, the Passover, it was referred to as "the Feast." Other celebrations fatten the body; this one feeds the soul.
- So then, when you take it today, do not neglect its solemn aspect -- but remember, this is a celebration. Take, eat -- with joy.

DIAMOND IN THE SINK

(January 12)

My wife is not a woman given to “water power.” She does not go into tears over the minor upsets of life. She is not one of those women who use tears as a weapon to get what she wants. When she cries, she means it. When she cries, I pay attention.

So you can imagine that I was extremely concerned when I came home one day to find her hovering over our kitchen sink, bawling her eyes out. She was clearly crying over something in the sink, and it wasn't onions. It took some time for me to get her sufficiently calmed to find out what happened.

She was crying because she had lost the diamond out of her engagement ring. It's interesting to see the difference in our reactions. My first thought was, “You've got to be kidding?” (If you knew how little that diamond cost -- and it was the biggest one I could afford at the time -- you'd understand my first reaction). To me, it was a relatively inexpensive gemstone.

To her, however, it represented her marriage. She had lost the symbol of something which (she tells me) makes her happy. I began to think about it in a different light.

Isn't it interesting that the deepest form of communication in our species is symbolic communication? It is the least precise form of communication, to be sure, because its meaning depends both on the one talking and the one listening. For example, when I see an American flag -- a symbol -- it carries deep meaning to me. For many of you it does also, but the meaning is somewhat different. Yet we refer to these meanings by the same symbol. The communication is not complete in what I say when I show the flag; it needs your experience to be complete communication. To my wife, that ring was symbolic communication from me to her, and it was very precious.

That's symbolic communication. It needs a symbol, like the engagement ring. It needs a sender, but it is not complete without the experience of the receiver. The deeper the experience on both sides, the more meaningful the communication.

It's important to see that symbolic communication is used where the message involves the total life of those doing the communicating. Such a communication is found in the Lord's Supper. The bread and the cup are symbols. Simple things; like a ring, or a flag, yet these are packed with meaning. They represent the body and blood of our Lord. As such, we see that Jesus committed his whole life into those symbols. He has made this communication as deep as it can possibly be.

But the communication is not complete without our lives. If we've never seen the flag before, it means nothing. If we choose to ignore the wedding ring, the communication is rejected. But if we commit our whole lives to Christ, the symbols take on the deepest of meaning for us. They become, symbolically, the very body and blood of Christ. They become our salvation; they become the promise of resurrection. And they are very precious indeed.

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

(January 19)

(Mat 26:28 NIV) **This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.**

It is an interesting thing that Jesus Christ went around in his earthly ministry saying, "Your sins are forgiven." We don't think of it this way, but this is an extremely presumptuous statement -- one of the many radical things Jesus said in such a humble way. Perhaps you don't think so; look at it this way:

Suppose that I decide that you need a good punch in the nose. Being a man of action (and rather limited sense) I decide to carry out this plan, and I bop you in the face. You (being a superb Christian) now have the Christian privilege of granting me forgiveness. Let us suppose, however, that Satan arises and tempts you to petty vengeance, namely, you decide to bop me in the nose. The fight seems to be on, but (let us further suppose) that Graydon Jessup steps between us. He directs you to cease and desist, because, he says, "I have forgiven him."

Now, being the logical sort of person you are, and greatly given to debate as opposed to combat, you decide to reason with Graydon. "Hold on, preacher," you say, "if I want to punch his lights out (in a decent Christian manner, of course), why, that's my business. What right do you have to forgive him and let him off the hook?"

You see the argument, of course. You have the right to forgive, because you're the one I punched in the nose. I didn't punch Graydon, so he doesn't have the right to forgive me on your behalf. Right? To turn this into a principle, only the person who is offended has the privilege of forgiving.

But hold on. In any such dispute, there are always at least two persons who are offended. In this instance you are one. The Lord God Almighty is the other, for he has ordained peace among his children. When I punch you in the nose, you bleed and He is pained. He who set the moral order of the universe is always offended when it is violated. And that doesn't count how He feels about someone punching his children (how do you feel when someone hits your children?)

Now you see why Jesus so enraged the Pharisees -- when he claimed to forgive sins, he claimed to be God. His entire purpose in coming to us was just that: to rescue us from our sins, to grant us salvation.

Vengeance is cheap, and therefore is commonly sought and sold. Forgiveness, however, is costly; the more there is to forgive, the greater the pain of forgiving. Our forgiveness cost Jesus his life, at Calvary. As God, he had the authority to forgive. As man, the price had still to be paid. He paid what I owed, and forgave me without price.

When you take the Lord's Supper, then, remember that He who died came with the authority and the purpose of forgiveness. Our forgiveness.

JESUS GAVE THANKS

(January 26)

(Mat 26:26-27 NIV) While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." {27} Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you."

We have often read this passage at the time of Communion. It is, of course, supremely important, but I suggest to you that we have often missed an important part of it. Notice that before giving the bread and wine to his disciples, he "gave thanks."

One of the first things we teach a child is to say "Thank you." It is probably the first of the social graces, but some of us have yet to master it. We are told in the Scripture to give thanks "in all circumstances" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). I remember the old story about the soldier who was about to face an artillery bombardment: "For what we are about to receive, Oh Lord, may we truly be thankful." I've never been shot at in anger, but I think I'd have a hard time being thankful for being shelled.

How then, can Jesus be thankful in these circumstances? Surely He knew that He was going to the cross. Yet, in the face of the agony of the cross and the death to follow, he "gives thanks." Some might think this just a matter of form, of politeness, of ritual -- a custom, nothing more. I think not.

The form he was following was that of the Passover. It looked back to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt; it also looked forward to the sacrifice on the cross. God created the first use -- with its giving of thanks -- with the second use in mind. It is therefore appropriate that Jesus gave thanks at this time. We sometimes forget that Jesus was completely human, as well as completely God. I submit he gave thanks for these reasons:

- First, it set for us an excellent example. Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we should give thanks for what the Lord has done.
- Next, he gave thanks in that his hour had finally come. There is a sense of anticipation here. Jesus came to be the sacrifice; the mission was almost complete.
- Finally, he gave thanks on behalf of us -- the people who needed him. It is no sin to thank God on behalf of your friends.. Indeed, we are commanded to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. Our greatest friend did just that with us.

For us, there is an even greater reason to give thanks: our salvation. With his blood we were purchased; with his body we were freed. Surely, then, "give thanks" is the least we can do.

BLOOD OF THE COVENANT

(February 2)

It happened once that I took a course in Business Law. The crushing boredom of the instructor gave me what little evidence I might have needed to decide that the life of a lawyer is not for me.

One concept, however, stuck in my mind. That concept is the business notion of a contract. In law, several things are needed to make a contract binding on both parties; the one most important is “the exchange of consideration.” Consideration is anything of value -- money, services, property, etc. A contract is not binding unless both parties exchange consideration. Interestingly, there is no requirement that the exchange be fair; just that the exchange take place. You may have seen newspaper articles telling of some charity renting office space for a dollar a year; the dollar is the consideration which makes the contract binding.

Sometimes I have heard various speakers attempt to explain the concept of a covenant as being “God’s contract with us.” Education can make you dangerous. A covenant is not a contract. The comparison is interesting:

- In a contract, there is negotiation. Sometimes even the wording of the contract is negotiated; other times just the price. God’s covenants have been non-negotiable, for who would tell God, “I have a better idea?”
- With a contract, negotiations come before delivery. In a covenant relationship, God does something first -- for example, He delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt -- and then establishes the covenant.
- A contract is optional for both parties. I don’t have to sign the contract with the car dealer -- if I don’t want the car. A covenant can be rejected -- at a terrible price.
- Finally, a contract requires the “exchange of consideration.” I provide the car dealer with money; he provides me with the car. In a covenant, God provides the payment first, and then offers the rewards of that payment to His children.

There is an old saying: “Your arms aren’t long enough to box with God.” Neither is your pencil so sharp that you can bargain with him. We are so often tempted to say, “God, if you’ll get me out of this mess, I’ll do thus and such for you.” That’s a contract. God does not work that way. Rather, we should say, “God, you have done so much for me. Now, allow me to do thus and such for you.” That’s a covenant.

In Communion we celebrate what Christ called “the New Covenant.” He gave us the symbols of the Lord’s Supper so that we might know the terms of that covenant:

- It is not negotiable; it is finished.
- God has already paid the price of this covenant.
- We can reject it -- at the price of our souls for eternity.
- God has paid -- and the rewards of that payment are ours.

THE WAR IS NOT OVER WHEN YOUR ENEMY IS DEFEATED

(February 9)

This week we celebrate the birth of one of America's great presidents, Abraham Lincoln. It is one of the great tragedies of American history that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated at the end of the American Civil War. This was a man who had the wisdom to see that the time had come to "bind up the nation's wounds," doing so "with malice toward none and charity toward all." Mr. Lincoln understood a great wisdom: the war is not over when your enemy is defeated. It is over when your enemy calls you his friend. Mr. Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, wanted to carry out this policy, but lacked the political stature to do so. As a result, we built an American South on the bitterness of conquest. Much of our later history of race relations can be traced to this lack of wisdom.

Some of us do not understand that principle. It is easily lost in thoughts of pride in victory, and the lust for vengeance. The Lord has rightly said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." We ignore this principle at our peril. Let me give you an example from more recent history.

After the first World War, our politicians (and those of Great Britain and France) promised to take reparations from defeated Germany. The phrase they used was expressive: "We will squeeze them until the pips squeak!" They did, too. Massive reparations, largely funded by massive American loans, were paid. The German people built their feelings on the bitterness of the conquered; out of our folly and lack of wisdom came Adolf Hitler.

But see what happened after the second World War! We did not send a team to pillage; we sent George Marshall, of the Marshall plan. We fed a hungry Germany; we rebuilt a war torn Europe. The results are plain. Prussian militarism and Nazism are dead, except for a few adolescents; democracy is firm. The War is Over.

It is the same way with our Lord. We, the sinners, are in rebellion against Him, and He has the power and might to crush us completely and utterly -- and the wisdom to refrain. Vengeance is truly His, for only He can judge righteously, but in His wisdom He has not done that. Instead, He seeks to end the war between us; He seeks to make us His friends -- indeed, more than friends, His children.

The Marshall Plan cost money; it was criticized at the time for that. War costs money, whether you wage it in combat or in love. The ultimate war, between man and God, cost Jesus Christ His death on the Cross. But as you take communion, remember this: the War is Over -- Love has triumphed. God has made His enemies into His children.

SPEECHES

(February 16)

In 1863, the Civil War then raging, a small town in Pennsylvania decided to formally open a military cemetery, occasioned by a battle nearby. They invited one of the leading orators of the day, one Edward Everett, to give the formal speech which was considered so necessary. They invited him to speak on October 23rd. He declined, asking more time, for such a speech would easily run from one to two and a half hours -- and the city fathers would want their money's worth. November 19th was selected as the day.

One author described it this way: "An oration was an oration in those days, and it had to have a certain style to it -- classical allusions, a leisurely approach to the subject matter, a carefully phrased recital of the background and history of the occasion, the whole thing working up to a peroration which would sum everything up in memorable sentences." Everett began with Pericles in ancient Greece, and slowly wound his way through Ezekiel's valley of dry bones on to modern times.

The applause indicated the speech was well received. The city fathers had received their money's worth. Edward Everett was indeed the master orator, as advertised. Sitting down, Everett handed matters back to the master of ceremonies who announced that the President of the United States, on hand as befitted such an occasion, had a few words as well. The thin form of Abraham Lincoln walked to the podium, spread out two sheets of paper, and began: "Four score and seven years ago..."

The only reason anyone remembers anything at all about Everett's speech that day is because of the remarks by Lincoln. His remarks turned a cemetery dedication at Gettysburg into history.

It strikes me that our worship is something like that. We spend a great deal of time singing, and even more time in preaching. At the tail end of the service there seems to be some sort of ceremony, almost an afterthought. An ignorant visitor might assume it was of trivial importance; after all, wasn't most of the time spent in preaching and singing? Yet we know that of all our worship activities, the most indispensable, the most central, is the Lord's Supper.

Like those at Gettysburg that November who forgot Edward Everett's noble speech, we may forget the preaching, we may forget the words to the songs, but we must never forget what Jesus did for us. Communion is not an afterthought. It is the center of worship, for it commemorates what Jesus did.

As Lincoln's Gettysburg Address needed no great length -- indeed, I think its impact is greatly increased by its brevity -- Communion needs no great span of time either. In it God speaks to our hearts, encouraging us to repentance, to remembrance and to hope. The real question is, are we listening?

The preaching is appropriate; the singing is wonderful; but only the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross can bring salvation.

THE FULL EXTENT OF HIS LOVE

(February 23)

(John 13:1 NIV) It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

There is a certain fascination within John's writings, for only John among the Gospel authors was an intimate friend of our Lord. Matthew was not among the inner four; Luke, as far as we know, never met the Lord in person; Mark was a young man at the time of the Crucifixion. Only John knew Jesus well. His writings reflect it; they are full of the personal kinds of remembrances you find when the author writes about someone he loves deeply. It is apt, therefore, that John begins the story of the Last Supper with the words, "he now showed them the full extent of his love."

If, without having read this passage, I were to ask you, "How did Jesus show the full extent of his love?", you would probably reply, "At the Cross." You'd be right. This verse, therefore, shows us that the Last Supper was simply the first act in the Crucifixion. It was not just simply the Passover which happened the night before; Jesus planned this Supper as part of His trip to the Cross. He planned it long before, when he had Moses institute the Passover. From before time the Cross was in view, and therefore this supper was in view. In it, Jesus begins to show his love for them.

Not just his love; the "full extent" of his love. It was as if he were saying, "Now you will see it all." We see it in the Passover, a picture of redemption. We see it in the Garden, where Jesus wrestles with fear. We see it on the Cross. Is there any greater love than a man dying for another?

Look again at that verse. Not just "his love;" not just "the full extent" -- look at the verb. He *showed* them. He did not tell them; he did not reveal some startling new doctrine. He showed them. The prophets revealed God's love, and mirrored it as best they were able. Jesus showed them in person. The Lord's Supper marks the full revealing.

What does it then reveal to us? Love is, first and foremost, a sacrifice. In animal sacrifice the Passover was proclaimed, and the death angel passed over Israel.. At the Cross, Love Himself became the sacrifice, and the death angel will pass over us. When he returns, we shall rise to meet him. The price of this victory over the grave was paid for us at Calvary; for this reason we remember the full extent of his love.

CHRIST, THE SERVANT KING

(March 2)

(John 13:3-5 NIV) Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; {4} so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. {5} After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

We often preach Christ, the Son of Man. This is right, for He made it clear that he came to seek the lost, to seek and to serve. Indeed, He deliberately made himself the Servant King. In that light, then, we must examine the Lord's Supper.

First, note John's words: He "knew that the Father had put all things under his power," -- how often we forget just who this Jesus is. He is the agent of creation, the one of whom John wrote: (John 1:3 NIV) Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Think of that! Here is the one who spoke and the worlds began. This is the author of the universe, the mind of the maker. The descent from his heaven to earth, to become a servant, is beyond our imaginations. C. S. Lewis once used the analogy of thinking of yourself as becoming a snail or a slug -- to explain to the other slugs what man is like.

But the descent from the throne was not a one way trip. Even at this moment, Jesus knew He had come from God -- and was returning there. It is one thing to come from heaven; that's very interesting. It's entirely another to let us know you plan to make the return trip! As interested as I am in anyone from heaven, the man who can make the return trip has my undivided attention. And the message that man teaches? By word and by example, service to others; the lesson of love. The service he is performing here was usually reserved for the lowest ranking servant of a rich household. It was the "dirty work."

In this series of actions we see the immense depth of Christ's sacrifice. It is not just that he went willingly to his death on the Cross -- it is also that he left his place of glory for the express purpose of doing so. Here, at the peak of that mission, his message is completely consistent with that sacrifice: He came to serve.

Consider this well, then, as you take the Lord's Supper. You are remembering not only his death on the Cross, but the sacrifice of immeasurable glory which preceded his arrival. Even greater news is this: You are also proclaiming his imminent return, when we shall share in that glory.

ONE BODY

(March 9)

(1 Cor 10:16-17 NIV) Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? {17} Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

Having been young and foolish (I'm now old and foolish) does provide a man with a wealth of humor -- if you can laugh at yourself. When I was busily applying for work, and having no experience whatever to merit it, I once encountered an application form which had an imposing looking space labeled, "Professional Societies of which you are member." I was not deterred. I simply wrote in, "Member, National Geographic Society." (I did not get the job.)

Many of us view the word "member" in the sense I used it above. One more interchangeable person, having no particular task or duty, but somehow a part of the society in question. The New Testament church has members, but none in that sense. The illustration most commonly used is that we are a body. As such, the "members" of a body, if you can recall the older sense of that word, are not interchangeable. Each member has a specific task to perform and a role to play.

Much can be made of that, but I would ask you to step behind the thought. Why is it that we are such members? Paul tell us here that it is because of the Lord's Supper. By that he certainly does not mean that any mindless person who participates is a member. Rather, he means that we share in the death of Christ. And because we share together, we are one body. It is not the emblem, but rather the sacrifice for which it stands, which makes us one.

We are one. We are one in geography. It does not matter where you live, if you take the body and blood of Jesus Christ, you are one with me.

We are one in time. The monk of the Middle Ages, the writer of the early ages of the Church, they are one with us too. When "the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more," they shall join us at that final roll call. Our oneness will be apparent.

We are one in the winds of doctrine. The church is not based upon careful understanding of church councils and decrees but on the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Even our own divisions cannot prevail against Him. If you name the name of Jesus, call Him Lord and Savior, and break bread at His table, we are one.

We are one in the Spirit, too. We often think ourselves so weak and the world so strong. It is not so. He who spoke and the worlds began calls us His own -- and we are one with Him.

ST. PATRICK'S DAY IN BOSTON

(March 16)

Tomorrow is St. Patrick's Day. St. Patrick is the patron saint of the Irish, and (one suspects) also of the drunk.

It is the custom in the city of Boston that anyone with an Irish surname can get a free drink in any bar (on St. Patrick's Day) in the city merely by presenting identification. So it was that a gentleman of obvious Oriental extraction, Japanese to be specific, pounded upon the bar and demanded his free drink. The bartender, naturally, was dubious. He demanded a driver's license. It was promptly produced. The bartender poured him a shot of the finest Irish whisky available.

And what would you do for a man named "Ohara?"

Nothing so marks the American spirit as this: we are a melting pot of culture. My long ago ancestors came from Germany, only to have their descendant discover the wonders of Mexican cuisine. Surely no nation on earth cares so little about one's ancestors. It is a complete joy to know that my grandfather was born (literally) on the wrong side of the tracks -- and that it matters not at all.

Or does it?

It is my unfortunate observation that the church, like our society, divides itself into various classes. There are the "ins" and there are the "outs." We are pious enough on Sunday to proclaim that Jesus died for all -- but on Monday we know who's who.

Abraham Lincoln once remarked that God must have loved the common man--he made so many of them. The Lord's Supper is a time when we must examine ourselves, and I must suggest to you that this week, the week most associated with St. Patrick and the "lower classes", you need to examine your attitude towards those who don't live as you do. Do you really recognize that Christ died for them, too? Indeed, if you will look at the Scripture, Christ said to the sinner, the prostitute, the thieving bureaucrat -- the workaday stiff -- repent. But to the pious, the religious leader, the proud, he said, "Be born again." He recognized that being privileged is a terrible disadvantage: it makes you believe that you are indeed self sufficient. You may think you are. Tell me, then, how you plan to conquer death!

We must face it: no matter how rich or how poor, how politically correct or disfavored, how fashionable or how bovine, all of us stand in the same relationship to God. The ground is level at the foot of the Cross. Each and every one of us must acknowledge the same thing, or die: "God be merciful to me, the sinner."

Examine yourself; ask his mercy. It is as sure as sunrise.

THE STONES

(March 23) Palm Sunday

(Luke 19:37-40 NIV) When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: {38} "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" {39} Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" {40} "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

It is one of the most astonishing statements in the history of mankind. Consider it well. Throughout all the Old Testament we have images of nature praising God -- figures of speech which include the trees clapping their hands. If nature gains a voice, it is only to praise her creator. Here, then, is a man, riding on a donkey in triumph and peace, into Jerusalem. The religious leaders of the day tell this man to rebuke his disciples, to quiet them down, to keep them from blasphemy. His reply: if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.

The stones will cry out? For whom would the very rocks themselves break into praise? Such a miracle is unknown in history. It would imply the end of the universe, of nature, as we know it. The laws of physics themselves would be set aside. How can a man make such a statement? Unless, of course, the man is Jesus, the Christ. It is his explicit claim to be the creator of the physical universe, of all that exists. This is indeed what has been taught of him since the beginning of the church:

(Col 1:16-17 NIV) For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. {17} He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Here, then, is the explicit claim of Jesus Christ to be the creator of all things -- the one from whom you and I borrow the very idea of existence. And what is he doing?

He is riding to his death. He came for the explicit, expressed purpose of dying for the sins of mankind -- for you and for me. It is his sacrifice, in coming to be among us as well as dying for us, that we celebrate at communion. We are apt to think of Palm Sunday as being a time of triumph. It is; but it is a time which foretells the triumph to come, when He returns again. For this moment, the triumph is transitory. His disciples praise him; the rocks do not.

In the Lord's Supper we proclaim his death *until He comes*. When he does, will the "very rocks" cry out? And when they do, will you be prepared to receive your king with joy, or with shame?

AFTER THE SUPPER, THE GARDEN

(March 30) Easter Sunday

Much of our thought at the time of Communion naturally goes to the scene we call the Last Supper. This is fitting and proper, of course, but it sometimes hides from the mind's eye the scenes which come next -- in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although it was an agonizing experience for Him, I draw comfort from the sheer humanity of Jesus' experience in the garden.

First, knowing that he is to face a horrible death brought on by betrayal, he goes to prayer. He does not go alone; he takes some of his closest friends with him. This comforts me. How often have I held myself to the expectation that I cannot show fear? Especially in front of my best friends? Here, however, is the greatest of men going to face that experience, and he brings along some friends. Were he God only, he would face this alone, I think. That he brings friends with him in his hour of need is entirely human. He understands me, for I too am afraid. He feels my pain; that comforts me.

Next, he goes to God Almighty in fervent prayer -- only to be denied three times. Surely if there was ever a man for whom God answered prayer, it was this Jesus of Nazareth. Now, at the greatest of trials, he asks to be released from this pain. Not just once, but three times. This comforts me too, for I have asked to be released from my trials and troubles -- and God has said no. God said no to Jesus; he knows what it's like to ask for release and be denied. He feels my pain; that comforts me.

He knows too what it's like to be let down by your best friends. These are the people that you think you can count on in a time of trouble. You say that you know them, and that they would do anything for you. Here, they fall asleep as he prays. In this darkest hour it appears to him that his best friends just don't care what happens to him. It is an awful blow -- and he knows what it feels like. He feels my pain; that comforts me.

Worse than that, he knows the sting of betrayal. Just at the moment where loyalty would count the most, Jesus is betrayed. Not just by Judas; Judas we can paint as villain and therefore dismiss. He is also betrayed by Peter. Jesus knows the agony of betrayal at the worst moment. He feels my pain; that comforts me.

What comforts me most, however, is this: he endured this pain voluntarily. He did not have to come to us; He did not have to go to Calvary. He went out of love for us. Even for the most unlovable of us, he died that we might have life. As we take Communion, we are to examine ourselves. That should not be easy, but should lead to repentance. It is not easy to ask forgiveness. But I ask it of Jesus, for he feels my pain; that comforts me.

DO YOU DESPISE THE CHURCH OF GOD?

(April 6)

(1 Cor 11:20-22 NIV) When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, {21} for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. {22} Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!

When the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper, it seems it was much more physically nourishing than the symbolic method we use today. I suspect that the Passover feast materials were used, and so it was that people were fed there in a physical as well as a spiritual sense. Imagine Paul's outrage, then, when this most sacred of feasts was abused by such flagrant bad manners. From the accusations, one might conclude that the wealthy were the first in line. Those first in line pigged out, leaving nothing for those who came later. If you were first to the wine, you got drunk. No wonder Paul was upset!

Note, however, the retort Paul throws at them: "...do you despise the church of God...?" The terror of this behavior is not simply bad manners. Bad manners are usually a form of lack of respect. In this case, the lack was directed at the church itself. The church, however, is not the building -- indeed, in those days, they had no buildings but met in homes. The church is composed of its members. In other words, the rich (in this instance) were despising the poor, and in despising them, despised the church. Could such a thing happen with us today?

I regret to admit it could. I'm not speaking about accusations like "old so-and-so is an elder only because he contributes so much" (you see, the poor can despise the rich too; they call it *envy*), but rather this. When you take communion, do you look around and think, "Look at old so-and-so, that hypocrite! How he can dare to take communion without fear of the roof falling in on him..." You see the point, I hope. Whether it's outright condemnation or the more subtle "I'll have to remember to pray for so-and-so's repentance..." we tend to look around and see the sins and failings of others, rather than examining ourselves.

Make no mistake about it: this is judging others (as in "judge not, that ye be not judged.") Just because it comes under the pious cloak of self-examination makes it no less judgment. Examining myself does not mean comparing myself to others. It means comparing myself to what God wants me to be. When I judge others at the Lord's Table, I'm saying they're not good enough to partake -- and I'm despising the church of God.

The command is simple: Let a man examine *himself* -- and no one else.

CHRIST OR DEMONS

(April 13)

(1 Cor 10:21 NIV) You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

Paul, when he was writing this, was concerned with a church which lived in a world of idols. There were temples to all kinds of gods and goddesses, and the fact is that many of them involved prostitution (of all kinds). His specific reference is to eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols, a problem we have not had in, say, 1500 years.

The principle, however, remains. You may think it has no application to you, but I must ask you to think again. Let me give you a specific example: where were you Saturday night?

Some of you -- no, I don't keep track of you, God knows, so do you and that's sufficient -- were out at the party Saturday night. The party itself was not the problem; the problem is with your attitude. For last Saturday you were a man of the world. You laughed at all the dirty jokes, especially the ones which made fun of all those weird people who would stay faithful to their wives. The "stick in the mud" types are always good as the butt of the joke. You leered knowingly as the other men described this or that woman.

You also put in your speech about how well things are going for you. After all, you must keep up with the Joneses, right? And the new Mercedes is lovely. One must have a taste for the finer things in life.

But mostly you strutted. You told stories of how great a shot you made at golf, or how you put one over on your boss, or your customer. You are a man of the world.

Indeed, you're better than that. The folks you saw Saturday night can't hold a candle to you. While they're hung over in bed, you dragged yourself out to church. You're the spiritual type -- something they could just never understand. Of course, the people you meet on Sunday morning wouldn't understand your friends on Saturday night, either; they are, after all, rather naive. So you see yourself as the perfectly rounded man -- worldly on Saturday night, spiritual on Sunday morning.

Let me be perfectly honest. You are a double hypocrite.

If this essay seems strange to you, well and good. I most certainly hope that your reaction is, "Who is he talking about?" But if it sounds just like you, then you have the hard choice. The Lord knows both of you. You must choose which you shall be, and there is no profit in delaying the choice. To try to have both the world and Christ will ultimately bring you neither. Be one person, not two: choose you this day whom you would serve.

PASSOVER

(April 20)

This week contains the Jewish feast called Passover. Many Christians are not aware that the Last Supper was in fact a Passover feast -- a feast in which Jesus revealed to his disciples that the Passover was a forerunner of his own sacrifice. It is fitting therefore that we examine Passover, and see what might be learned about the Lord's Supper.

Passover is so named because the Angel of Death "passed over" the houses of the Israelites while destroying the first born of Egypt. The key feature is this: the signal that any given house was to be passed over was blood on the lintel and doorposts. Note that this salvation from death was not achieved by merit, or by being born in the right tribe, or by achievement -- it was simply a matter of claiming it. If you believed the Lord would deliver, and said so in visible terms as he prescribed, you would be passed over in death. Perhaps this seemed silly to some; I'm sure a few of the housewives asked who was going to clean up that mess. But the foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of man. Passover starts with faith. The Lord's Supper is a visible demonstration of our faith.

Passover involves sacrifice. A young lamb, in perfect condition, was to be slaughtered to provide the blood for the doorposts and the meal. A perfect sacrifice was required; the blood was the sign of salvation. Jesus is our perfect sacrifice; by his blood we are passed over in death.

Passover was a community ritual. The requirement was that the lamb be completely eaten, or the leftovers burned. The Israelite was to assemble his family, and if that were not sufficient in numbers, bring in others so that the lamb could be completely consumed. So it is with us that the Lord's Supper may not be taken alone, but in the presence of the family of God.

Passover was not an end, but a beginning. It meant that the Israelites were beginning a journey to the Promised Land. It was in many ways the beginning of the nation of Israel. It was for most of them the beginning of their relationship with God. So it is with us. The Lord's Supper is not the end, but the beginning. We acknowledge our sojourn in this world. By it we are made one people, the people of God around the world. By the sacrifice it represents we have fellowship with God.

Passover was to be eaten in haste, dressed for a journey. The Israelite was to be ready to go out and follow the Lord wherever He might lead, even though he was under a roof celebrating a feast. He was to have his garments belted for a journey, his sandals on his feet. Passover was to prepare him spiritually for the trip. So it is with us. The Lord's Supper should be taken as if preparation for spiritual combat -- for such it is. We are not here to relax in angelic arms, but to tighten our belts, put on our combat boots and prepare for battle.

PROCLAIMING THE LORD'S DEATH

(April 27)

(1 Cor 11:26 NIV) For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The opening is at once noble and famous:

“When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.”

These are the solemn words of Thomas Jefferson in his opening of the Declaration of Independence. Most of us are more familiar with the second paragraph (“we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”). When men do great and noble things, it seems absolutely required that they be prefaced with great and noble words. The line is drawn in the sand; the Rubicon is crossed; the call is made for blood, toil, tears and sweat. Greatness must be announced; it must be declared (hence Declaration); it must be proclaimed.

The Christian, too, is called upon to make proclamation. Jefferson proclaimed life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Christian is called upon to proclaim the death of Jesus Christ.

Communion is a symbolic act. In symbolic actions we communicate our deepest desires and thoughts. In the deepest communication a Christian can make, he proclaims the death of Jesus. Not the life; not the miracles; not the teaching; not even the Resurrection itself -- but the death. Why?

It is the central message of the Christian faith: Jesus died -- for us. God did not become the Incarnate Word just to teach us. He did not walk this planet just to show us His miraculous power (wonders enough there are for that). He did not die on the cross to show us that He is Lord of Life in the Resurrection. He came to die. He came to die as the sacrifice for our sins, the atonement which takes away our sin. The miracles help us believe; the teaching helps us live; the Resurrection gives us our hope -- but the sacrifice in death brings us salvation.

So what are we “declaring?” What do we proclaim? Simply this: that Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, died -- that we might have eternal life. The fountain of his mercy is free and flowing fully, for all who will. We state that every time we take the cup and the loaf.

SELF EXAMINATION

(May 4)

(1 Cor 11:28 NIV) A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

It is rather interesting to me that the medical profession -- home of so many who think of themselves as M. Deities -- will so frequently encourage the practice of self examination. After all, the doctor knows so much more than you and I, should we not let him do the examining? And yet despite the ego, it is standard practice to encourage the patient to examine himself.

The reason is relatively simple: the tests performed by the medical profession are often painful, intrusive, obnoxious -- and expensive. Even worse is the treatment which comes after the tests. Surgery, one doctor reminded me, is nothing more than a friendly attack with a knife. But the surgery can be lessened or even avoided -- if the disease is detected in time. That's why self examination is so much encouraged: the sooner you see it, the lighter the task of curing it.

Some of us, however, take our dislike of going to the doctor (a male fault, for the most part, in my observation) to the extreme of never performing a self examination. We're afraid of what we might find. You think not? Have you ever felt around inside your mouth and discovered something that "felt funny?" Did you have the temptation to say, "Well, it's probably nothing - - no need to call the dentist on this one?" Of course, when it begins to hurt, you'll hear the dentist say those painful words, "I wish you had come in when you first noticed this."

The purpose of self examination is not to prevent disease. It is to minimize the impact the disease has, and provide the swiftest, least painful cure. That is exactly the same purpose that self examination has for the Christian. You and I are sinners. We are going to sin; if we "let it go," it will become a habit of vice so very hard to break. But if we catch it early, God, the Great Physician, can deal with it gently and root it out.

So our spiritual physician prescribes a weekly period of self examination. It's a time for a check of our attitudes and our habits. In a medical examination, the doctor will tell you what to look for. He'll tell you what "normal" looks and feels like, and then leaves it to you to find something that doesn't match that pattern. So it is with our heavenly physician. He has given us the pattern we should conform to -- our Lord, Jesus Christ. As we approach the Lord's Supper, we should be fully aware of our sins.

For there is one thing else. More and more doctors are discovering that the patient is a very important part of the cure. It is so in spiritual life as well. If you will not examine yourself, you will not confess your sins. If you will not confess, you will not repent. If you will not repent, you cannot be forgiven. Healing power is His; the next step is ours.

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

(May 11) Mother's Day

A teacher put this question to little James in his arithmetic class. "James, suppose your mother made a peach pie, and there were ten of you at the table -- your mother and father and eight children. How much of the pie would you get?"

James replied, "That's easy! I would get one ninth."

His teacher contradicted him, "No, no, James. Pay attention!" There are ten of you. Ten, remember. Don't you know your fractions?"

"Yes I do," came the reply from James. "I know my fractions, but you don't know my mother! She would say that she didn't want any pie."

Those of us who were raised in Christian homes, especially those in which "mom" was a stay at home mother, soon learned that Christian charity has its specialties. It is a rare man (but not unknown, we have one in our class) who will make dinner for a family in need. It is a common thing for Christian women to take food to those recovering from surgery. More than that, however, as young James has illustrated to us, the most common example that a Christian mother shows her young children is that of sacrifice. It may not be something young children understand to its depth, but it is unmistakable in its impression. Mom makes sacrifices for her family.

Indeed, as we grow older, we learn even more from this. We learn *why* Mom makes sacrifices for her family: because she loves them. As my wife and I have built a home, I have seen the same thing in her. In just the little things of daily living, it is amazing how much she does out of love. She may be frazzled at the end of the day, but it's the frazzle of a human being doing the things she loves to do. There is a difference between labor and "labor of love."

It seems, therefore, that in our earliest and closest examples of love we learn this principle: Love means sacrifice. You cannot love someone without sacrificing for them. It is the way in which the universe is constructed, a moral principle not to be altered. The coming of our Lord and his sacrifice on the Cross are the supreme example of that principle. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? The One whose very character is love comes in the flesh; could he then avoid sacrificing for the ones he loves, namely, us?

He did more than that. He did not just sacrifice for us; he became the Sacrifice for us. With his own body and blood he became the sacrifice for our sins. In so doing, he showed us another side of love. Love does not wait for the beloved to become worthy. A mother with a newborn baby knows that it will take years just to get to "please" and "thank you." The smile of an infant is a joyous thing. A howling little monster who needs his diaper changed, face fed and a nap is quite another. Mom cannot turn the kid back in at the hospital. Love cannot wait for worthiness.

Christ is our sacrifice, not because we are worthy, but because He loves us. As you take the Lord's Supper, remember: He loved you first.

EATING AND DRINKING JUDGMENT

(May 18)

(1 Cor 11:29 NIV) For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.

There is a consistent principle in the Bible: by the standards you set for others, you yourself will be judged. (See, for example, Romans 2; also verse 27 in this chapter.) Sometimes we participate in Communion in a thoughtless way, not giving any thought to the warning that Paul gives us here.

There are two ways to proclaim your principles. The first is to live by them; the second is to pronounce them (usually upon others). For reasons of space, I'll deal only with the first method, and leave the second to you.

Think of it this way: you come to church. Often, you dress in a particular way (some of you cannot come to church, for example, without a coat and tie.) You act, and mean to act, as if this "going to church" were important. By your actions, then, you set a standard. If this standard applies to your clothing, how much more to your worship life? You take Communion -- or at least you did once -- with a solemn look, considering your life and its failings, asking the Lord for forgiveness while you remembered the sacrifice which made forgiveness possible. By these actions you proclaimed (to yourself and God, at least) that Communion is solemn -- and important. It is a thing not to be taken lightly, so say you.

I cannot say I've seen too much frivolity at Communion. Drunkenness I have not noticed (for which Paul chastised these Corinthians). Such disorder would be socially unacceptable -- and this is a polite congregation. There is another way, however, that Communion may be taken lightly.

You can't see it on the outside, for indeed this method depends on outer appearances remaining the same. It is called "going through the motions." You bow your head; your lips move; you wait just the right time and with a humble look you partake. You're thinking about the cute girl two rows up; or about the mound of work waiting back at the office, or maybe just where you plan to go for lunch. Your mind is anywhere but where it should be: on Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for you.

C. S. Lewis once wrote that the devil does his worst work in us not by what he puts into our minds but by what he keeps out. Communion is not meant to be a passive experience but an active reminder. The Bible describes it in action verbs: "take," "eat," "do this." Discipline your mind to God's life in you. Do this in remembrance of Him -- and reap forgiveness instead of judgment.

MEMORIAL DAY

(May 25)

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. In the tradition of late 20th century America, the most notable thing about it is an automobile race.

There are many reasons why the one thing we don't want to do on Memorial Day is remember. I suggest only three here.

First, there is today a cult of youth. Watch the typical television situation comedy, and you will see a dysfunctional (but funny, of course) family. The father will be a lecherous dolt, barely capable of thinking his way out the front door. Mother's IQ is only slightly higher. Intelligence, wit and sense are reserved for the teenagers (who, by the oddest of chance, are also the intended target of the commercials). How curious it is that we are now raising a generation taught to believe that at the age of twenty they will be obsolete. In any other culture, age would be respected. But since youth is paramount, why would anyone care about anyone older -- especially the dead?

Next, there is an attitude best expressed by the movie executive who first turned down the script for *Gone with the Wind*: "Anything that happened before I was born can't be of interest to anyone." To begin with, this is sheer arrogance; it is the attitude that the current generation is the only one ever to walk the planet with anything worthwhile to say or do. The absurdity of it all is this: the people of this attitude take their ideas from those who are long dead. The sin of pride is no better displayed in our time than in this. It is also the wellspring of contemporary political thought.

Most significant of all, though, is this: we are not willing to face death. Since youth alone is the time of life in which important things happen, and people are genuinely wise; since the gone are deservedly forgotten, is it any wonder that we turn our faces away from death, and deny it until it is upon us? But the truth is still the truth, and death comes to us all. The only real question is, "what then?"

It seems that those long gone people who established Memorial Day may have had a better idea. Youth? Yes, this day honors the youth -- who died in combat, and in dying gave us liberty. As such, it calls our minds back to the noble things for which they sacrificed. And in doing so, forces us to face death. Death, not just in the abstract, but death as a sacrifice for a cause. A noble death.

We may take this to its highest example: Jesus Christ. Jesus the man died at about 33 years of age; leaving neither wife nor children. But for what a cause! Indeed, the highest possible cause: to give all of mankind, all who will, eternal life. In the Lord's Supper we face His death; we also face our own. But in looking back in memory, we also look forward to the time when death shall be no more. Can there be any sacrifice more worthy of memorial than that of Jesus on the cross?

THE DEATH OF RICHARD THE LIONHEART

(June 1)

If you are like I am, there is nothing quite so entertaining to watch as a good swashbuckler. Recall if you can all those pictures you saw about Robin Hood. It's a story that's been used many times in Hollywood. We forget that while Robin Hood is a bit shadowy as a historical figure, "good King Richard" was not.

King Richard, the Lionheart. As Winston Churchill said, "When Richard's contemporaries called him 'Couer de Lion' they paid a lasting compliment to the king of beasts. Little did the English people owe him for his services, and heavily did they pay for his adventures. He was in England only twice for a few short months in his ten years' reign; yet his memory has always stirred English hearts..."

My concern here is not for his life, but the manner of his dying. In 1199, in a dispute over treasure, he laid siege to a castle in Chaluz, France. He was wounded in the shoulder by an arrow. Gangrene set in, and he knew that death was at hand. He arranged matters in accordance with the principles by which he had lived, dividing his belongings among friends and charity. The archer who shot him was now a prisoner, and Richard pardoned him, and gave him a gift of money.

The thing that interests me most is this: for seven years prior to his death, Richard had not been to confession (he was a Catholic, as were all Christians in Western Europe at that time) nor taken communion for that seven years. Why? Because he knew that at confession he would be obliged to admit his hatred for Philip, the King of France -- and would then be compelled by his faith to be reconciled to his mortal enemy.

In a great man's life we may see a mirror of our own. How many of us approach communion hoping that God will let sleeping worms lie? Wanting so much not to be reminded of the grudge we hold, or the vengeance we want to take, or the secret sin that lies hidden in our minds -- known only to God and to ourselves. We mutter a prayer, hoping that God will let us by one more week without having to face ourselves as He sees us. Gradually, we hope, the nerve endings will become numb, and we will no longer hear the still small voice telling us, "Confess your sins to me, and be clean."

Richard at least played the man. He put it off as long as he could, but when the time came, he took it with calm courage -- and reconciliation. He forgave Philip; indeed he even forgave the archer who had shot the bolt that was to kill him. I wonder how many of us could forgive our killer.

If there is something in your life this morning that stands between you and God, get it out. Richard knew the hour of his death; you and I do not. Would you walk from his house without reconciliation and forgiveness?

Richard, at his death, forgave even the man who killed him. His knights were not so charitable after his death. The archer was flayed alive. Choose you this day whom you will serve.

D-DAY

(June 8)

June 6th is the anniversary of the invasion of Normandy -- D-Day. In the largest amphibious crossing of all time, the Allies landed five divisions on the beaches and began the liberation of Western Europe.

In a very real sense Communion is a celebration of just such an invasion. Look at it this way: who is the prince of this world? Satan, of course. He holds the planet; as Mark Twain once remarked, he "is the spiritual head of four fifths of the human race, and the political head of all of it." Into that world came Jesus, invading, if you will, from heaven itself.

There are some remarkable parallels between the invasions. Erwin Rommel, the German commander, was convinced that he had to crush the invasion on the beaches. Satan, through Herod the King, slaughtered all the babies in the area -- an attempt to stop the invasion right on the beach itself. By Satan's rules, it should have worked. But God intervened. By "chance" at Normandy, Rommel was convinced the Allies were not coming soon -- the weather was too bad. And it was awful, except for a one day break on June 6th. Coincidence? God warned Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt -- just in time.

There is another parallel. The campaign in Normandy soon turned into a tough fight, an infantry fight -- until the breakout. Once the Allies broke out, they raced across France to the Rhine, in a campaign limited only by their ability to provide gasoline to the trucks. The breakout was planned long before; it was an essential element of the plan for D-Day and beyond. Eisenhower knew that the time would come when the Allies would erupt from the beachhead. We too are in a tough fight, an infantry fight. The enemy is providing stern resistance, and it would appear to the pessimists among us that Satan is very mighty.

But wait! The breakout is planned. The Lord Himself shall return to us, and on that day He will sweep aside all resistance, and every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

Until that day, we are commanded to remember the sacrifice which Jesus made, the point of the original invasion. It is important for us to remember that we celebrate first and foremost the death of Jesus, for in that death our eternal life was purchased. But in so doing, we also need to remember that we proclaim His death "until He comes."

The invasion was begun in a manger about 2,000 years ago. The infantry fight began at Pentecost, and continues to this day. But remember: the breakout is planned. Victory is sure; it is guaranteed by the Resurrection itself.

THE FATHER'S COMPASSION

(Psa 103:13 NIV) As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

Most of us approach Father's Day with one question in mind: what do we get dad for Father's Day? The stores are filled with some of the strangest junk, all labeled with the phrase, "Perfect for Dad!" It's particularly difficult for me, for a couple of reasons:

- My dad is 80 years old, and as for material things, it's difficult to get him something that doesn't fit in the category of "one more thing to dust." He's getting rid of those.
- He's also the most intimidating person I know. He was a company commander in the Army for many years; his troops called him "The Bear." Enough Said!

In such a man, however, there is a gentleness that comes through strength. This is a man who looks back and tells his stories not to prove how great he is but rather for a good laugh. It is this immense strength, clothed in love and gentleness, that I admire in the man.

More than that, my Father is a giving man. As I write this, I am looking for a new job, and not by my choice. 80 years old, retired, his son pushing 50, and he still takes me aside and says, "Now don't get yourself in financial difficulties. Remember we're here - and I've been where you are.." He understands my need to be the breadwinner (none better); he also understands how difficult life can be, and asks for the privilege of helping.

Our heavenly father has compassion on us, just like that. By the grace of the Incarnation, he understands where we are. By his great love, he has mercy on us:

(Rom 5:8 NIV) But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

So here it is Father's Day. What kind of a gift should we bring to this compassionate heavenly Father of ours? Fortunately, he's told us what he wants:

(Mat 9:13 NIV) But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (The quotation is Hosea 6:6).

The greatest gift a son can give his Father is to be an imitator of his Father. Our heavenly Father is merciful to us; He desires us to be merciful to each other. As we approach Communion, let us remember that it is the repeated symbol of the ultimate expression of God's mercy to us: Christ's sacrifice on the cross. He has been merciful to us to the fullest measure possible. Let us therefore examine ourselves, and ask: am I giving my Father what he desires most?

COMMUNION IN 1866

(June 22)

The year was 1866; the place was Richmond, Virginia. The citizens of the capitol of the defeated Confederacy were still trying to recover from the devastation of war. Among many other problems, they were struggling with the question of the role and relationship of the newly freed slaves -- a struggle which is not yet done.

In a fashionable church in Richmond the minister was offering Communion. In this particular house of worship Communion was offered somewhat differently than we serve it. When the time came, the minister would stand at the front of the church, behind an altar rail. Those wishing Communion would rise from their seats, a few at a time, come forward and kneel at the altar. The minister would hand them Communion. Usually those in the front came forward first, but it was not uncommon for some to remain longer than others, deep in meditation. One rule was observed: Communion could not be given to a solitary person -- at least two must be at the rail. This was to preserve the spirit of Matthew 18:20.

In the middle of this procession, from the back of the sanctuary, a former slave stood up and strode forward. The minister was taken aback. This was a "white" church; racial separation was the firm belief of virtually all the members. This was also the Lord's Supper. The minister hesitated. The man was at the rail alone; he was not obliged to serve Communion to a solitary worshiper. What was he to do? All eyes in the congregation were on him.

At this moment another worshiper rose from his seat. He was an elderly man, with gray hair, but tall and erect in his bearing -- military, we would say. He walked down the aisle and without a word knelt by the "man of color" (as the phrase is today) to take Communion. His example decided the minister's action; Communion was served to both men together.

We often forget that Communion is also proclamation. (1 Cor 11:26 NIV) For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. We forget that by this act we proclaim Christ, and all that he taught, to all who observe. It is easy to do so here in the Lord's house. Do we proclaim it in the world as well? Indeed, do we even proclaim it in the Lord's house? Examine yourself; does it feel uncomfortable to you when you see people of other races and color worshipping with you? Is it OK for the missionary to reach other races -- as long as the other races don't reach you? Or do you rejoice that Christ died for all, and that in His church we at last can put aside the feelings that have divided his people?

Do not think for a moment that your thoughts and actions are of no account in this. This is not the affair of the minister alone. The guiding example came not from the pulpit but from the pew. One man (or woman) can make a difference in God's economy.

The minister in our story was probably a man of faith, but he was unprepared for action. The man in the pew was not. Not surprising, that -- his name was Robert E. Lee.

UNDER THE ARMOR

(June 29)

My wife has had occasion to visit the convention of ACSI - the Association of Christian Schools International. You can see all kinds of items for sale there, as they always have an exhibit hall where those who want to sell to Christian schools. You can see anything from textbooks to travel arrangements.

One of the hokier items for sale some years ago was "the full armor of God." It looked exactly identical to the "Knight's Armor" sold at the local toy stores -- except for the packaging and the price tag. It was designed for a child of about five years of age, and consisted of all the pieces of armor given in Paul's famous illustration, in Ephesians 6:13-17.

Take a look at that armor. Armor is something people wore to protect themselves, and this armor was designed to be visible to people. So it is with the armor that Paul described -- truth, righteousness, the Gospel of peace, faith, salvation and the word of God. All these are things which are on display in our daily lives (or should be). So we may consider that this armor was also meant to be displayed.

You may not know it, however, but the armor was not worn over the bare skin. A linen undergarment -- silk, if you were able to afford it -- was always worn. It was to be tightly woven; the tighter the weave, the better the garment. The reason for this was simple: armor is not complete protection. Armor has joints in it. In combat, the soldier would be subjected to a storm of arrows. There was some chance that, in the action of combat, gaps would open in the armor and an arrow would penetrate.

What difference would an undershirt make? Just this: a silk undershirt in particular would wrap around the arrowhead as it went in -- making it easy to pull it out without having to cut the arrowhead out. The result was a wound which normally would heal cleanly. Without that shirt, the arrowhead would have to be cut out, making the wound much larger -- and much filthier, for the cutting would be done with an ordinary knife or short sword. The silk shirt was not meant to be seen, but without it an ordinary wound would result in gangrene -- always fatal in those days. True, the wound would be painful in any case -- but with the silk shirt, you probably lived to tell about it.

In some ways the taking of Communion is our silk undershirt. Unless our friends happen to come to worship with us, they don't see us taking the Lord's Supper. The time of self examination serves the same purpose as the silk. We cannot say to our Lord, "Oh, I haven't sinned this week, I don't need to examine myself." We must confess and repent to truly be one with him. And that, like the silk, keeps a small wound just that -- small. If we swiftly confess and repent, the wound is still painful, but the sin does not grow. Our Lord plucks Satan's arrow out from our souls, and the wound is small and quickly heals with the attention of the Master Physician. Come then, make your armor complete. Examine yourself, repent and confess -- and be whole again.

THE LIBERTY BELL

(July 6)

Humidity was invented in Philadelphia -- probably by Benjamin Franklin. It was that kind of a day. My wife and I, with our two boys (our daughter not yet born) were visiting my sister and her family in New Jersey. We took some time to visit the city of Philadelphia, in particular Independence Hall.

Independence Hall is the place where the Declaration of Independence was signed. As we entered the hall, our families split up into small groups. I had only my two boys with me when we went into the small outdoor pavilion in which the Liberty Bell is kept.

Our tour guide must have been affected by the humidity. She was a summer hire, and obviously tired and bored. In a sing-song voice that matched the weather, she told us about the bell. Where it was cast; how much it weighed; how it was brought to Philadelphia; for whom it was tolling when it cracked -- I've forgotten everything she said that day.

Except for the last two sentences: *"If you are an American citizen, the Liberty Bell is part of your heritage. You are permitted to touch the Bell."*

Touch the Liberty Bell? You might as well have told me that I could take home the original Declaration of Independence. My father raised his son a patriot. I get a lump in my throat when the flag is paraded by; I can't finish the Star Spangled Banner at ball games (and not just because of the high notes). The thought of actually touching the Liberty Bell stirred deep emotions within me.

We waited until all the others in our group had filed out. I took my sons forward. I told my oldest boy to touch the Bell. He did so, with all the solemn dignity that only a five year old can have when doing a very "adult" thing.

I picked up my two year old son, and told him to touch the Bell. He pounded on it with both hands, as a toddler will, with a big smile on his face. Is there any joy like that of a toddler having fun in his father's arms?

When I put him down, I took a moment to reflect. Then, eyes wet, with my own two hands, I reached out and touched the Liberty Bell.

If you are not a patriot, I cannot explain the moment. If you are a patriot, I need not.

In a very real sense, I held "liberty" in my hands that day. Today, in exactly the same sense, you will hold the very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in your hands.

- Take it, as my older son touched, with the solemn dignity of one who is permitted to share something far higher than oneself.
- Take it, as my younger son touched, with all the joy of a child in his father's arms.
- Take it, as their father touched, with tears in your eyes -- remembering that your salvation, like liberty, is not free. It was bought with a price beyond measure, at Calvary.

THE ONLY ACT OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY....

(July 13)

Did you know that there is one act of Christian charity that can be performed -- entirely -- *while lying down?*

My rather puckish sense of humor delights me in this. I sometimes daydream of what it would be like to approach a lovely young woman and ask, "How would you like to join me in the only act of Christian charity which can be performed -- entirely -- while lying down?" (Best done outside the presence of her husband. Husbands have been known to have no sense of imagination in these matters).

To the pure all things are pure. There is nothing crude about it. The only act of Christian charity etc..... is *giving blood*. That's right. For those of you who have never done it (I have been a donor for years) it is done entirely while lying down. And it most assuredly is an act of Christian charity, for lives are saved by this.

You cannot, if you are a Christian, fail to note the parallel. We are saved by the blood of Christ. Indeed, Scripture assures us that when Christ took the cup to institute the Lord's Supper he told his disciples that "This is my blood." It is the blood that gives life, whether we think of that medically or spiritually.

There is another point, however, that I would make to you. The process itself is not particularly painful (there is a sharp prick of the needle, but that's about it). No matter how little the pain (I've even had one facility offer Novocain for that tiny amount of pain) some people just won't even consider giving blood. I know the feeling. I've done this many times, and I still can not look as the nurse puts the needle in my arm. At that moment they always ask, "Are you all right?" I tell them I'm fine, which is a polite way of saying, "Lady, you're dealing with a chicken here." When it comes to getting stuck with a needle, I'm a devout coward.

How much more, then, did it take for our Lord to go to the Cross? Please remember that Jesus is "Son of Man" -- entirely human, just as you and I. He felt the agony of anticipation (remember the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane?) of what would happen. He asked for a way out. He felt the fear in much greater measure than I do. But through it all He said, "Not my will, but yours" to His Father. He overcame the terror of the Garden to face the pain of Calvary.

All this He did for us. His life was not taken from Him; He gave it up freely that you and I might have life. By the blood we live; let us remember also the fear and the pain needed to bring that blood to us.

There is one last parallel. When you try to give blood, they ask a long list of questions, most of which convince me that I've led a very dull life. It's largely a list of sexual sins -- and answering yes disqualifies you. This is to protect the blood supply from disease. One would not want a transfusion of AIDS. The blood must be pure if it is to save a life. To save all who will, only the perfect purity of the blood of Christ Himself would do.

A GOOD HOPE

(July 20)

If, as has happened to me, you have been summonsed for jury duty, you may have the privilege of serving on a trial jury. At the beginning of this proceeding, the judge (or some videotape) will explain the difference between evidence and proof. Proof is conclusive; no doubt remains. Evidence is something which points to a conclusion but which, in itself, is not proof.

Now, most of us find it absolutely necessary to pass through our daily lives working on evidence. We cannot *prove* the job will be there tomorrow -- but we have good evidence, and so we continue working in the *hope* of a paycheck. The Christian faith works the same way. It is based on evidence, which is what you would expect of the truth. It is not based on proof. If it were, there could be no doubt; if doubt were not possible, faith would be unnecessary. And without faith it is impossible to please God.

In our daily Christian walk, then, we turn the evidence of Christ (which is very solid) into the working, day to day principle that we call *hope*. That trusting in the evidence, and the Lord it presents, is *faith*. Hope is based on faith, and hope then becomes the working principle of our lives -- or should so become.

Confused? Let me give you a walking example. I have faith that my wife is faithful to me. There's a lot of evidence for that (starting with the fact she's put up with me for so long). But there is no way I could prove that she's faithful; indeed, even to make the attempt would so wound her that it would damage our relationship. So I take the evidence I have, turn it into practical hope, and go through life blithely assuming her fidelity. Hope becomes the ground work for action.

Our hope is in the Resurrection. At the Lord's Supper, we celebrate the sacrifice our Lord made at Calvary. Among many other meanings is this: our Lord was human, just as we are. He too had to have faith in His Father, for He, like us, faced the grave. Facing it, He suffered and died -- and was raised from the dead by the power of the Spirit. It is the central fact of Christianity, and of history: Jesus rose.

His Resurrection is our evidence. From that evidence we should draw the conclusion stated so long ago in the New Testament:

(1 Th 4:14 NIV) We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

But do we? Do we believe the resurrection of the dead, or is it a comforting fairy tale for preachers to use at funeral services? After all, he's been gone a long time.

Every time I take Communion, I proclaim the Lord's death -- *until He comes*. To take Communion is to state your hope in the resurrection. To state it means you will act on it. Are you stating it on Sunday, and denying it in the hospital corridors on Monday? Examine yourself well; you do not know when He returns.

PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION

(July 27)

We owe the clearest formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity to a man named Athanasius. His master work was a small book titled *The Incarnation of the Word of God*. This book was written early in the fourth century. That century saw the Diocletian persecution, the most terrible persecution the church has ever known. Many scholars identify that persecution with the "Great Tribulation" of the Book of Revelation. Athanasius uses this persecution, and the behavior of Christians as they met their deaths, as a proof of the Resurrection! Here's what he wrote:

A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death, they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as something dead. Before the divine advent of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection. But that devil who of old wickedly exulted in death, now that the pains of death are loosed, he alone it is who remains truly dead. There is proof of this too; for men who, before they believe in Christ, think death horrible and are afraid of it, once they are converted despise it so completely that they go eagerly to meet it, and themselves become witnesses of the Savior's resurrection from it. Even children hasten thus to die, and not men only, but women train themselves by bodily discipline to meet it. So weak has death become that even women, who used to be taken in by it, mock at it now as a dead thing, robbed of all its strength. Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot as he now is, the passers-by jeer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the king who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Savior on the cross. It is bound hand and foot, all who are in Christ trample it as they pass and as witnesses to Him deride it, scoffing and saying, "O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?"

(Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, V-27)

You see the point, I trust. His argument is simply that "everybody knows" with what good cheer Christians went to meet the most horrible of deaths. It was a common thing; all had seen it. Yet, argues Athanasius, anyone but the Christian fears death greatly. This cannot be possible -- unless the Christian knows that death itself has been defeated at Calvary.

I must ask you, therefore, to examine your attitude towards death. Are you afraid of it? Is it "the end?" Or do you see it as they did, as something to be despised and jeered at -- conquered by your Lord and King? I'm afraid we do not set so good an example here. It is no good arguing that they were closer in time to Jesus; as much time separated them from Jesus' earthly ministry as separates us from George Washington. We need a change of heart in this.

It begins at the Lord's Supper, for there we are reminded of the Cross. We are to remember the suffering, yes; but let us also remember the triumph and proclaim with those saints of old, "**O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?**"

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

(August 3)

Somewhere -- probably in II Hezekiah, I haven't had a chance to look it up -- God gives every college student the right to complain about the food. As the fortunes of life would have it, in my undergraduate years I did not have the funds to move out of the dorm, so I had a great deal of experience in complaining about dorm food. A common sign in our dorm rooms was this: "Choose your meals carefully in the cafeteria -- you are what you eat." It gives one pause.

It is still true, however. If your diet consists of cookies and ice cream, you will soon begin to resemble an ice cream sundae -- every mound of it.

It is true in the spiritual realm as well as in the physical realm. If you're one of those people who complains that there is too much sex and violence on your VCR, perhaps you ought to check out what you are checking out from the video store.

The positive sense of this is also true. If you take in -- would "devour" be the right word? -- the Scripture, it changes you. You become what you have "eaten," greatly to your profit. When you listen to the Word, preached, taught or read, you are taking it in, and you become what you "eat."

This is true also in Communion. Communion is a symbolic meal. One of the (many) symbolic interpretations of this meal is this: You are "eating" the very body and blood of Jesus Christ. Now, we know that our Lord's body was like ours, until the Resurrection. He ate, he drank, he felt pain -- He was a man just like us. But after the resurrection, his body was different. It was still recognizable as his body, but it was greatly different in kind. Paul puts it this way:

(1 Cor 15:42-44 NIV) So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; {43} it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; {44} it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

By taking in the body and blood of Christ you are -- symbolically -- becoming like him; you are what you eat. You therefore become like Christ, presuming that you partake with sincerity and repentance. Since you have taken in his body -- his nature, as it were -- you will share in that nature. We will be raised from the dead just as He was raised from the dead.

The meal is a spiritual one. It must be taken in a spiritual way -- in love, truth and light. The result will be spiritual for now -- until the day when the faith becomes sight, and He returns to claim those who love Him.

LATIMER, LATIMER

(August 10)

John Latimer was the Archbishop of Canterbury. As such, in his time, he was viewed as the highest church official of England. It was a time when Archbishops were appointed by the king, and the king expected loyalty. The conflict in the mind was intense.

On one occasion the king, visited Latimer at Canterbury, and evidently it was an unexpected arrival. Latimer began his sermon this way:

“Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say. Henry the king is here.”

“Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say. The king of kings is here.”

Is it so? Our Lord assures us of the fact:

(Mat 18:20 NIV) For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

It is one of the most difficult of things to realize, and one of the simplest. We are often so taken up in worship that we begin to pay attention to ourselves. Aren't we singing well? Isn't that wonderful music? Right on, preacher! Yet for each of these moments we must realize that our Lord is in our midst, unseen but not unnoticed. The singing is not just for our amusement, nor just to make a joyful noise. It is to put us in tune with him, by praise, by petition, by thanksgiving in song. The special music is to turn our hearts to him; the sermon to teach and remind us of his commands. All our music and all our words should be done with this in mind.

There is more. His presence in our midst is the source of our unity. A person has one body (imagine what it would be like to have a selection!); that person also has one spirit. We are one body because we have one spirit, the spirit of God. In a very real sense which the world cannot understand -- because it cannot understand or know God -- we are one.

We are one here; we are one around the world. We are one around the world; we are one throughout all ages. Not because we agree; not because there are no factions; not because we are wise -- we are one because He is one (though three) and therefore we are one (though many). We are formed into one body in imitation of Him.

It therefore is important for us to realize this most especially at Communion. We are one; now we eat at the table as one. Do you come to His table with thoughts which hurt the unity of His body, the church? Are you simmering the stew called anger? Are you chilling the warmth of friendship and love in the arctic of jealousy? Consider well: examine yourself, and ask: "Is there anything in my heart and mind which hurts the oneness of His body?" If so, ask forgiveness (of him and of those you have offended) -- and partake of His generous forgiveness.

LONE WOLF GONZUALLES

(August 17)

The tale you are about to read is true. When I first heard it, I thought it nothing but a tall tale from Texas, but the Los Angeles Times published it as fact in the man's obituary. As the obituary columns are relatively free from political correctness, we may take it as truth.

In the early 1930s a major riot broke out in an oil town in West Texas. The drunken oil field workers were tearing up the place, and the sheriff and mayor wired to the governor in Austin for help. The reply came back that help would arrive by special train early the next morning.

In the small hours of darkness, with the riot still raging, the mayor and the sheriff met the special train. It had one passenger car on it, and one passenger in it. Six foot nine inches tall, criss-crossed bandoleers, two .45 caliber revolvers on the hips and regulation Stetson on his head, down stepped Henry M. T. Gonzualles.

The sheriff, after making sure that the Second Armored Division was not cowering under the seats in the train, shouted, "You mean they only sent one man???"

Gonzualles, in the manner of all Texas Rangers, took his thumb and placed it on his nose, pushed up the brim of his regulation issue Stetson, looked down from that terrific height and replied, "There's only one riot, ain't there?"

The story goes on from there. Gonzualles then proceeded to put down the riot. To this day, carved over the entrance to the headquarters of the Texas Rangers in Austin, Texas, are the words, "One riot, one man." In these later days we have forgotten the power that one solitary man can have for good. Such power is not from any native bravado, but from the still water that runs deep. Courage is not the denial of fear nor the absence of fear -- it is the conquest of fear.

The ultimate example of this was our Lord, Jesus Christ. It has always comforted me that he was afraid, desperately so, in the Garden of Gethsamene. He did not take counsel of his fears, but of his Father in Heaven. By remaining in God's will, courage was supplied to him to face the test of Calvary. Facing it, he triumphed. But note the key fact: he remained in his Father's will. Still water runs deep, but it cannot run unless connected to the source of the fountain. So it is that we are commanded to examine ourselves before Communion. In that examination we come closer to our Father, and in that closeness the living water He supplies runs deep indeed.

Gonzualles was, in fact, such a man. In an interview near the end of his life, he was asked which of his accomplishments gave him the most satisfaction. He did not even mention the riot. He replied that his greatest satisfaction came after he retired from the Texas Rangers. He, and a group of his fellow Presbyterians, banded together to raise funds for and construct the first hospital in his home town. God needs to send only one man -- when that man is in touch with his heavenly Father.

FORGIVENESS AND SHAME

(August 24)

Dan Sickles was, in the 1850s, an up and coming politician, a Congressman from New York. He was a member of one of the most prominent of political organizations (and the most corrupt): Tammany Hall. He had his sights set upon becoming president of the United States. He might have made it -- had he not shot and killed Philip Barton Key.

Key was the son of Francis Scott Key, the man who wrote "The Star Spangled Banner," our national anthem. He was a good friend of Sickles. He was also Sickles' lawyer, and Sickles appears to have used his influence to have Key appointed as United States attorney. He also was Mrs. Sickles' lover.

One day, on the street across from the White House, Sickles met Key. He pulled out his revolver and shot him dead on the spot. That accomplished, he walked down the street to surrender the revolver (and himself) to the Attorney General.

The trial was a public circus. People debated whether or not Sickles was a man who had defended the sanctity of marriage or a common murderer. Remember, this was in a time when almost everyone in America believed that divorce was morally wrong. Adultery was not "an affair," but one of the worst sins anyone could commit. Meanwhile, his defense team (including Edwin Stanton, later the Secretary of War for Abraham Lincoln) came up with a new defense. For the first time in American justice, they raised the defense of "temporary insanity." They argued that the shock of finding out that his wife was untrue to him, and with his best friend, was so great as to render him insane. The court acquitted him.

He returned to Congress to find himself an absolute pariah. When he entered the hall, other members refused even to sit near him. He was totally ostracized -- but not for murder. You see, he had done something so utterly scandalous as to make the shooting seem trivial by comparison. He forgave his wife, and took her back.

Righteousness implies judgment. Judgment implies shame. If there is to be forgiveness, then the shame must somehow be borne. The shame of our sins was borne for us on the cross of Calvary. Like Hosea of the Old Testament, like Dan Sickles, our Lord has taken us back, despite our shame. He bore the shame for us, for as the Scripture says,

(Heb 12:2 NIV) Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Therefore, indeed, let us "fix our eyes on Jesus." As we eat the bread and take the cup, let us remember that He bore our shame as well as the pain on Calvary. He is indeed the author and perfecter of our faith, at the right hand of God. Communion reminds of the price of that joy.

LABOR DAY

(August 31)

(1 Th 4:11-12 NIV) Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, {12} so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

In the manner of American politics it has been decreed that a day should be set aside to honor the common laboring man. When this was first done, most of us did indeed work with our hands (and not on a keyboard and mouse). On Labor Day such work is glorified -- but I suspect that if most of us were offered the life of ease and luxury, we would not turn it down for the honor of being a laborer.

The Scripture gives us a different viewpoint. For the most of us, we are to “make it our ambition” to lead a quiet life. Have you ever heard of leading a quiet life described as someone’s ambition? Or, for that matter, do you have the ambition to mind your own business? Let alone the ambition to work with your own hands! There is wisdom in this. Paul gives us two reasons here: first, that we may win the respect of outsiders, and that secondly we may not be dependent on anybody.

Labor, you see, is not an end in itself. It must have a purpose. Most of us are not called to be preachers or evangelists; we are called to be just plain “us.” But our labor may have a divine purpose. If others look at us with respect, our words about the Lord Jesus Christ may carry that much more weight. Think of it this way: the man standing on a soap box in the park may be preaching the truth -- but who’s listening? We’re human; what we listen to often depends on who is saying it. So our labor, our quiet life and minding our own business may indeed serve as a testimony to the righteousness which is in Jesus Christ.

Labor, then, is subordinate to the cause of Christ. There is a third reason, not discussed in this passage but frequent elsewhere, for these strange ambitions. Many of us labor not for the quiet life but for the materials that labor can bring. We work hard -- not to win respect from others, but to buy the status symbols our society mandates. What we work for says a great deal about who we are. Our work shows our priorities in action.

Communion is a time to reflect on ourselves; that includes our priorities. What are you working for? Does your life style say, “I’m working to get ahead (of what?); to keep up (with whom?); to have more (and why?)” Or does it say, “I work to provide for my family; other than that, my ambition is not for wealth but for Jesus Christ?” Words are not heard in the presence of action. As you take the Lord’s Supper this week, ask yourself: “Just who am I working for?”

THE REJECTION OF CHRIST

(September 7)

At first glance it appears most curious that Jesus, the Messiah, would be rejected by the Jews. Consider what God did to prepare the Jews for His coming:

- First, over the period of many thousands of years, there are many prophecies recorded with regard to the coming of “The Holy One.” Both explicit and implicit, they were studied so well that the authorities knew even where he was to be born.
- Over the final two thousand years of that time, from Moses until his birth, God had consistently been in contact with (and disciplining) those same Jews. He was hammering into their heads the kind of God He is.
- At a deeper and more mystical level, all the Old Testament worship practices were forerunners of the things to come. In the animal sacrifices -- especially Passover -- we can see the picture of the Christ.

Despite all this, Israel rejected her Messiah. Indeed, this rejection was prophesied as well in the Old Testament. Such rejection was seen as necessary.

- It was necessary that the Jews reject the Messiah so that the good news -- we are inclined to forget the meaning of the word “gospel” -- could be spread outside the boundaries of Israel.
- It was necessary that the “Son of Man” experience this, that He might have full sympathy with us. To be the perfect sacrifice, He must be fully human. To be perfect, He must be fully God.

Communion is a time when we may contemplate the rejection which Christ suffered on our behalf. Consider how he was rejected:

- His own closest friends and followers -- men whom he had taught for three years, living with them daily in rugged conditions -- abandoned him as soon as the official oppression began.
- The nation of Israel, in the persons of its leaders, officially rejected him. This was the same group of men who studied the Scriptures so diligently that they knew where he would be born, and yet they could not recognize him as Messiah.
- On the cross itself, we hear the cry of the greatest rejection of all: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” He who knew no sin became sin for us, rejected as sin must be rejected by a holy God.

Consider well, then, what your Lord went through. The emblems passed are to remind you that your Lord was rejected by Heaven and earth -- for you.

MYSTERY!

September 14

(Eph 1:7-10 NIV) In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace {8} that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. {9} And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, {10} to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

"Mystery" -- as Paul has it here -- is not the same word with which we are familiar. When I think of mystery, I think instantly of Agatha Christie, the great bamboozler of our time. I speak as one of the great bamboozled. I have never yet been able to penetrate "who done it?" I think of myself as being reasonably intelligent, so it's frustrating to read these mysteries and not be able to figure them out before the detective announces the solution. How do these mystery writers do it?

Dorothy Sayers, another great mystery writer (and probably the finest writer of theology in the twentieth century) has revealed the secret of how it's done. She explains it this way: "If a thing could only be done one way, and if only one person could have done it that way, then you've got your criminal, motive or no motive. There's How, When, Where, Why and Who -- and when you've got How, you've got Who."

In this series on Communion, I have given much attention to Why: the love of God. Communion also reveals to us the mystery of God's purpose: the How. The How is Christ, the mystery of the ages. Mystery in the Biblical use of the word means something which was hidden, but is to be revealed at the proper time. Christ is the great mystery of God. From the beginning, it was God's intention that Christ should come. Throughout the Old Testament, first in hints of prophecy -- one thinks of Job crying out, "I know that my Redeemer lives!" -- and then in more explicit terms, God makes it clear that the Messiah (which is the same as Christ) is to come. Then, at the right time, Jesus arrived. The mystery was, as far as God was willing, revealed to us. We understand now what God was driving at. He spent two thousand (and more) years drilling into one people group just what kind of God He is -- so that we could know Him when he came. The great point of that coming was Calvary. God's purpose in this visit was to provide a way back to him -- and that way is Jesus.

But there is more. The mystery is not yet fully revealed, nor will it be until He accomplishes his ultimate purpose: "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

In Communion, we proclaim not only the mystery revealed, his coming to the Cross, but also the mystery to be revealed -- his coming again. We do not yet know all -- but we know Who.

SOCCKER AND COMMUNION

(September 21)

My oldest son has managed to obtain a summer job which pays rather better than most: he umpires baseball games and referees soccer matches. Now, the baseball games I thoroughly enjoy. Along with basketball, this is a favorite sport, one that I played in my youth. But I must confess to you that I see absolutely no merit in soccer whatsoever. You can almost imagine Bob Newhart talking on the phone about it:

“You dress up these grown men in little silk shorts and matching shirts. Right. (Hey fellas, listen to this one)”

“Uh huh, they run up and down the field kicking a little round ball. But they’re not allowed to touch it with their hands. (Hey fellas, a sport for the malcoordinated!)”

“No TV time-outs (That’ll sell at the advertising agency!)”

“And you try to kick it through this net. And most of the games are decided on penalty kicks. (We got a winner here, guys, for sure!)”

The odd thing is my kid’s attitude to this. He will turn on the TV and actually watch soccer -- in Spanish! I know his Spanish isn’t good enough to catch everything, for he often turns the sound down. How is it that he loves it so much and I find it so boring?

I think the answer lies in the fact that he has played the game, and I have not. Soccer was almost unknown when I was growing up; it was a popular sport when he was growing up. He’s a soccer player; I’m (at best) a watcher. Playing the game makes a difference.

The same is true in Communion. If you find that Communion is a time best reserved for discreetly pulling something out of your wallet for the offering, maybe it’s because you’re a watcher, not a player. Ask yourself this: what have I done for Jesus Christ this week? If you can’t remember anything you’ve done for Him, perhaps you can see the reason why you don’t enjoy remembering what He’s done for you.

And indeed, He has “done” for you; Communion is the remembering of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Nothing we can do can change the fact that this sacrifice is absolutely essential to salvation. All we can do is imitate it.

So let me encourage you: get in the game.

(James 1:22 NIV) Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

THE FRIEND OF GOD

(September 28)

One of the most common concepts in Protestant Christianity is Martin Luther's *sola fide* -- faith alone. It is the doctrine that we are not saved by what we do ("works") but rather by whom we believe ("faith"). A "proof text" often used to bolster this view is quoted from the Letter of James:

(James 2:23 NIV) And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.

The argument is fairly simple: Abraham believed God; God credited him with righteousness. So often we then conclude that what we *do* has nothing to do with our belief. But back up a couple of verses. What was Abraham doing here, about which James said he "believed?"

(James 2:21-22 NIV) Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? {22} You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

Even though we often hear James 2:23 quoted as supporting the idea that "works" are of no consequence, the passage is actually an explanation of James more famous quotation:

(James 2:17 NIV) In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. The King James has it in more familiar language: "Faith, without works, is dead."

The sad thing is that we have redefined the word "faith." To James and the others of his time, the idea that you could have faith without acting on it was absurd -- as indeed this is the point of the second chapter of his letter. He considered it foolish. We, on the other hand, have redefined faith to mean "intellectual agreement." I have faith that the earth goes around the sun. I have faith in my wife. One of those two I act on -- and so the word "faith" in those two sentences has two different meanings. Christian faith is the kind of faith you act on -- or it is not the faith at all.

As you take Communion, you are stating your faith. You proclaim to all who observe that you believe. The loaf and the cup, you are saying, are symbolically the body and blood of Jesus Christ, broken and shed for our sins. In a communication too powerful for words, you proclaim his death as sacrifice for us. Before we do this, each of us is commanded to "examine himself." So I ask you to examine this: am I making an empty proclamation at Communion? Is my faith lacking in works? Or does my faith overflow in good works to the praise of God?

Use the mirror of your mind; see if your faith is alive -- or dead.

WHO IS THIS MAN?

(October 5)

There is a wonderful old movie which surfaces this time of year, *Miracle on 34th Street*. If you can, watch the old version; the new ones lack the sense of wonder and innocence of the original production. It is important, for the story contains a truth.

The plot is relatively simple. An elderly gentleman, through a series of comic circumstances, claims to be the one and only Santa Claus. He is locked up as a suspected lunatic. The hero of the picture, with romantic complications, represents him in court -- and proves to the court's satisfaction that he is "the one and only Santa Claus." The case is dismissed; the boy gets the girl, and all live happily ever after.

There is, however, a point in all this. If I claim to be Napoleon, then the lunatic asylum awaits. Jesus of Nazareth claimed on numerous occasions to be the one and only God -- the representation in the flesh of the awesome Jehovah of the Old Testament.. As C. S. Lewis once put it, that gives us only three options: either he is genuinely the son of God, or he is the devil of hell, or he is a lunatic on the level with a man who says he's a poached egg. He did not leave us any other choice. He did not intend to.

The point is important for this. Christians say that Jesus is indeed God in the flesh. Such a claim would meet with approval from any number of people if only Jesus had performed to their expectations. It would have been so convenient if he had left us some wise sayings, told us to be good, and then politely ascended to heaven. He did not.

Indeed, the whole purpose of his coming seems to have been to die on the cross. He came to be a ransom for us. That he left us much wisdom, that he taught his disciples well, that he performed many miracles, all these are true. His purpose, however, was to die on the cross. That's why he came. This is, to some, scandalous. A God who comes to us to give us a little good advice and then assure us that we're all bound for heaven is very reassuring and comforting. A God who tells us that we are sinners -- and then dies to take away the penalty of our sin -- is vastly more challenging. Indeed, the whole point of his life seems to be that we are sinners; he offers us salvation -- if we will cast our entire lives into his hands.

So it comes down to this: Who do you say He is? Devil? Lunatic? Son of God?? If you say He is the Son of God, then the Lord's Supper is a way of remembering what He did for you. He did not come to give you wisdom; he did not come to make things smooth; he came to die for you and for me. He calls us then to live for Him. As you take the bread and the cup, remember: this is who He is, and why He came.

DAY OF ATONEMENT

(October 12)

Yesterday was (by my calendar) Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Mishnah Tehillim, a sacred Jewish text from the Middle Ages, records this legend about this day:

The numerical value of the letters in the word "Satan" {Hebrew *Hasatan*} adds to 364, the total number of days in the year, less one. Satan can accuse the Jewish people and lead them astray every day of the year, with the exception of Yom Kippur. On that day the Holy One, praised be He, says to Satan, "You have no power over them today. Nevertheless, go and see what they are doing." When Satan finds them all fasting and praying, dothed in white garments like the angels, he immediately returns in shame and confusion. The Holy One asks him, "How are My children?" Satan answers, "They are like angels, and I have no power over them." Thereupon the Holy One, praised be He, puts Satan in chains and declares to His people, "I have forgiven you."

We no longer celebrate the Day of Atonement, for Jesus Christ is our Atonement, once and forever. The former things are passed away. But there is a point to this legend. It is in how we are seen.

We are sinners (those wanting points of detail in my case may consult my wife; she has an extensive list. Regrettably, it's accurate). But that is not how God sees us, looking at us through the lens of Calvary. When He looks at us, he sees something entirely different. He sees us, as the Scripture puts it, as if we have "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. (Colossians 3:10)" Like Satan in the legend, he sees us as fasting and praying, clothed like the angels. Because of the Cross, God sees us in the sinless perfection of His son, Jesus Christ.

There is another point: it is the power that Satan no longer has over us. Paul puts it this way: (Rom 6:9-11 NIV) For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. {10} The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. {11} In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The victory we celebrate in Communion is not just a victory over the grave, and the promise of resurrection to come. It is also a victory over sin in this life. As we look through the lens of Calvary, we see Jesus suffering, dying, buried, and rising triumphant. As God looks at us through that same lens, he sees in us Jesus Christ. This is the victory we celebrate, a victory for today and forever.

ATTITUDE AND ALTITUDE

(October 19)

(Phil 2:5-8 NIV) Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: {6} Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, {7} but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. {8} And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on a cross!

Motivational experts are currently using a new buzz phrase: “Your attitude determines your altitude.” We are told that we need to have that sneering arrogance that just brushes aside obstacles on our way to success. As Lucy once told Charlie Brown, “I don’t want any ups and downs. All I want are ups and ups and ups!” From “trash talking” in sports to “in your face” business attitudes, we are told that arrogance is the key to success.

Compare that, if you will, to the attitude shown by Christ Jesus. Paul tells us here that he was “in very nature” (philosophically, “in essence”) God. What was his attitude? That he took upon himself the nature of man, and a man of humble circumstances. Consider then, the change in Jesus: He went from “in very nature God” to man. Not just man, but humble man. Not just humble man, but poverty pressed wandering preacher. Not just wanderer, but persecuted. Not just persecuted, but abandoned. Not just abandoned, but crucified. At this example we are instructed to consider his attitude. The motivational experts would seem to be right. That humble attitude, it would seem, cost him everything -- until Easter Sunday.

(Phil 2:9-11 NIV) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, {10} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, {11} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We are often instructed to remember Christ’s death at the time of Communion. I would invite you to consider what preceded it: the greatest change in circumstance ever known, from heaven to earth itself. The change was voluntary; we are instructed to have the same attitude. As we examine ourselves at this time, may I suggest a few simple questions?

- Are we too important to take on the menial tasks in the church? (Have you ever changed diapers in the church nursery?)
- Is “status” so important in our lives that we sacrifice the eternal to achieve appearances?
- Are we afraid of the embarrassment we would suffer if we forced ourselves to speak to others about the grace of God?

DRESSING UP

(October 26) Halloween 10/31

(Gal 3:26-27 NIV) You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, {27} for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Or, as the King James so eloquently put that last verse,

(Gal 3:27 KJV) For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

It is fashionable in some Christian circles to scowl at Halloween as a heathen holiday, a tribute to Satan, a terrible thing to do. I will leave you to your own opinion of this; but I must ask you to look at it, for the moment, through the eyes of a child. Remember for the moment that “(Titus 1:15 NIV) To the pure, all things are pure,...”.

Have you ever seen a child dressing up for Halloween? For that matter, give a small child a trunk of old clothes and the child soon becomes someone else. My father was a soldier when I was growing up; how often did I play at being a soldier! The uniforms may seem absurdly large to adult eyes -- but I looked at them through the eyes of a child, and I saw a much finer picture.

The Bible frequently assures us that we are the children of God. Indeed, our Lord goes so far as to state,

(Mat 18:3 NIV) And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's Halloween. We're His children. So what would we dress up as?

Well, some of us would dress up in our favorite fantasy. But I think that most children, at any other time of year (i.e., with no prompting from the toy makers) would dress up like I did as a child -- just like their father. We would, as it says in the King James, “put on Christ.”

But that's not all. We have small children in our neighborhood, and they do dress up once in a while. It's really charming to watch them as they come to the door and announce to you “I'm” We know who they really are of course, but with a smile on the face, we say, “Of course you are!”

So we go to our heavenly Father and announce to Him, “I'm Christ!” Or at least, “I'm a little Christ,” for that is what Christian means. We have put on the costume of Christ, imitating Him as we can. And our Father, smiling, says, “Of course you are!”

The privilege of putting on Christ is the privilege of being a child of God. That privilege was gained for us at the Cross. My father's uniforms did not come from the costume shop, but from his hard service in the Army. My Lord's crown did not come by pretense, but by death, burial and resurrection. He paid the price so that I might wear the crown.

ELECTION DAY

(November 2)

“Democracy,” Winston Churchill is reputed to have remarked, “is the worst form of government. Except for all the others.”

There is much uncertainty and debate about the role of a Christian in democracy; some say this, others that, and it’s not my purpose to state the doctrine of church and state. Rather, I would have you remember why our Founding Fathers insisted upon popular votes. It was not because they believed the common man a source of virtue (possibly with the exception of Thomas Jefferson). It was because they believed that all men are sinners, and none were so inherently righteous as to be completely trusted with the governance of their fellow men.

It is a dour view of human nature, and one not much in favor these days. We prefer to think of the citizenry as the source of our democracy’s strength, the foundation of the republic’s virtue. It is not so. Our ancestors carefully constructed a constitution which provided for a balance of powers so that no one man, or group of men, would become so powerful as to ride roughshod over all others. The view is that all of us are sinners, and our only political hope is to have each sinner keep tabs on all the others.

The point here is not the correct method of constructing a government, but rather the futility of a government, any government, in correcting sin. No government program can make a man righteous, and those who wrote the constitution knew that. Our leaders have since forgotten it, but that does not change the truth.

What, then, does make a man righteous? Our society has made two other attempts at it: one is to deny the existence of sin (must be your heredity or upbringing) and the other is to soothe it (why do psychologists talk so much about guilt?) There is only one real way to deal with sin, to make men righteous: that is to take up the righteousness Jesus Christ made available at the cross. Only his perfect righteousness will work in this world; only his righteousness will be of any effect on the Day of Judgment.

This Lord’s Supper is the celebration of the sacrifice which made that righteousness available to us. Without his death on the cross, we would have no means of access to the righteousness of Christ, and thus no access to our Heavenly Father. Our founding fathers knew that liberty was bought with a price, eternal vigilance and often the sacrifice of lives. Righteousness, our eternal freedom in Christ, is also bought with a price: the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. As you partake of the Lord’s Supper, remember: you are not your own; you were bought with a price.

VETERAN'S DAY

(November 9)

The writer Irwin S. Cobb tells a story: It seemed that two Confederate veterans were reminiscing about the days during the war when Paducah was being fought over by the Northern and Southern armies. "I remember," one veteran said, "when we pushed those Yankees all the way across the Ohio and up into Illinois!" The other old soldier regretfully corrected him. "I was there, old friend," he said, "and I'm afraid that wasn't the way it happened at all. Those Yankees drove *us* out of Paducah and almost to the Tennessee line." The first veteran reflected a bit, then sourly remarked, "Another good story ruined by an eyewitness!"

As long as there are veterans, there will be war stories. Some of them will be true. I've noticed one thing, however. Most veterans will have a medal or two. The stories behind those medals are sometimes a little less often repeated, for often they are painful memories rather than glorious ones. War stories come by being there when something was happening. Medals come by sacrifice.

Yet whether we mount them on the wall in a lighted frame or put them in a box in the closet, the veteran keeps his medals. He needs to remember. At this time of year in some communities the veteran even parades them so that the community will remember too.

We, as Christians, share a similar memory. Each week, for two thousand years, we have shared the memory of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. It is a painful memory. The loaf and the cup are the "medals" which display not our sacrifice but His. We keep this from becoming a "war story" because we have the written, eyewitness accounts of the time when Christ instituted this memorial.

Like the medals given to the soldier, this memorial is designed to honor the one who sacrificed for us. He was the one who "paid it all." Therefore we remember. In that memory we are commanded to examine ourselves. There are many ways in which we can do that, but if I might stretch the analogy a bit, consider this one: picture a father with his little children. They are looking at his medals and asking how he got them. He tells them the story of the combat and what he did to earn them. The children go away from this session, imaginations fired, and go out to be a hero just like dad.

When you take the cup and loaf, remember the sacrifice made. Then, like the little children, resolve to go out and imitate your Father. Can any greater honor be paid to a veteran father than to have his children say, "I want to be just like him?"

COURAGE IN QUIET PLACES

(November 16)

In his classic novel *The Hobbit*, J. R. R. Tolkien gives an interesting insight on courage. The scene is set: little Bilbo Baggins, a half pint Everyman, is going down the tunnel to sneak into the dragon's lair. Not one of his companions would volunteer to go with him. About halfway down the tunnel he hears the rumble of the sleeping dragon. This is the description:

"... Wisps of vapor floated up and past him, and he began to sweat. A sound, too, began to throb in his ears, a sort of bubbling like the noise of a large pot galloping on the fire, mixed with a rumble as of a gigantic tom-cat purring. This grew to the unmistakable gurgling noise of some vast animal snoring in its sleep down there in the red glow in front of him.

" It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterward were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait. ..."

Have you ever had a moment like that? A moment when you had the time and quiet to think, and realized that what you were about to do was indeed a frightening thing? I did once. It was at a wedding. I nearly stayed a bachelor all my life (Betty managed to talk me out of it). How often we reach the point where we say to ourselves, "Look how small I am, and how great the task ahead of me."

I'm like that quite often at Communion. How often I drag myself, mentally, to the altar of God and moan, "Here I am again. Back again, with the same sins as last week, unable to triumph over them. Lord, how can you stand to see me like this?" The great temptation is to say to God that I am such a sinner that nothing can be done for me. I take counsel of my fears and listen to my discouragement. The battle begins.

Then I begin to think about what lies ahead that week. I think of the people I will have to face; the conflicts which seem inevitable, and the reactions already burning in me. It seems hopeless to think that I can walk as Christ would have me walk.

If I stood alone in my own strength, that would be true. But I do not stand alone. Communion is a time when we must -- like Bilbo in the tunnel -- face our fears and our discouragements. If we face them alone, we will fail. But we do not need to face them alone. For just as we are weak, He is mighty, and He is with us. Unlike Bilbo, we are not alone. The Lord Almighty stands with us.

I do not stand alone. I bring my sins to a loving, forgiving heavenly Father. I receive from him the charge to try again, and his promise of his aid. I am brave, for I am not alone.

THANKSGIVING

(November 23)

This week brings us to Thanksgiving, the truly American holiday. It has been defined as the day on which one species of turkey stops gobbling so that another may start.

Have you ever considered how many ways we use the expression, "Thank you?" There are many more, but consider this little progression. Pay particular attention to the idea of a sense of obligation.

First, we use it as a social lubricant. When you make a purchase, and the clerk hands you your change, you say "thank you." Now, the clerk actually owes you the money; both of you expect that she will give it to you, and in fact you are getting exactly what you deserve. Still, you say "thank you." It is a social courtesy, a way of acknowledging that you are satisfied with the transaction. There is, however, no sense of obligation.

Consider, however, a little different case. The salesman at the car dealership also says "thank you" when you purchase your new car. Again, there is an exchange of value; again, you are getting what you paid for and the dealership is getting its money. But the salesman knows you did not have to purchase the car at that particular dealership. "Thank you" means that he knows that; you had a choice and made it in his favor. The two sides are still equal, in money, but there is a little more sense of obligation.

Thanksgiving, as originally celebrated, extends this concept. God is under no obligation to the farmer to provide rain at the right time; to protect from hail and the elements. The farmer depends upon the elements. The Pilgrims felt that God had done them a favor; he had been gracious to them. True, they had worked the soil, planted the crops -- but having put the seed in the ground, they depended on God for the growth. The sense of obligation is much deeper now

There is a much greater case, however, which we celebrate at Communion. God was not only under no obligation to send his son to the cross, He had every good reason not to. We were (and are) sinners; he is a just and righteous God. He owes us nothing; we borrow the very idea of existence from the great I AM. Yet, while still sinners, Christ came and became our sacrifice for sin, that we might become the children of God.

Thankfulness varies by two things: the size of the favor and the extent to which we deserved it. The favor in this case is eternal life and cleansing from sin; what greater favor could be bestowed? The extent to which we deserved it? Not at all. So then, as we take Communion, we should do so with a thankful spirit, knowing that we did not get what we deserved -- we got His love instead.

SINGING IN THE SHOWER

(November 30)

I am a “shower singer.” The family knows that the door to the bathroom must be closed when dad is in the shower. The interesting thing about it: I think I sound wonderful. It seems that my shower stall has an excellent tone of voice. It also has a magnificent sense of rhythm, perfect pitch and of course a wonderful selection of great melodies. If we could just move that shower stall to the choir loft, we’d never lack for a perfect bass section.

Unfortunately, out of the shower, the facts that I’m partially deaf in one ear, have no real training in music and a voice that is remarkable for the fact that it sounds like none other -- all combine to make the Music Department grateful that I’ve never darkened the choir loft. Or at least they should be.

Shower stall singing holds within it a trap: it makes you think you can sing. Singing in the shower is easy; singing in a trained choir (we are very blessed in that way here) is much more difficult. It takes practice, training, discipline, and at least a bit of talent. I am assured that practice, training and discipline are the keys. Any number of choir members have assured me that they have no talent to sing of. Instead, they practice, they train, they are self disciplined -- and they sing.

At the Lord’s Supper there is a similar trap: it makes us all think we are good Christians. The Scripture says the Lord loves the repentant sinner, and in the sanctuary there are plenty of them. With very little effort, we can fall into the habit of telling the Lord at Communion just what miserable sinners we are -- without, of course, the slightest intention of changing. We can confess to Him just how difficult it is to repent; how our evil habits have hold of us. Indeed, like shower singing, it feels good to “get it off your chest.” We confess and confess and confess -- but never repent. Like the shower singer, we sound great in the sanctuary. We then take part in the ceremony and go away feeling clean.

This is a terrible trap. We have all the emotional blessings of confession, all the catharsis of laying our sins out before God (no one else, of course; that might make us accountable for changing the way we live). We rely on the maxim, “God will forgive me -- it’s His hobby.” If we do this, we are indeed in the Devil’s grip. Communion was never meant to be a tranquilizer, but an antibiotic against evil.

The Scripture shows us the cure:

(James 5:16 NIV) Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

If you come to the Lord’s Supper only to feel clean, you will get what you came for -- and no more. Come instead for repentance; claim your brother’s aid; confess your sins and pray for each other -- and be healed.

PEARL HARBOR!

(December 7)

It has been called “a day of infamy.” It has been called “the greatest military disaster in American history.” Books have been written to tell how it happened, or show how it should have been prevented. Movies show it as tragedy.

How seldom we see it as what it really was: a tremendous victory for the cause of freedom. Almost no one saw it as such at the time -- almost no one. Let me share with you two voices who saw it a little differently, on opposite sides of the war and the globe.

The first is a man born and bred for war: Winston S. Churchill. Here is his reaction:

“... So we had won after all! Yes, after Dunkirk; after the fall of France; after the horrible episode of Oran; after the threat of invasion, when, apart from the Air and the Navy, we were an almost unarmed people; after the deadly struggle of the U-boat war -- the first Battle of the Atlantic, gained by a hand's-breadth; after seventeen months of lonely fighting and nineteen months of my responsibility in dire stress, we had won the war. ... How long the war would last or in what fashion it would end, no man could tell, nor did I at this moment care. Once again in our long Island history we should emerge, however mauled or mutilated, safe and victorious. We should not be wiped out. Our history would not come to an end. We might not even have to die as individuals. Hitler's fate was sealed. Mussolini's fate was sealed. As for the Japanese, they would be ground to powder. All the rest was merely the proper application of overwhelming force.”

On the other side of the globe, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander of the Imperial Japanese Fleet, learned that Japanese emissaries in Washington had not presented the United States with the planned declaration of war before the attack. On learning this, he refused to join his officers in a victory celebration. He told them:

“You do not understand. We have awakened the sleeping giant, and filled him with a terrible resolve.”

How must things have looked to the Sanhedrin on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday? Perhaps they looked then as things look now to the world: “We've heard the last of this Jesus; he's dead, he's buried, he's gone.” Then came the dawn.

We do not understand God's victories. He tells us that if we would save our lives, we must lose them. The power of paradox runs through the Gospel, and nowhere greater than this: our salvation was purchased with His death; our resurrection guaranteed by His sacrifice.

Sometimes, we just don't know good news when we hear it.

FORGIVENESS IS ...

(December 14)

A professional Christian counselor once shared this definition of forgiveness: "Forgiveness is one person's willingness to bear the consequences of another person's sin."

Verbs, said Miss Hornbuckle (my junior high school English teacher, and her looks and manner well fit the name), are action words. The verb in that sentence is "bear." To bear is to carry a burden, in this instance for someone else. The physical picture is that of one person carrying a load for someone else.

There are all sorts of circumstances in which we bear someone else's burden. Sometimes we do it purely for love -- at least, I assume there are still books to carry and pretty girls to carry them for. Sometimes out of a brotherly love known as team spirit -- we cover for one of our teammates, bearing his or her workload for a while. Sometimes we do it out of a sense of obligation, grumbling all the way. Sometimes it may even be compelled. The greatest joy lies, no doubt, in doing it for love.

We may do it for love, but it also has a purpose. Sometimes it's just to show that love (carrying the books), but occasionally it's because of injury. If the one you love has been injured, even ordinary burdens can become too much to bear. If she's on crutches, he's carrying the skis.

God did that for us at Calvary. Just when we were so wounded that we could not bear the burden of our sins, He came. He took that burden from us, and bore it for us. In this we have forgiveness, for God bore the burden we could not. He is willing to bear the consequences of my sin -- all the way to the Cross.

He asks us in Communion to remember this sacrifice, this bearing of our burdens. May I ask you to remember not only the sacrifice but the way in which it was made? Jesus did not forgive us in word only, saying "I forgive you -- but you still have to pay." He did not forgive grudgingly, but joyfully. He did so in true love.

Think, then, how often our forgiveness falls short. How often we forgive in word only, saying (with an exasperated sigh), "I forgive you -- but if it ever happens again, you can bet I won't forget this." How often we forgive only under the compulsion of circumstance, doing it grudgingly. Consider our Lord's example on the Cross, and ask yourself, "Do I forgive like that?"

Jesus is our supreme example. He forgave us at the greatest cost any human could pay -- his life. He did so willingly and completely. As you remember that sacrifice, examine yourself and see: Do I "go and do likewise?"

THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS

(December 21)

It is a solidly established fact that the early church had no celebration of what we now call Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ. The custom at that time was to celebrate the day of a person's death, not birth, and the early church adopted various festivals honoring certain martyrs on the days which marked their deaths as well as Easter.

Christmas itself seems to have originated in the fourth century in the Roman church, and spread rapidly throughout Christendom. Surprisingly, one of the reasons for this rapid spread was the popularity of a certain heresy known as Arianism. Arius, the bishop who started all this, claimed that Jesus was not truly divine in every sense, but was a created being, the highest of all created beings but nonetheless created. The church needed a way to stress to the average Christian -- a person who could not read and depended upon the priests for solid doctrine -- that Jesus was in fact God in the flesh. The celebration of his birth being somewhat in fashion, the church promoted this as a way to instruct the faithful in correct doctrine.

Arianism has an opposite: it is called Gnosticism. Gnosticism is found in the New Testament church as a heresy. While Arianism says that Christ was not fully God, Gnosticism says that he was not fully man. Between these two heresies we have the roots of most of the cults which have plagued Christianity from its beginnings. Many cults just cannot accept Jesus as both "fully God" and "fully man," or, as the New Testament puts it, "Son of God" and "Son of Man."

It is essential to our understanding of Communion that we see him as both. Jesus Christ came to die, to pay the sacrifice due for our sins. Such a sacrifice had to be human, in the flesh, for the sin came from humanity. Such a sacrifice had to be divine, for only God could meet the standard of complete righteous perfection required of such a sacrifice.

That can be difficult to understand, so permit me an example. Let us suppose that I'm bankrupt -- no money and lots of bills to pay. I need some help, and because my credit is so lousy, no one will loan me the money. But, let's suppose, I have a rich uncle. I go to him and because he's a loving uncle he gives me the money to pay my debts.

Note two things: first, he must be a rich uncle. A poor one, a bankrupt like me, won't do. Next, his money has to be in dollars, because that's what I owe, and if he can't change it into dollars I'm still broke. Jesus is like that. Because he is God, he is able to pay the debt. Because he is man, he uses the same currency I do. Combined, he can pay the debt. And like my (very mythical) rich uncle, he loves me enough to do it. Enough to die on the cross so that my debt might be paid.

UNTIL HE COMES

(December 28)

(Mat 26:29 NIV) **I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."**

One of the many uses of ritual is to teach. Most of us learn best through repetition. If you think not, try diagramming this sentence. Unless you happen to teach English, most likely you can't do it. It's not that you weren't taught how; it's just that you don't practice it. The same thing is true in our ritual life. If you wish to learn from it, you must repeat it. So we repeat those rituals whose lessons need to be learned and relearned; therefore, we repeat the Lord's Supper. One reason for this is that in Communion we proclaim not only the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord, but also his coming again. It is not an aspect of Communion which is much emphasized. Indeed, I find that the return of the Lord is a subject which is dealt with very lightly in the church today (with some notable exceptions). This is strange, considering that we proclaim it every week in our ritual.

Make no mistake about it: we do proclaim it in the Lord's Supper. Our Lord explicitly connected this Passover meal with his return. Indeed, not with a return visit, but with the establishment of his Father's kingdom. You cannot take the Lord's Supper and consistently deny the return of Christ.

Christ also taught that when he returns in power and glory we will see the resurrection of the dead. There are many disputing theories about the details of this, but all agree on these things:

- All the dead will be raised -- to face some sort of judgment.
- The dead in Christ will be raised like He was raised -- incorruptible.
- The resurrection is a bodily resurrection, not just a "spiritual" one.

More than this is difficult to say. Leaving aside the controversial, those who are in Christ will be raised from the dead, in bodily form, to meet him at his return. That body is an eternal body; the fellowship with him and with the Father is eternal.

And we proclaim this truth every time we take Communion. Our deepest thoughts, the ones which surpass words, are acted out in symbol and ritual. This is a part of the deepest ritual in Christianity.

Note, "a part." The resurrection of the dead cannot be separated from the Passion of Christ. The resurrection is not an afterthought; it is not a pleasant epilogue to Christ's ministry. The resurrection is part and parcel of the first coming of Christ. He meant to bring this message. The Old Testament hints at it (in a couple of passages rather explicitly); all of Christ's teaching on the subject presumes it. Paul develops it more fully. Jesus Christ did not intend his sacrifice to be effective in this life only. When you take this cup, you look backward to the sacrifice -- and forward to his coming again.