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 ATTENTION TO WHAT IS SAID.

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

- THOMAS À KEMPIS

The Imitation of Christ

Cover: Communion at the Garden Tomb near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, by James Emery. Creative Commons 2.0 License.

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On Celebrations

(January 5), 1995

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 is 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 (Romans 12:15). 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 tells 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.[1]

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[1] The astute reader will recognize my debt in this essay to C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters.*

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 is 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 'Coeur 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

(June 15)

(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 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 <u>proclaim</u> 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 (Eph 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 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)

Hugh 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, crisscrossed 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 Gethsemane. 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.

Soccer 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, clothed 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.

Slaughter of the Innocents

January 1, 2006

Tucked away in the sweetness of the Christmas message is one horrible incident. Herod determines that he will not let the newborn King of the Jews live, and therefore orders the slaughter of all male children two and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem. This was prophesied by Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD, "A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; She refuses to be comforted for her children, Because they are no more." (Jer 31:15 NASB)

Many years later a great painter, Pieter Bruegel, portrayed this horrible moment. If you examine his painting, you see the horror of the act:

- You see the anguish of the parents; a father kneeling before one of the officials, begging for his child's life. It's winter; the father is lightly clad, and he's on his knees in the snow.
- You see the nervousness of the soldiers, bunched together at the edge of town, seeking moral strength and self justification in their numbers and in their soldierly discipline. They don't approve, but they have their orders.
- You see the evil glee of the executioners, reveling in the abject humiliation of the people, teasing them with the life and death of their children. They have power now; some old scores may be settled, or just the simple ego expansion that comes with the power to inflict misery and pain.

One thing Bruegel does that may surprise you. He sets the painting not in Palestine, but in his native Holland, in his own time. It is a message that, though the actual event happened long ago, the human drama and the failings it shows are still with us in any age. But if those horrors are with us in any age, their reply (and ultimate resolution) is likewise found in any age—in Christ:

- He is the one who sends the Comforter to comfort the mournful. He knows what it is to die; He has done it Himself.
- He is the one who will guide and encourage the wavering, putting backbone into the nervous soldier.
- He is the one who can forgive even those who slaughtered the innocent.

When you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death—and His power over it. Indeed, we do this until He comes again. When he does, we will see the rest of the prophecy fulfilled:

Thus says the LORD, "Restrain your voice from weeping And your eyes from tears; For your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD, "And they will return from the land of the enemy." There is hope for your future," declares the LORD, "And your children will return to their own territory. (Jer 31:16-17 NASB)

God sees such horrors in a different way. He knows that we are agonized by such things—but remember: the Innocents will return at the resurrection, and God will wipe away each tear. Until then, we remember His death while awaiting our eternal life.

Leaves

January 8

There are sections of this nation which are noted for the dazzling display of autumn leaves. The colors run riot, and people come to see the beauty of what nature has done.

These leaves might be a metaphor for the state of the church. The leaves originally were on the tree just as the early church was united. In that union there was great strength. The early Christian martyrs—including all but one of the Apostles—feared not even the worst of death, for their Lord had conquered it. As long as the leaves stuck to the tree, the leaves were green and strong.

But the time came when the leaves started to break away from the Branch. They began to change colors, a sign of their intent to break from the tree. They stuck to the tree for a while, but anyone who looked could tell you which were the ones that would soon be gone.

But the journey of the leaves was not over; indeed, they would be gathered together again—by a man with a rake or a leaf blower. United again—for their destruction.

That's the church. You will see it in the various denominations. It is interesting to read through the histories of the American Civil War and see how much the various denominations have altered their views. The changes in view preceded their departure, just like the leaves change color. We now see many denominations dying—even while they make a bold display of their "new" theology.

This also applies to individual Christians. The change is subtle at first, but eventually shows up brightly. The individual changes his color—his doctrine—and leaves the true Branch. There is a warning in the leaves: these will be gathered together again, for their destruction at the return of our Lord, as he told us in the parable of the wheat and the weeds (tares in the King James).

What can the individual Christian do about it? Most of the time we can do nothing about the divisions and schisms—but we can maintain the unity of the church in the Holy Spirit. In the Spirit we are one. As others run away, we can run to the center—a deeper relationship with Christ.

When you take the Lord's Supper, you proclaim the unity of the church. The Lord's Supper is inclusive, not exclusive. Anyone who proclaims that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, is brother or sister to me. We may not worship in the same buildings; we may have different hymn books (or words on the screen); we may not speak the same language or even live in the same time—but we are one. We are one in the Spirit. We are one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father over all. When you take the Lord's Supper you proclaim the unity of His church—until He comes again.

For Whom?

January 15

Modern man values "why" much more than any "who, what, when, where." We think we understand a thing once we can answer "why." But may I submit that, in the case of the Lord's Supper, the answer to "who" also has great significance?

So let us ask: for whom did Christ die?

- *For our weaker brother (1 Corinthians 8:9-12).* It's tempting to be impatient with those who are immature in the faith. It's often convenient to segregate those who have a besetting sin (drugs on the right, alcohol in the center, pornography on the left, stay in line, please). We see them as weaker, and mind you, this might be true. But do we see them as one for whom Christ died? One for whom our Lord cares?
- *For the just and the unjust (1 Peter 3:18).* No one has the credentials to earn salvation; it is a gift. We need to remember that the gift was given for all—not just the nice. The frauds, welfare cheats, con artists; these too are those for whom Christ died.
- *For the helpless ungodly (Romans 5:6-8).* Those who are mired down in sin, who see no way out. He is the help of all who seek Him, the joy of all who find. There are no worthy sinners and unworthy sinners; just sinners—and His salvation.
- *For you (1 Peter 2:21).* Love lifted even me.

Why, then, do we so often look for (and find) the evil in others? One reason is this: it's easy enough to find. We're all sinners; it's just that some of us manage to hide it in a socially acceptable way. More than that, we are often quick to assume—the beggar by the road is a fake; the politician is lying to us; those who think us weirdo right wing fundamentalists have no idea what they're talking about. Sin is easy to spot in others, hard to spot in ourselves. It's easy to outline the cure for others; hard to take our own medicine.

Do you see it? We come together for the Lord's Supper and our minds race over the subject of sin—for ourselves. We linger over others. The matter is serious, then. Why do we do this? The honest answer is that we are disobedient. We call Him Savior; do we really call Him Lord? When you drink the cup and eat the bread you proclaim His death until He comes again. How can we proclaim that and still look down our noses at others?

There is a cure for this: it is the love of Christ. He demands no robot like obedience. Rather, obedience to Christ is based on love, for He told us that if we love Him, we will do as He commands. If your nose is shiny from looking down it, look up instead. Love Him, deeply and sincerely, honestly and courageously. When you do, you will see those for whom Christ died in a different way—not just sinners, but children of God. And remember—He died for you, too.

Folding the Laundry

January 22

It happens that my meager share of household chores includes folding the laundry. Once a week we dump piles of clean laundry into baskets, and I get to turn the piles into orderly stacks.

In some ways this is a metaphor for communion. I often put on a Christian music CD—it means that I listen to someone other than myself. That's a discipline of the spirit, for it says that you will listen instead of talk. It is a time to reflect upon life; deep thought accompanying manual labor. So how is folding the laundry like communion?

Done with ordinary things- Communion, with all its symbol of sacrifice, is done with the most ordinary of things. Laundry folding is never a high and holy occupation; it's about folding your t-shirts and matching up your socks. Laundry may be holey, but never holy. The elements of communion are likewise plain and ordinary: wine and bread. The presence of Christ transforms them.

Like the laundry, communion is a time of setting in order. In the laundry you fold and stack the clean clothes in some order. In communion you should do the same. Reflect upon your life; is there some piece of it which is contrary to God's will? Then bring it to the Master, and ask Him to set it in order for you.

It is also a time set apart. Folding laundry is not particularly entertaining; therefore, the mind finds other things to think of. No one disturbs me (for fear of being asked for help.) Therefore my mind has leisure to think. In communion likewise your thoughts should be undisturbed by others, so that the voice of your Lord may be heard.

A time of cleansing - Of course, doing the laundry has as its objective clean clothes. It is a time of cleansing for the cotton. Communion too has its objective: the remembrance of Christ's death. In the process, you are to examine yourself so that you might receive the cleansing of the soul.

- Sometimes, your socks just don't match up. Is there a part of your life in which there is love but not righteousness?
- We discard things with a hole in them. Is there something in your life which you know you need to discard?
- "It all comes out in the wash," we say. Confession is simply pre-spotting the really tough stains.

You cleanse the body with soap; your clothes with detergent—and you cleanse your soul with the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Line in the Sand

January 29

The book of James assures us that Elijah was a man just like us. That seems a little dubious to us, for the most memorable moment in his life came at Mt. Carmel. You remember the scene: one prophet of the Lord vs. 850 for Baal. The prophets of Baal dance themselves silly to call down his fire from heaven. When Elijah and the crowd watching have had enough, Elijah gets his turn. You will remember how the offering was drenched with water—and then God sent fire from heaven.

How was this Elijah "a man like us?" Certainly not in the sense of being able to call down fire from heaven. He was like us in one respect, however: he knew where the Great Divide lay. That division separates the church from the world. He challenged the crowd with it: how long would they "halt between two opinions?" Most of us don't like that kind of challenge. We want to go through life without great conflict, just getting by and leaving that challenge to someone with a degree in theology. But the Lord presents that Great Divide to us each time we take Communion.

You will recall, of course, that after that little incident the queen, Jezebel, threatened to have his head removed. He did what most of us would do: he ran. What he did NOT do was to reach a reasonable compromise with the other side. So it is with us: righteousness can make no compromise with evil.

Some of us try to do that. We are proud of our "one of the boys" carousing on Saturday night, secure in the knowledge that our bar buddies would never understand the spiritual side so well displayed the next morning. Sunday morning, we pity those Christians who just don't know how to live with gusto. But the Scripture is clear: no matter how you try, you cannot serve two masters. The world is clear also: any attempt to do so is hypocrisy.

See, then, how the Lord's Supper divides us from the world. In drinking His blood and eating His body, you invite His judgment upon you. It is most unwise to do this lightly; did you think He would neither notice nor care? So it is that we are encouraged to examine ourselves, confessing and repenting, so that when you take the Lord's Supper you do so as a repentant sinner—not a pious hypocrite.

You are in the world, but not of the world. Taking Communion proclaims the Lord's death until He comes again. By taking it, you pronounce yourself a sinner who believes that His Atonement is your salvation. Let your words suit your action; meditate on your sinful state, ask forgiveness and proclaim to the world and to the church just which side you are on.

Clearing the Closet

February 5

One of the blessings of winter is that you have time to clear out your closet. When it gets to the point of needing a crowbar to put your clean shirts away, it's time for some serious work.

The problem, of course, is that clothing in the closet is not merely tailored cloth. Many of the items come with some personal, emotional attachment. See if you recognize these:

- There are the pants whose waistline shrunk in the wash. It's outrageous in this day and age that such items are permitted in the stores, but there it is: too small a waste (well, waist).
- Then, of course, there is the neon orange sweater. The one Aunt Luvinia gave you. Your rich Aunt Luvinia, who loves to see you in that sweater, since it's such a perfect color on you.
- Finally, taking up much too much space is the gold thread embroidered souvenir of your trip to Mexico, the four foot diameter sombrero.

This is where your attitude matters. Someday you'll diet, someday Aunt Luvinia will die, someday you'll wear that sombrero for Halloween. Sure. Let's adjust our attitude a little here.

- You can complain about the pants or you can use them to bless someone else. Even in the richest nation in the world, the poor are always with us. A good pair of pants might be the difference between getting the job and unemployment.
- That orange sweater? If you live in tropical Minnesota, that sweater might keep some poor fellow warm.
- Sometimes you have to admit your fashion mistakes. Throw the sombrero out.

The art of examining yourself at Communion bears some resemblance to the cleaning of the closet:

- Waist line? Don't blame the Manufacturer. He is not the creator of your sins. Be honest with yourself, and with God. The repentant and contrite heart—one size fits all.
- The sweater? Do you continue in your sins because you are afraid of offending someone? Want to be one of the boys? Decide: are you going to please God, or are you going to please those whose approval you so much desire?
- The sombrero? Is there something you retain in your life because you're too proud to admit it was a mistake in the first place? Perhaps a family feud; worse, a thorn in the side of your spouse? Pull the thorn; admit the mistake and ask forgiveness.

God knows what's in your closet—and in your heart. Cleaning the closet is good; cleaning the heart is required.

Railroad Trains (and Other Metaphors)

February 12

Most of us don't read theology textbooks for fun.

God knows that. So it is that the New Testament in particular abounds with metaphors, similes and life object examples—things which make the point clear by portraying it in an everyday sort of picture. You will remember some of them:

- Paul's dissertation on the whole armor of God was probably inspired by the fact that when he wrote it, he was chained to a couple of Roman soldiers.
- Christ's parable of the sower and the soils would be familiar to the farmers of his day, and the gardeners of ours.
- Those among us who have remodeled a house in any way can certainly see the point of the parable of the builders, the house upon rock or sand.

We continue to do this today. If you will look back into a conventional hymnal with songs dating from the 1800's it will not be long before you find metaphors about the sea and ships. Haven of Rest, Lower Lights and The Old Gospel Ship are but three of many. This persisted into the twentieth century, in particular to one outstanding picture before us: the steam railroad locomotive. If you have ever traveled on such a train, you know exactly why. The rhythm of the pistons and wheels was borrowed by many artists; if you listen even now to Southern Gospel style music, the rhythm of that engine can still be found, often quite easily. Older Christians will remember "Jesus on the Mainline" and others.

One reason we pick up such metaphors is that both the ship and the railroad engine mean a voyage—going someplace we have not been, or returning to home. The picture is easy to grasp, and the preacher's sermon easy to outline—for the Christian is a pilgrim in this world, on a voyage from sin to heaven.

Have you ever thought of the Lord's Supper in that light? The elements themselves, bread and wine, are common enough. Christ gave them new meanings while adapting older meanings to the same cause.

- We think of bread. It is excellent nourishment, and adaptable in many ways (including some which involve peanut butter.) It is the food of a mature Christian. But please note that bread doesn't last very well. You keep needing more of it.
- We think of wine. Wine is an excellent antiseptic (used for cleansing wounds in ancient times) and a reasonable anesthetic as well. In contrast to bread, it keeps quite well for a long time.

There you have it: nourishment for the soul, needed each and every day. A cleanser and pain killer, which will last forever. We need Him every hour; we will go with Him forever.

Separation Anxiety

February 19

"Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.' "Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' "In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out.

(Luk 13:24-28 NASB)

It is a sad, but often repeated fact: there will be many at the Last Judgment who will be surprised to discover that their attendance in church (of course, the *right* church) does not mean that they are welcomed to the kingdom of God. Such people will use as their defense the frequency with which they took Communion, and their regular attendance in teaching and worshiping. It won't work. They are those who attend church but do not practice the faith.

How, then, can someone be a real participant in Communion? What makes you "real?" May I suggest some practical tests?

- Are you present at Communion with Christ, or not? We know that wherever two or more are gathered in His name, He is there. But are you with Him? Do you sense the awe due the Lord God Almighty, and enter humbly? Or do you think that this is just "going to church?" Not all who participate are actually partaking; some will be just going through the steps, thinking this is sufficient.
- Do you discern the body and blood of Christ? Your hands touch the bread; you see the wine. But—in your mind's eye—do you see the sacrifice He made for you? Do you see His suffering on the Cross? Our salvation was purchased at great price; one which is beyond our ability to match. Is it there for you in Communion?
- Are you one who is a repentant sinner? Do you bring to Him the ancient sacrifice, the broken and contrite heart? Have you confessed your sins, and asked both forgiveness and help for whatever sins you have?

The world is like a stage, filled with actors. We see the actions, but we cannot know the heart. It is well to remember that we take this cup and eat this bread *until He comes again.* Let each of examine ourselves to see if we are a partaker or just a player.

Cleaning Your Glasses

February 26

Oh, there are ordinary glasses, of course. And if you're old enough, they're spectacles. Sometimes we hide behind dark glasses, or make a fashion statement with our shades. If the lenses are thick enough, we call them coke bottles or goggles. The sufficiently stuffy may carry a lorgnette—one of those glasses on a stick affair. If you can remember back to the Roosevelt administration—Teddy, not Franklin—you'll see that light set of glasses known as a pince-nez. It's French for "nose pincher."

All these are forms of the optical device which corrects your vision. One thing they also have in common is this: they need to be cleaned, frequently. Dust, dirt, dandruff, it matters not. You have to clean them to see through them.

Have you ever considered that you might be "glasses" to see God? It's true: the man with the pure heart is the one who will see God. It's as if God were saying that nothing but all of you, kept in purity, will work to allow you to see Him. King David put it this way:

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood And has not sworn deceitfully. (Psa 24:3-4 NASB)

It's true: the pure heart is needed if you are to see God and go up to Him. But just as your glasses need cleaning regularly, so does your heart. How does one obtain and keep a pure heart?

- David, in his sin with Bathsheba, knew that he could not do it by himself. So he asked God to create that pure heart within him (see Psalm 51).
- But for most of us, the problem is not creating the pure heart—but keeping it.

But there too we find our solution in God.

But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. (1Co 11:28-32 NASB)

If you will submit to the examination of your soul, and accept the discipline your Lord prescribes for it, you will keep the pure heart—and someday, you will see God.

Harmony

March 5

Have you ever been entertained by a barber shop quartet? They do still exist, you know, though most have long since lost any association with a barber. The essence of the barbershop style is harmony; this is the key to singing in that style. Consider how the harmony is kept:

- There are rules about who gets which note. Which, by the way, also determine who gets to pull off which gag, too. Everyone knows his part.
- They dress in a particular style—Gay '90s. (For those of you who haven't heard this, that refers to the 1890's.)
- Purpose: they know their purpose—to entertain you. So they keep it light.

Marriage, too, needs harmony. Consider that such harmony is very similar:

- Each one is assigned a part—and like good musicians, you learn to cover any notes your partner misses.
- You dress in a particular style; it's called "who's wearing the pants." If you think this old-fashioned, you're right. But if you know a couple where she wears the pants, tell me: just what do you think of *him*?
- Purpose: harmony is there to ensure that the marriage will indeed be "until death do us part."

There is harmony in the church, too. Indeed, the harmony in marriage is described by the harmony of the church and her Lord. The same things can be seen:

- If someone misses a note, all is not lost. There is repentance; there is forgiveness to restore the harmony of the church.
- Leadership? Christ is the head of the church—and it helps so much to remember that.
- Purpose: the harmony of the church is there to make sure that no one is hindered in any way in coming to the faith.

That harmony, that one-ness in the church is exemplified in communion.

- Did you miss a note this week? Confession and repentance are available, so that you may go forward in tune with your Lord.
- Leadership? This is the time when in prayer you recognize your Lord as head of the church—and lord of your life.
- Purpose? So that you might have eternal life in Him.

Harmony. One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Oil Change

March 12

It is a part of the national character of red-blooded American boys: they know about cars. From the time they're old enough to hand Daddy a wrench from the toolbox (the *right* wrench takes a few years) the American male and his car are inseparable.

The same cannot be said for the American female. There are many women out there with an appreciation of cars, but it must be admitted that our society harbors a number of women who do not so much purchase a car as inflict themselves upon it. Such a young lady dined with us recently. The matter was very clear; the car had been handed down and handed down before it got to her. Such women recognize three techniques for dealing with an oil light blazing red:

- *Run the car into the ground.* Simply ignore the idiot light. It probably isn't functioning correctly anyway, just wait until the car won't go and then have a mechanic fix it. A man designed that idiot light, let a man fix it.
- *Add a quart—or two, or three.* The problem is the idiot light, right? OK, adding oil turns the idiot light off. Simple problem, simple solution. Why must men make things so complicated? No reason to change it; just add to it. Same solution worked last week, right?
- *Change the oil.* While this does involve taking a man's advice, it has certain other advantages. It leaves you with the secure feeling that there was nothing more you could have done for the poor vehicle. And, if you believe the mechanic, it's the best thing to do.

Communion: A time when your personal red light goes on. The rest of the week you can ignore it, but the Scripture is clear: you are to examine yourself. When the red light goes on, there are three methods for dealing with that too:

- *Go through the motions.* Ignore the warning. Don't think about your furious anger; the greed, the envy—rather, act like all is fine. God will eventually adjust to your version of righteousness; after all, you are sincere about it. It's just that it's inconvenient to deal with the problem right now.
- *Promise to do better—or at least more.* OK, so you scream at your wife a lot. But how about that church workday you showed up for? Doesn't that count? Just keep thinking about the good stuff you do; no real reason to examine yourself.
- *Clean it out.* He calls you to examine yourself. Turn around, face it squarely and tell Him that you admit it. Whatever it is you wanted to bury under the façade of niceness or compensate for, drag it to the Light and admit it. Ask his forgiveness; ask Him to create a clean heart within you.

The clean engine of the human being is the clean heart. Only at the Cross can you find forgiveness; only in repentance can you have Him clean your heart. Your life will run a lot better when you do.

Eye of the Hurricane

March 19

It is a fact: there are those Christians out there who live in the eye of the hurricane. Their kids grow up straight and strong. The husband wouldn't think of having an affair. His wife doesn't want to run off. Most of all, their lives seem dull, ordinary and unexciting. And they like it that way. There aren't too many of these folks, but any good sized church will be able to find a few.

What may seem curious to you is that these folks do have their share of other peoples' burdens. Rudyard Kipling referred to them as the Sons of Martha. The Sons of Mary lay their troubles on the Lord—and the Lord, He lays them on the Sons of Martha. Somehow, the desperate children of the Lord seem to find their way to Martha's door.

Have you ever wondered how it is that these people keep such a calm life? The answer is simple: they are obedient to their Lord's command. He put it this way:

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock." And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. (Mat 7:24-25 NASB)

The Sons of Martha are those who have built their lives upon the rock which is Christ. In the hurricane are chaos, damage and danger. The rock is in the eye of that hurricane; those who live there cling to that rock—and take strength in doing it.

But is it possible that anyone could be that obedient? How could anyone have a life like that without going astray sometime? Consider it this way: you can't be obedient all your life; you know that. But could you be obedient for an hour? How about a day? As much as a week? That's all you really need, you know. For each week He tells you to examine yourself, and then take of His supper. The bread is your strength and sustenance; the wine is your antiseptic and anesthetic. By His strength He sustains you; He cleanses you from all sin as you confess it to Him. He gives you comfort—the sweet comfort of knowing that you are God's child, and welcome.

Often the Sons of Martha really can't explain how it works. They just know that it does. Obedience to God's command is often like that. His way is perfect, He tells us. Even the most obedient and prayerful of Christians would tell you that there are times when the perfection of His way is anything but visible. He told you His way is perfect; He never promised that you'd understand how. Cling to the Rock; the hurricane has no power over it.

Lord, as we eat the bread and take the cup, turn our hearts to you. Turn our faces to the Rock of Ages, so that we may find our cleft in the rock—and watch the hurricane from within the eye.

On Currency

March 26

Have you closely examined one of the new twenty dollar bills in circulation? The Treasury has gone to great lengths to resist the assault of counterfeiters. Turn it so that it's Jackson side up, and if you catch it in the right light you can see much that you might otherwise miss:

- Over to the left side, in ghostly silver is a dramatic American eagle, clutching the additional arrows and olive branch.
- On the right side, in the same light, you'll see two wavy lines of text: "Twenty USA" and underneath that "USA Twenty."
- A little further to the right—if you hold it up so that the light is behind the bill—you will see a second picture of Andrew Jackson.

If you look at the back side, you will find what appears to be a random scattering of the number 20, in yellow, over the blank areas. There are other devices; but this is a communion meditation, not a class for counterfeiters. Indeed, the new design is intended to deter counterfeiters as much as possible. Even as difficult as these things would appear to make counterfeiting, it still happens—in large amounts. One thing does remain the same: no one attempts to counterfeit a twenty-five dollar bill. All twenty-five dollar bills are counterfeit.
No one counterfeits that which is worthless. So when someone tells you that all Christians are hypocrites, remind him of this. If we're all counterfeit Christians, then Christianity must be like the twenty-five dollar bill. No, real Christianity is so precious that the temptation to counterfeiting is very great. But just how would someone counterfeit a Christian at communion? One way would be to take it very casually, as if it had no significance at all. Or contemptuously, as if you were God's judge. But the most common way is to act very dignified and humble at the same time—pious pretension—so that you'll look like the real thing.

If this is you, please—take this warning seriously. Paul tells us that sickness and even death can be the result:

For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. (1Co 11:29-30 NASB)

Can it be that God would react this way? Hear again the apostle:

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we? (1Co 10:21-22 NASB)

Ultimately, however, the rejection is not in this world—but at Christ's return.

"Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets'; and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.' (Luk 13:26-27 NASB)

Consider well; God's wallet contains no counterfeits.

Perfect Harmony

April 2

Most of us are not cut out to be professional photographers. Besides the patience needed to deal with frantic brides (and their mothers), you need a certain amount of technical skill. Most of us take a lot of pictures—and get a good one once in a while. What kind of "good one?"

- For most of us, that means an accurate representation. Mug shots are good at this. You know who it is, but no one frames it.
- The next level up is the "typical" photograph, where the viewer says, "Isn't that just typical of him? Mouth opened, eyes closed, stepping on his wife's feet."
- But once in a while you get one that is just about perfect. People see it and say, "That's him!" Everything comes together in a picture that you prize (and might even frame and hang it on the wall.)

Sounds have a similar progression to our ears, though it may be a bit more difficult to recognize. But most of us would know such a sound.

- For those who wear an eye patch (the writer does) it's the constant background noise of "Arrrrgh!" Just like pirates say! You know what it means, without words.
- For most couples in love, there is "our song." Maybe it's "Blue Suede Shoes" (please, no more) for the two of you. It's Elvis singing—but it somehow becomes yours.
- Then, once in a while there comes a sound or music which is just about perfect. The fourth movement of the William Tell Overture by Rossini, for example. ("A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty, Hi Ho Silver—the Lone Ranger rides again.")

Pictures and sounds, that's what we use. God uses something different. His son, Jesus, is the exact representation of the Father. His actions are those the Father shows Him. His words are those the Father gives Him—indeed, John the Apostle introduces Him to us as "The Word" - the message of God, wrapped in human flesh. By Him you know the Father; indeed, there is no other route to the Father other than by Christ. This exact image—the root word is the one from which we take our word "icon" - was given to us by the Father, and given for our benefit. Benefit? Yes indeed

- By Christ we know the Father, for the Son is God as well.
- In Him we find the Word of God—in all senses
- But most important: our sins are atoned for by His sacrifice.

As you take Communion today, consider that Christ has given us a picture of His sacrifice—so that we might not forget that wonderful gift of God. By the bread His body; by the wine His blood—it is a picture for us this day. It is His own picture, for He gave it to us. Like other pictures, it's given as a reminder, so that we will not forget what He did. It's the one picture He wants us to keep in mind—and heart.

Hands

April 9 (Palm Sunday)

Within the millions of patents issued by the US Patent office, it is still unlikely that anyone has patented a ramjet powered, hydraulically operated, computer controlled communion dispenser. It is unlikely that anyone ever will; and even less likely that anyone would build it, let alone buy it. Even in the largest of churches, communion is given by hand.

Hands; human hands are the tools which bring the Bread of Life to the Christian.

- Some of those hands are worker's hands—rough, callused in places of wear, belonging to men whose lives and livelihoods are a matter of touch. Reality is something you must be able to touch, even if it is only in symbols. The hands that fix the pipes, build the houses or drive the trucks are fit to bring the real Christ to His people.
- Some of those hands are thinker's hands—hands with little wear and tear, but minds which were built by God to comprehend what is meant in the Lord's Supper. Deep are the depths of the human mind; no match for the infinite deeps of the mind of God. They cannot know everything, but what they can know, they must know. These hands, too, know sacred things when they touch them.
- Some, alas, are careless hands—hands belonging to those who appear to be pious enough, but harbor within their hearts a callous not found on their hands. Would that it was on their hands! We cannot know these immediately; but by their fruits, in time, they shall be revealed.

Hands, human hands; four fingers and an opposable thumb. The same hands that work in the factory, store or office are allowed to handle the most sacred of things: the body and blood of Christ. For does He not say, "This is My body; this is My blood?" Hands and holiness seem completely linked:

- With hands we consecrate those whose lives are a service to our Lord. By the laying on of hands we confirm, our spirits with the Holy Spirit, that the one so consecrated goes forth with our blessing—and accountability.
- With hands we bless, whether it is a blessing of infants held in our hands, a bag of groceries carried by hand or merely the hand of welcome—our hands do the work.
- With lifted hands we praise the Lord, whatever the tempo of the song. We are to "lift up holy hands to Him."

There is more. At the Last Supper, holy hands broke the bread, calling it His body. We know that. But do we remember the greatest use of hands—as a witness. For Christ, appearing to Thomas, invited him to put his fingers in the holes where the nails had held Him to the Cross. So when you look down at your hands as you partake in Communion, remember the hands pierced and nailed to the cruel cross—nailed, for you, and for me.

On The Incarnation

April 16 (Easter Sunday)

C. S. Lewis once said that all of Christianity could almost be condensed to one doctrine and one fact. The doctrine is salvation by grace; that seems obvious enough. But the fact he cited is not the Resurrection. It is the Incarnation.

Incarnation - It is the teaching of the church from its earliest days that Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, was (and is) God in the flesh. The importance of the fact can be seen this way:

- Virtually all of the heresies inflicted upon the church center upon the idea that Jesus could not have been what He so plainly claimed to be. The heretic says that He is either not God or not Man. Dozens of variations exist—but this is the core: Who do you say that Jesus is?
- If He is not God, he is not sinless—for all of Adam's children have sinned. If He is not sinless, then He cannot be the acceptable, unblemished sacrifice demanded by the justice of the righteous God.
- If He is not Man—His favorite title is Son of Man—then His death, burial and resurrection are frauds, mere play acting.

What He did depends on Who He is. The purpose of the Incarnation is the Atonement.

The Incomprehensible - The common heathen of today is a much simpler man. He has no example before him of a church willing to die in the thousands and even millions rather than deny her Lord. He therefore sees no evidence of the Resurrection, and takes comfort in thinking that the Resurrection is a miracle—or would be, if science allowed such things. Since miracles are unscientific, they don't happen. Since they don't happen, there is no evidence that they ever did. Therefore there are no miracles, and therefore there is no Resurrection.

That argument is a simple logical fallacy; circular reasoning. But it comforts the heathen mind. Today's heretic has a different argument: "Yes, but…" This is followed by one of the common heresies of the early church. But if there is no resurrection, then we are fools fit for pity. We also die in our sins, and face the judgment alone and guilty. So, then, the point is important to us.

The Imminent - But the Resurrection does not stop there. The church has taught from its earliest days that Christ will return—in power. God's justice will come with it—reward, for those who have served so faithfully. Punishment—a lot of outstanding debts will be paid on that day. When? Soon. When will that be? In His good time, when we least expect it.

Remember, then, that when you take this cup and eat this bread you proclaim our Lord's death—the Atonement—*until He comes again.* It is your testimony to the Incarnation, to the Atonement, to the Resurrection—and to His soon return.

Music

April 23

There is no subject more likely to divide an elder's meeting than that of church music. To some, it appears that modern music is largely composed of over-amplified simplicities. To come to the case in point, where is the modern musical equivalent of *Old Rugged Cross*? For these, comfort comes from the old and familiar—and the old and familiar are right there in the hymnal in front of you.

Of course, the modernists have their say. Most commonly we hear two themes: it's necessary for evangelism (especially to young people) and that the older music is "too complicated." Four part harmony is seldom taught in school these days. So, we don't have the means to do it right—so we'll do it with simple choruses and music that the kids understand.

Pitifully far behind in this debate are those whose musical tastes run to the classical. It's one of the first things to go from the school budget—because the school leaders like rock-and-roll. But if you will humor me and consider the music that shaped worship for over three hundred years, you will find a curious pattern. Although there are many, many religious works available, it is interesting to note that the "great" musical works primarily concentrate on one of four themes. One is the *Credo* ("I believe"), usually the Apostles' Creed. The other three are of interest to us concerning Communion:

- *Sanctus* (Holy) - these works focus on the power, might and supreme holiness of God. With the deep eeriness that classical music can bring up, they conveyed a sense of utter holiness in God. And something lacking in us.
- *Kyrie* (Lord) - "Lord, have mercy upon us." If He is utterly holy, and we are not, then we come into his presence as unholy sinners; we cannot ask for pardon—except in the blood of Christ. This at once proclaims the lordship of Christ and the sinfulness of man.
- *Gloria* (Glory to God) - If the mighty and holy God comes in the flesh, to die upon a cross so that sinners such as you and I might accept the lordship of Christ and thus come into His presence seeking mercy, it is indeed a moment of glory. It is glory to God, for He has done great things.

Do you not see that all this is summed up in Communion? We acknowledge His holiness and our sinfulness. We come, calling upon the One who is faithful and true, asking mercy, and receiving it. And as we finish, surely we should give glory to God. Athanasius, the great defender of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church, taught that one is closest to heaven when praising God with music—for only in music do you worship Him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Give heed, then, to what you sing; He inhabits the praise of His people (Psalm 22:3). Use the music to prepare your self to understand His holiness and your sinfulness. Use it to put your thought into asking forgiveness of the one you call Lord. Do so, and carry the glory of God out from the sanctuary and into the world.

Melchizedek

April 30

He's a figure of mystery, this Melchizedek. Some say he is the pre-incarnate Christ. Others take him at face value; he is the king of Salem (which means peace; *shalom*). The theories abound. But we may note two things about him:

- He greets Abram (Abraham) with bread and wine, the same elements used in Passover and in the Lord's Supper.
- Abram tithes to him, thus marking him as superior.

The event then seems to disappear. There is no mention of Melchizedek in the Scripture until about a thousand years pass, when he is mentioned in one of the prophetic Psalms. The explanation, such as we have, is found in the book of Hebrews. So it seems that he remains a mystery—until you consider *what happens next.*

The chapter divisions don't help us much here. For the very next thing to happen to Abram is that God establishes his covenant with Abram. It is a covenant of promise and prophecy.

Promise. He promises Abram three things

- God will be his shield and reward. Protection from evil and reward for righteousness will come from God.
- Despite his age (about 99) he and his wife will have a son. This, of course, is Isaac.
- His descendants will be as numerous as the stars.

There is prophecy also:

- His descendants will return to the land of Canaan in four generations—because of the sins of the Amorites.
- His descendants will be enslaved for 400 years—but at the end of that time God will lead them out of slavery into the Promised Land.
- Then, there is The Land. A large section of the Middle East is promised to his descendants.

Is there a connection? It seems so—for bread and wine mediate two more covenants, the one with Moses and the one from the Messiah. It seems God has a menu for the occasion. He also insists upon a priest, evidently. Abram had Melchizedek; Moses had Aaron; we have Christ.

What does a priest do? May I suggest these three?

- The priest intercedes—speaking on behalf of the others to Almighty God.
- He also is to bring God's will to man, so that we might learn obedience to God.
- And, the priest is empowered to pronounce God's blessings upon us.

Your priest, Christ, does all this for us and more. The name of Melchizedek did not vanish with Abram; in David's time his name is recalled—so that we might understand that Christ is our High Priest. This priesthood was bought with a price at Calvary; what He paid, we could not. Let us remember His intercession for us in the simple elements used by Melchizedek so long ago.

Before and After

May 7

In some mega-churches you can sense the change in worship. We've gone from our grandparent's hymns of faith (and the King James Bible) to modern music (and Bible paraphrases). It is all so upbeat and cool. Everything is light-hearted and happy. Until, of course, the time rolls around for Communion. It's then we miss the solemn nature of grandfather's church. Then we notice how Communion now seems to be an interruption of the cool and upbeat. Why are we in such a hurry to get through Communion?

- *The preacher has a lot to say and time is short.* Perhaps the preacher should be advised to stick to the timetable—to make time for God's message of forgiveness.
- *The organ music in Communion sounds like a funeral.* Well it should. It brings to mind the death of Christ, His sacrifice of atonement.
- *We've got to hurry through it; otherwise the Presbyterians will get to the restaurant first.* You would deny the Christian the bread and wine of life to fatten yourself faster?

Why is this so irritating? It's because the heart and mind do not have time to switch between the upbeat cool to the solemn. We may ask, then, what a Christian should be doing before he takes Communion:

- To take Communion is to open the door through which Jesus will come and dine with us. We should therefore prepare a suitable place for him, and that place is the human heart. Remove the distractions of this world; clean the sin and invite Him in.
- We should welcome Him with a quiet soul, not contorted by the world. His words do not come by the speaker system, but by the still, small voice.
- Having done this, we should receive the Lord's Supper with reverence. This is a solemn occasion, in which one handles holy things. We should do this with a fitting attitude.

If the time to prepare is too short, the time to reflect is also. When a Christian leaves the Lord's Supper, his mind has been renewed—or should be. Perhaps we might look at what is cut off by ending the Lord's Supper so abruptly:

- Can you take the Lord's Supper and not confess your sins? We should go from Communion ever ready to confess our sins, which he is faithful and just to forgive.
- Having received the pure forgiveness of God, how can we refuse to give the fallen forgiveness of man?
- We should go carrying more than forgiveness—reconciliation. We should walk out with the intent of reconciling with those who need to be reconciled to us—and those who need to be reconciled to God.

Enter with reverence; receive God's own Son; go out to share what you have been given.

Fellowship Offerings

May 14

There is a curious consistency—almost—in the Old Testament concerning offerings made to God. Anything made of grain which was to be presented to the Lord was to be unleavened—for as our Lord used it, leaven (yeast) is symbolic of sinfulness. Nothing made of grain was to have leaven it—absolutely nothing.

Except the fellowship offerings. Called a "peace offering" in the King James (and NASB), this offering is one which is not brought in obligation to the Lord, or as atonement for sin, or any other required thing. It is the offering of one who simply needs to express the peace God has planted in his life. When God is doubly good to you, then a peace offering is the fitting gesture of the thankful heart, living in God's own peace. That offering had to be leavened.

Fellowship—the word is also translated Communion—on our part means that we bring a fellowship offering which is inherently sinful, for we are sinners. Nothing perfect can we do. But our Lord knows that. So He blesses the fellowship offering, for if He is to have fellowship with us, He knows that it will be with sinners. Yet He knows we do not want to come to Him empty handed. So He gives us the fellowship offering.

What might a Christian bring today, and why?

- Sometimes it is sheer joy. When a child (or a grandchild) is born it is fitting to tell your Lord just how much joy is in your heart. Bring a gift for the church; let it be the symbol of your commitment to raise that child in the faith.
- Sometimes it is a noteworthy occasion, such as a special anniversary. When God blesses you with a wife who carries within her the beauty that only the saints of God can carry, it is fitting to tell the Lord that you are grateful.
- Sometimes it is at the end of a trial, such as a severe illness. When He has been your Rock, your Guide and Friend, it is fitting to acknowledge Him as best you can.

Nothing that we could bring in the way of a gift, an offering, could be as perfect as He is. But He knows that, and accepts from us the imperfect, for in Love's eyes God sees little Christs, not big sinners.

Communion is a chance to present to your Lord such a fellowship offering. We celebrate the sacrifice Jesus made, a sacrifice of all that He had—His life. By this He is Lord and Savior. What better time to bring to Him the greatest sacrifice you can make: your life, dedicated to Him. You might think that He would accept no such thing, for we are sinners. Instead, he who would save his life will lose it, and he who loses his life (for Christ) will save it. Bring it as your fellowship—your Communion—offering. He is gracious and kind; He knows what it is to give all. Even if all we have is sinful, He knows what it costs us.

Scale Models

May 21

Many of us who are beyond the years of playing computer games will remember a hobby that gave us a sense of accomplishment with little expense but lots of effort: model making. Perhaps it is just a sign of antiquity, but many remember getting a box of parts which, with diligence and a sparing use of glue, eventually came together to be a scale model of a ship, plane or vehicle. Everything in the model was built "to scale" - a smaller copy which preserves the detail of the larger.

For the younger modeler, it was a personal thrill to display the model to someone who had served on the original ship, or flown the life-size plane. It was especially rewarding when he would identify it without being prompted. "That's a P-51!"

Models have a fine use in our lives: they represent the essence of the thing being modeled. No one would model an aircraft carrier and paint it paisley. By use of the model we identify, we honor and we symbolize.

Did you know there is a model in the Old Testament? Indeed there is. You may find reference to it in First Chronicles 28:18 (some use "model", others "pattern"). We know that the Israelite was told to make no graven image—no models of deities, so to speak. But David was given the pattern of this model: the chariot of the cherubim. It is a curious phrase, that; but it is a model given to David for Solomon's use in building the Temple. It is not known if the cherubim were placed in a chariot, or whether this reminds us that God mounted the cherubim and flew. We do know that these were patterned after the model.

Communion is rather like that too; it is a model of our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross. It is a model in the sense of being a portrait; "this is my body." It is a simple thing, but the act that it models for us is clearly seen.

But Communion is greater than that. Each time you take Communion you proclaim the Lord's death—the death of atonement. But do you not see also that this is the model for the martyrs of the church? The early martyrs died in much the way Christ did, not just in method but in steadfast refusal to betray their Lord. The reminder is still there; perhaps we shall see martyrs in our own time.

Once more: you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. We must be content with the model now; but the time is coming (soon, Lord, soon) when we shall see Him face to face. Until then, we have the pattern, the model, in Communion. Where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is also. Now, in the form of the model—then, face to face with the Living God.

Waiting Lounge

May 28

It is a familiar site to the business traveler: the airport flight lounge. Look around and see the people who will soon be on board your flight. Some are going away; the others going home. Some have emotional reasons for the flight—the joy of marriage, the grief of a funeral. Others fly only for business. Some might even think this the flight to a new life. Some are going home to the same life. You can't tell by looking, but they are there.

Watching the congregation prepare for Communion is like that. Behind the sober faces there are many reasons for coming to the Lord's Supper. Some genuinely hunger and thirst for righteousness, and here they are filled with the righteousness of Christ, our atoning sacrifice. Some are sick, in mind or body or heart, and seek the Healer of all. Some are alone, even desolate, and seek the only Comforter.

Others see it more routinely. He is the Master; I am His servant—where else would I be found than at His table? He is the Creator, I am the creature—and in my Creator I find purpose and joy. But no matter what our reasons, it is a risky business to be at the Lord's Supper. Risky? The God who weighs the hearts of men knows the fraud from the true. Paul tells us that there are those who are sick or even dead because they slighted the Lord's Supper. It is not wise to try to deceive the Living God.

The question of Communion is this: while I can see many reasons why I would come to Him at His table, why does He come to me? It certainly is not for my own virtue or worthiness; even the best of us are sinners. No, it is not my holiness that calls Him to us. It is not our virtue and righteousness that calls Him; it is His love and mercy. Communion is for my benefit:

- First, that I might know the mercy of God. I do not deserve it, yet still He bids me come.
- Next, that I might know the love of God—and grow in it.
- Finally, that I might know who He truly is—to the increase of my humility.

I cannot earn or deserve this; but I can reverence it. How?

- I will acknowledge Him for Who He is. I will praise His greatness and give thanks for His love and mercy so freely given at the Cross.
- I will confess who I am as well; who I am and what I have done—and then recognize that I cannot deserve His mercy.
- Indeed, like the tax collector of old, I will ask, "Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner."

Communion in the church is like that waiting lounge. Some are here in joy; some in admiration; some in pain; some, not really sure of anything but that they need to be here. Communion is the flight lounge of the church; we remember His death until He comes again. On that day the church, His people, will take flight—for what is hoped for will have arrived.

Alone

June 4

It is very popular in these days to have the piano or organ played during the Communion service. It does expedite things somewhat, but at a price.

If the music is not playing, you might just suddenly find yourself alone with your thoughts. This might mean that He is going to structure your thoughts, not you.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to judge someone else during Communion? We do this in Christian charity, of course. The formula in other places is to end each condemnation with the phrase, "bless his heart." By such measures we assist the Almighty in determining who is and is not a sinner.

If that doesn't work, then we may find ourselves slipping into a time of praise to God. We remember His greatness; we remember His compassion; we remember just about anything that will allow the sleeping worms to be still. The one thing we don't want is honest self-examination; that might cause repentance and reconciliation.

Of course there is another method. It takes a few weeks to get down this low, but you can use the time to bring up your complaints in the trials of this life. If you talk slowly enough, this will use up the time. One should point out, however, that you're complaining to a man who was crucified in your place—which does tend to render our irritations rather trivial.

If you would proceed in the way which is profitable, things are different. First and foremost you must come prepared to judge yourself. It is best to be prepared beforehand; otherwise you will run out of time. Confess; then remember that confession alone means nothing (unless there's a plea bargain). If there is confession, there must be repentance. It is a hard and sober thing, but necessary. And then do you not see that reconciliation is next? How can you be at peace with God if you will not forgive one of His children?

Then you may bring your praise. Praise Him for the swiftness of His forgiveness. Reverence His holy name. Be at peace with Him, and reconciled.

There is a very curious action that medical doctors have observed. When a man is talking with his family physician, he is more likely to give you important information as he leaves the room. It's called "the hand on the doorknob" speech. You save the worst for last, and give him no time to react this time. Then he can tell his wife that he mentioned it to the doctor, who seemed to have no reaction to it.

Do not be like this in Communion. Start with your confession; not end with it. Give the Helper time to be the Healer.

Woman in the Crowd

June 11

(See Luke 8:40-56)

Being a Christian manager sometimes brings you problems, conflict between the faith and the business. Once such was handed to me. She was an excellent employee. She also believed—quite firmly—that AIDS is contagious by touch.

Now, our installers were sent to the job site in pairs. Another employee was paired with her—by rotation—and she refused to work with him. He was an open homosexual, and rumored to have AIDS. She absolutely would not work with the man. I had the dubious privilege of telling her that, by company policy, I'd wind up firing her for refusal, not him.

Put your mind upon the homosexual for a minute. Amongst Christians, AIDS is the modern leprosy. Even to be suspected of such is enough to make you socially unacceptable in many churches. It is therefore instructive to learn from the woman who touched Jesus.

The woman was suffering from some condition which caused her to have blood flow every day. As such, she was ceremonially unclean—evidently for life. She was not allowed to touch anyone, but was required to announce her status loudly, so that no one would defile himself by touching her accidentally. Years and years of implied sinfulness; years and years of loneliness. She hears of the new rabbi, Jesus, and takes heart, gathers her courage and thinks, "If only I could touch his garment." This probably violates some ancient law; it's not the best of theology—but Jesus honors it. Perhaps this is because He is on His way to the house of Jairus, there to raise his daughter from the dead. Jairus might just need an example of faith. Jesus does not rebuke her. Instead, when all is clear, he speaks to her:

- "Daughter" - what a sound to one who has been exiled from the family so many years!
- "Your faith has made you well." Not what, but Who.
- "Go in peace" - no thought of returning to uncleanness, rather, peace.

We approach Communion and receive much the same thing. By the sharing of His body and blood we are confirmed in the kingdom of God—welcomed home, not as strangers but as children of our heavenly Father. He acknowledges to us that it is faith that matters, not ceremony. And as we leave His table, we are not only to go in peace, but indeed be His ambassadors of peace and reconciliation.

"Power had gone out of me" said Jesus, when she touched Him. In the same way He puts that divine power within us, by faith. If you feel the power of God during Communion, perhaps that is it: those with faith receive that power from their Lord.

What a Friend!

June 18

He may be rather difficult to spot. He might even be you. He is present at any worship of a large congregation, but can often be found in the smaller ones as well. He is the man alone—the one who has loneliness as his companion, even in a crowd.

He rather prefers the larger churches. It's much easier to hide in a crowd, and the existence of one more soul seems a small matter. He prefers a church with the new choruses rather than the old hymns; old hymns hold memories. You might eventually connect his face to his name, but you have not connected him to the church.

Sometimes it's the result of hidden sin. "If anybody here knew what I have done…" He hears no testimony of what Christ has done for others; he is therefore alone. He's the only drunkard in the congregation, the only pornography addict, the only man who ever drove a loving wife away from himself.

Sometimes it's the result of deep wounds. Other women who have been through a bitter, messy divorce don't seem to be there; only happy suburban families. Those who had childhood horror are also not there; he is alone. No one shares the secrets or the pain; he is alone.

What can we do about it? In imitation of our Lord, you can reach out as friend to friend. It may be superficial at first; it almost must be. But there are two things our lonely one seeks:

- He seeks unconditional love. Anyone who is lovely is easy to love. The hard part is seeing past the sins and hurts to do just that.
- He's looking for a crack in the mask. Just something to reassure him that in this place there is someone who knows how he feels.

Who is that someone other than our Lord and Savior? Does he understand loneliness? Think again of the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. When His accusers caught Him, all of the disciples fled—every friend he had on earth. All the official mechanisms which should have stopped His execution were twisted and distorted to bring Him to the Cross. And there, in the ultimate of agonies, He cried "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Do you think He understands loneliness?

He understands; He also goes further. That death was a sacrifice—for you, me and the lonely one. He has reached out in forgiveness to all who will accept it.

We know all these things. Sometimes, though, we need to be reminded. So it is that we are taught to take His body and blood, ensuring that we continue to be one with Him. If you are the lonely one today, remember: He knows how you feel. And he invites you to come home.

Far Away Places

June 25

An airline commercial puts it rather well: the most popular destination for travelers is—home.

There is a parallel to this in the church: the longing. In every Christian there is an itch which cannot be scratched. It is the desire for heaven.

- Many of us feel this desire in the form of those who have already died and are with Christ. As you get older, this longing increases. Shortly before her death, my mother put it well: "All my friends are gone." She was lonesome for those she loved.
- Others will tell you that they certainly want to go to heaven—because earth has been trouble enough for them.

"To live is Christ, to die is gain," said Paul (Philippians 1:21). The Christian's view of death is very different from those in the rest of the world. Indeed, if you believe that God has a plan and purpose for your life, then death and heaven are the logical results. Logical?

- If you have not fulfilled God's plan for you, wouldn't it be best if you remained here to finish it?
- If you have fulfilled it, why would you want to stay?

It must be admitted that, by the world's standards, Christians have a strange way of regarding death. How is that we can hold such beliefs?

- First and foremost, we know the One who conquered death. One of the most powerful arguments for the faith in the early days of the church was the way in which Christians went to their deaths—without fear. They knew the power of the Resurrection, and we should too.
- That same Conqueror has promised His people that He will someday return. This time, it will not be as a baby in the manger, but the Lord of All.

Such power is beyond mortal man; we could not do this at all. Therefore we look to Christ as the source of these things:

- We cannot pay the ransom of sin; therefore He paid it for us. By His death on the Cross he purchased our pardon.
- Like Him, we will rise from the grave. He is the only one to defeat death, and by His power we shall obtain the resurrection.

But such an ending did not come without its price. It is fitting that we commemorate His death, for it is the greatest of God's gift to us. Until He returns, let us thankfully remember.

Masquerade

July 2

It happens that the author of these meditations is obliged to wear an eye patch. The reason for this need not concern us now; but the patch itself has some interesting effects. Small children know immediately that you're a pirate, who is either terrifyingly wicked or really cool.

Adults sometimes react the same way. One encounter in particular: I was in a grocery store, pushing the cart for my wife, when this man came around the end of one aisle and caught a glimpse of me—and did a double take.

This man was about my age, but his life had been that of an ironworker. He had forearms bigger than my thighs. If you could have read his mind at that second, I suspect you would have heard him thinking, "I wonder if that guy's as tough as I am."

If you could have read my mind, you would have heard, "Lord, please don't let him find out!"

Sometimes fantasy (the pirate) and reality (the ironworker) come together like that. We even choose to have this happen whenever we go to the theater or to a motion picture. The playwright depends upon "suspension of disbelief." It means that you are "into" the play, but not in the play. If Shakespeare is done, you might find yourself watching an actor who proclaims himself to be (for example) Henry V. You know he isn't, but you accept that; you suspend your disbelief and permit him to be Henry in your mind, for a while.

This happens with us, too. A friend in the medical profession told me that she put on her "professional mask" each day; warm, sympathetic, caring—and uninvolved. Otherwise, the stress of dealing with so much misery would overwhelm her.

We do the same. We are players on the world's stage, and most of us have a mask. We don't let this mask down, for then people would know who we really are. ("Who was that masked man?") Our mask hides our problems but allows our success to shine through.

We come now to the time when the mask should be dropped. There is no sense keeping it up during Communion; the Playwright knows it all anyway. In Communion we meet the real Christ; He said "this is my body" and "this is my blood." Would you meet the One upon whom reality itself depends, trying to hide your reality from Him? Drop the mask at His feet; may it be the real you that now seeks the real Christ.

Not Alone

July 9

Alone. It is one of the coldest words in the English language. It is the chill of frozen hope; it is the yearning of the human heart for what cannot be. Most of us spend our lives in the company of others, just so we won't be alone.

When does a Christian feel alone? For most of us, the most powerful sense of being alone is when going through the death of a spouse. More than anyone else on earth, a wife shares all those things the world mustn't know. My sister described the death of her husband simply: "It's just like having your right arm ripped off—every day."

Sometimes we are alone by conscious choice. It is a fact that God somehow does not need a favorable opinion poll; sometimes what he needs is just one good man. One who will stand up for the truth no matter how his enemies smirk at him. It is a tough situation to be in; sometimes the world sees just how tough the gentle Christian is.

But for many, the choice is simply lifestyle. Willie Nelson sang of cowboys this way:

"Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys,
Don't let 'em pick guitars and drive them old trucks
Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such.
Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys,
They're never at home and they're always alone—
Even with someone they love."

The true Christian is never alone. Even in the middle of nowhere on a horse, or facing the city council with a chorus of boos at your back; even in the death of a loved one—we are not alone. We can be alone only if we choose to be. Christ, the gentleman, never forces his way into the human soul but waits for the invitation. So, when loneliness strikes, we must reach out to Him. He promised us He would be with us until the end of the age.

Think about this now with regard to communion. He went to the cruel Cross for our salvation, and He did it because of His great love for us. Do you think, therefore, that He would cease such love? He cannot; for He is eternal and unchanging. He will not abandon us. As Paul put it, "Love never fails."

In Communion we take the emblems of remembrance, body and blood. By His great love He died for us; by the power of the Spirit He rose again. Wherever two or three are gathered, there He is too. Gaze upon His sacrifice; meditate upon its meaning; and know you are not alone.

Grace and Power

July 16

He ate with sinners so that you might know his grace and power—Rabanus

It is a seldom-preached theme—the condescension of Christ. But consider how low our Lord stooped so that we might have His mercy:

- First, He came in the flesh, born like the rest of us. C. S. Lewis pictured it as turning yourself into a barnacle—to save the other barnacles. Nothing but pure love would move Him to this. The King James Version phrased it eloquently: He "emptied Himself."
- See, also, that He did not seek to be a member of the pious and learned. He came to seek and save the lost. So we find him dining with sinners, to the disgust of the religious leaders of His time.
- The ultimate in this is the Crucifixion. He went voluntarily to a horrible death to be the salvation of those same sinners.

He ate with sinners!

- He was noted for eating with real sinners, not just the pious who realized that all have sinned. Sinners whose reputations were earned—men like Matthew, who betrayed his people to be a tax collector for the invading Romans. When Matthew was called to follow Jesus, his first reaction was to throw a party—and invite all the other sinners too.
- It was not a grudging participation. Indeed, Jesus was the life of the party. Remember the water turned into wine? Do you not recall how His disciples were not fasting, simply because He was with them?

It is impossible to make light dirty; especially the Light of the World.

Do you see it? We sometimes say that Jesus was not afraid to dine with sinners. Afraid? He enjoyed it. We are told that when a sinner comes home, the angels in heaven rejoice. How much more, then, when Matthew accepted the call, will Jesus party with him? When Zaccheus repents, Jesus says, "This day is salvation come to this house." If His grace flows even to the worst of society, how can it not flow to all who will have it?

But this is not merely good wishes; His grace is accompanied by power. Who among us could spend our lives among prostitutes and drug dealers and not be dragged into sin? But His grace comes with the power of the Resurrection. Even the vilest offender can receive effective pardon from our Lord.

As you take the cup and the bread, remember that His grace extends to you, no matter what you have done. And He has the power to back that up. Remember the sacrifice that made this effective for us—and the one Who gave so much that we might live.

Last Day of Your Life

July 23

A story is told of a Jewish rabbi, aged and revered by his students. He was dying, and his students came to him to ask him the questions they thought most important. One student asked, "On what day should a man repent? The rabbi's answer puzzled the student:

"A man should repent on the last day of his life."
"But how can anyone know which is the last day of his life?
"That is why a man should repent every day."

"But I am young and strong," you say, "and there are many years before the end." Really? Is it so? Hear the words of Solomon:

I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. (Ecc 9:11 NASB)

A familiar Scripture reading, and who are you to say that time and chance will not overtake you? Indeed, Solomon makes the matter clear in the next verse:

Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them. (Ecc 9:12 NASB)

So heed the words of this wise man; you are not guaranteed tomorrow. Thus you should repent every day.

There is another reason, however, which is more subtle and sinister. Each day that goes by without your repentance tightens sin's grip on your throat. The sin which will be difficult to renounce today will, in time, become so strong that you will find you do not have the strength to give it up.

What should you do? Repent, of course, and ask for the clean heart He will give you as you do. Why is this important at the time of Communion? Because at Communion we deal with the fact that we are sinners, and He is our sacrifice of atonement. Repent, therefore, and partake.

- Partake looking back—and see the sacrifice He made for your life.
- Partake, looking at today. "Just as I am" comes to Jesus today; for today is the day, now is the hour.
- Partake, looking forward to His return, when all the thoughts of a man's heart and the actions done in secret will be proclaimed to one and all.

Today just might be the last day of your life.

Epidemic

July 30

There is an epidemic in our land, of massive proportions. No section of the country has proved to be immune to them.

- It appears that they break out in clusters. They are most often seen indoors, and it is quite rare to see only one. Usually they group together, preferring the areas which humans occupy indoors.
- Upon close examination it will be seen that they appear primarily in geometric shapes. Rectangles are the most common shape, though squares and even circles are reported. Some reports also mention a tulip shape—but we must make some allowance for the panic even one of these can cause.
- They are, it appears, migratory. There is no north/south pattern, but it is usually observed that a flock of them will follow a particular human almost indefinitely.
- Individually, they are relatively easy to dispose of. But the most common case seems to be that no matter how many you get rid of, they continue to multiply.

Is this some dread disease? Some horrible new insect? Alien invaders from space?

No, they are yellow sticky notes.

It is the nature of human beings to forget. It is therefore also their nature to write down reminders. In the oldest of civilizations we find broken bits of pottery called potsherds which were used to write down little notes. We take a note of what we want to remember.

It is not the only aid to our memories. For more important things, we have ways which are more serious than notes.

- We create reminders. Calendars with recurring events on them, for example. It would not do to forget your wedding anniversary, for example.
- We build memorials—visible reminders to one and all of something which has happened which should not be forgotten.
- We conduct rituals. We post guards around the tomb of the Unknown Soldier; we raise the flag over the shattered hulk of the USS Arizona so that neither will our gratitude cease—nor our warning.

Communion is like that. It comes about every week, so that we will not forget. We see its memorial every time we look at a cross. We conduct the ritual so long ago adapted from Passover by our Lord. Our Lord did so much for us; it is well that we have these reminders. If the church forgets the Lord's Supper, will she not soon forget her Lord's sacrifice?

Teeth Cleaning

August 6

The pattern is familiar to most adult Americans. Every six months, you go to the dentist's office to get your teeth cleaned. That's how the appointment reads, but experience has taught you better than that: it's another round of dental combat.

The tactics are familiar:

- The hygienist cleans your teeth—scrapes them, really. As she does, she notes "problem areas" - things that need a look by the dentist.
- The dentist comes in, looks at the x-rays, says "hmmmmmm," and then goes into his "Tut-tut-tut" drill. He usually looks at you as if you've been surviving only on World War II surplus candy bars. Then comes the lecture.
- The preliminaries over with, it's time for your "drill and fill" exercise.

There is a fundamental problem with this technique: The dentist gets paid for dental work done, not dental work avoided. In theory, he's working himself out of a job. It appears as if his workload should spiral downward, but it doesn't.

Indeed, his strategy seems designed to produce minimum income:

- All sorts of devices are on display which promise to clean your teeth better—thus preventing all sorts of problems. The hydraulic ramjet toothbrush and floss dispenser may seem a little outrageous, but the dentist tells me that it works.
- When problems are encountered, they are fixed as soon as possible. This prevents little problems from forming a union, thus becoming big problems.
- And, as he does so, he works to ensure that you have only the minimum of pain required in the process.

It seems somewhat strange—but it works. Therefore we cooperate with the plan.

Look at that strategy again. It closely resembles the one Christ uses for us:

- He has a variety of methods used to keep you from sin. It's not just the threat of hell; he provides us preachers and teachers to show us the path. The Bible is given to us not to decorate the coffee table but to be read—to be the light for our path.
- When sin arises, he gives us a time of reflection each week at communion. It is a time to examine ourselves, seek repentance and live.
- And minimizing our pain? He did that at Calvary.

So as you take the cup and the bread, remember this: the reason you come back again and again in repentance is that it works. But only if you cooperate.

Skyscraper Fish

August 13

My nephew is a lad of unbounded energy and cheerfulness, who is especially fond of sharing what he knows with enthusiasm. Lots of enthusiasm.

We were meeting the rest of the family at a local restaurant. As I walked in my nephew, about three years old at the time, grabbed me by the hand to show me something. He took me over to the koi pond (koi are a kind of carp, raised for their colorful decoration—quite a common sight on the west coast). Pointing to the koi, he proudly proclaimed, "Look, Uncle John—skyscraper fish!" His father explained to me that things were small, medium, large and skyscraper in his vocabulary.

Size is often a matter of perception. It first begins with your own size. What was an ordinary fish to me was huge to a boy less than three feet tall. We tend to measure the rest of the world with our own tape measures, a habit that sometimes deceives us. If we see ourselves as wonderful Christians, far above the norm, it's difficult to see the spiritual size of Jesus Christ.

Size is also a matter of experience. If you have suffered through the long, lingering death of someone you love, the tragedy is greater when you have the responsibility for care. When my grandfather died, it meant little to me. My mother took it very hard. When my mother died, I understood why. Death had not shrunk; I had grown.

Size is also a matter of your view of the world. A small child's view is heavily populated with adult knees. Knees are important; altitude is hard to gain. As you become an adult, you develop a view of the world in spiritual terms. You may be bitter or sugar sweet; either way, it affects the size of things spiritual. But you can change your size, and most of us do. In spiritual terms, you grow—often as simply as greater knowledge of what the Lord requires of you. But the real growth comes in charity—what will you sacrifice for others?

Your experience changes your view, also. In particular, the experience of being forgiven is one of the great changes—when you realize there is no way to justify yourself. If you take the lesson to heart, you will soon become quick to forgive, too.

As you take communion this day, measure your size against that of Jesus, the Christ. The more you walk with Him, the greater your size. If you seek Him in knowledge, and find him in charity, you will grow. If you will accept his forgiveness, using it as a model for your forgiving, you become great in Christ. All this He desires, for He wants you to be like Him. So when you take the cup and the bread, remember: the one whose size you seek to be, whose knowledge and charity are examples to you, whose forgiveness inspires your own, did not simply tell us to do so. He asks us to remember that He has already set the example—at the Cross. If you would be a "skyscraper Christian," then follow His example. There is plenty of room to grow.

Wait For Each Other

August 20

The man is well known to you; by the end of this description you might even find that he is you.

If he arranges to meet at a particular time, he is punctual. At a board meeting he's there a little early, but never late. If he walks in by himself even a minute late, he apologizes. When he's expected, he arrives—on time.

However, on Sunday morning at the worship service it's a different story. About five or ten minutes into the service you will see him and his wife quietly entering through a side door, politely attempting to avoid distracting everyone else. The reason, of course, is his wife.

Oh, it's not like he hasn't tried to correct this. Don't bother suggesting that they get an earlier start. They've tried that—and arrived even later. You'll notice, however, that he never says a word to her about this, at least not in the hearing of anyone else.

You see, he has learned to wait upon his wife. It is a valuable lesson and should probably be added to the high school curriculum.

But did you know that the Scripture specifically commands us to wait for each other in the matter of the Lord's Supper?

So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. (1Co 11:33 NASB)

Paul had to tell the Corinthians this as they were in the habit of first come, first served. But the church is commanded to wait for each other. Why?

- First, so that the body of Christ might be one. Drive-thru communion divides the body; waiting for each other unites it.
- Next, so that we will judge ourselves, not others. We might well begin with our impatience.
- Finally, so that there will be no favoritism seen in the church.

In waiting there is strength (Isaiah 40:31). But in waiting for our Lord we learn the valuable lesson that He moves in His time—not according to your watch. Indeed, we are to wait upon the Lord until He comes again; may He find us faithful and vigilant in our waiting.

Amateur Theatricals

August 27

During the American Civil War a general named John Magruder found himself with about ten thousand men, staring across the battle lines at the Army of the Potomac. His opponent, McClellan, was a cautious man—and Magruder gave him something to be cautious about.

Magruder, you see, was a man fond of amateur theatrical performance. He was an enthusiastic if not particularly able actor, and he gave the performance of his life that day. The bulk of his men were set to convincing the Union Army that they were faced with a numerically superior force. One deception in particular is worth noting.

A band of forest ran through Magruder's front. Normally, any soldiers marching through the forest would be unseen, but there was one patch not so concealing. Magruder lined up a few men and sent them through that patch—over and over again. The Union observers dutifully counted all the marchers, confirming McClellan in his opinion that he was about to be attacked by an overwhelming force!

Deception—an art of war as well as theater. Our enemy uses it too:

- There is deception of the body—you must have the right tan, drink the right drink, wear the right clothes, and eat at the right restaurants.
- There is deception of the mind—life consists entirely of the toys you buy; when the woman gets older, divorce her and get a younger one; drive the right car and show the world how important you are.
- There is indeed deception of the soul—the weariness of things obtained; the truly sophisticated think this way; indeed, to the point where Saturday night never meets Sunday morning in your mind.

But through a little clearing the Truth may be seen. You have arrived at that clearing, for in the Lord's Supper you proclaim the Truth:

- You proclaim Him to be both God and man—worthy to be worshiped, human to be our atonement.
- You proclaim His death on the Cross, atoning for our sins.
- You proclaim His Resurrection, the triumph over the grave.
- You proclaim His coming again (soon, Lord, soon).

Fear not, little flock; the Truth is ever in the Light.

I Know My Redeemer Lives

September 3

Perhaps it has not caught your attention, but did you know that the celebration of the Lord's Supper will cease? Do you not recall that in Communion we proclaim Christ's death "until He comes?" At the return of the Lord we shall have no need to meet Him in the Lord's Supper, for we shall know Him face to face. So when we take Communion we are telling the world that we believe He will return. Face to face means just that; the dead shall rise.

It is, on the face of it, rather absurd. The dead shall rise? What makes you think such a thing could be? Permit me three reasons:

First, the Old Testament prophets who foretold the coming of Christ also proclaim the resurrection of the dead. Consider first what might be the oldest book in the Bible, Job:

"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth." Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!

(Job 19:25-27 NASB)

And this from the book of Isaiah:

Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, For your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.

(Isa 26:19 NASB)

Not enough? Consider God's justice. Do you think Adolf Hitler got what he deserved in this life? Is it because God is not just? Never! Is it because God is powerless? Absurd! Or is it simply that He is not finished with us yet? The Day of Wrath approaches, and with it the resurrection of the dead.

Finally, the greatest proof of all. One man—one only—foretold His own death, burial and resurrection. The Man who did it tells us that just as the Holy Spirit raised Him from the dead, so shall the Spirit raise all mankind. The Man Who has been to death and back says it will happen.

So as you take Communion today, remember: as you do, you proclaim His death—until He comes again. Soon, Lord Jesus, soon.

Yearbook

September 10

If you are like most Americans, somewhere on your bookshelves or in your closet is your high school yearbook. It's a collection of grainy, black and white photos for those a bit older; color is now in fashion. But the photography doesn't seem to have improved.

You look at it, turn the pages and you wonder: where are they now? What do they look like today? Some look the same, give or take a wrinkle or two. Others are very different. Sometimes the handsome athlete in high school is now fat, bald and old.

Memories. The book triggers memories for each of us. See if your heart knows of these:

- Lost loves. Those we actually dated, or those we only dreamed of dating. Life has moved on, but still we imagine, "what if?"
- Old friends. A picture stirs a memory; a friend you have not seen in years suddenly appears in your mind. You wish you could share a meal and old times with them.
- Even, old enemies. Sometimes a face conjures up the memories of pain and insult. Not all of us can be star athletes, and some of the stars are very mean people.

Memories; they come in the Lord's Supper as well. We are told to remember what He did for us at the Cross. See if these look familiar:

- Lost love. Do you still have the fire in your faith? Does your heart ache when you meet someone who refuses to meet the Master? Or have the flames become embers, enough to warm you, but giving no light?
- Old Friend. How long has it been since you walked with Jesus, sharing your heart with Him? Does He know your heartaches? Does He know your desires? Or are you hoping you don't meet Him?
- Old Enemy. Does Satan have you by the throat? A sin that you just can't seem to get rid of, no matter what you do?

All of these find their answer at the Cross. The Lover of your soul still desires your love; the old Friend still has room for you to share your hurts and desires. His triumph over our enemy is in fact what we celebrate at the Lord's Supper. Come to Him, confessing your sins, confiding your troubles and sharing your dreams. He ransomed you; He will not turn you away. Bring your hopes and disappointments to Him, for He cares for you.

Misery and Chains

September 17

Have you ever wandered the aisles of greeting card store, looking for the perfect card to express your feelings? Long before there were greeting cards we were given the Psalms, so that words might be found to express our hearts. Here is one such passage:

(10) There were those who dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death, Prisoners in misery and chains,
(11) Because they had rebelled against the words of God And spurned the counsel of the Most High.
(12) Therefore He humbled their heart with labor; They stumbled and there was none to help.
(13) Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses.
(14) He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death And broke their bands apart.
(15) Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, And for His wonders to the sons of men!
Psa 107:10-15 NASB

Chains are still used to bind the prisoner, but for most of us chains do not come in the form of steel links.

- There are the chains others fasten upon us. The wife who finds that her stable marriage of yesterday has become the chain of adultery today; the parents wondering how their child could have wandered into crime—these are heavy chains.
- There are the chains we fasten upon ourselves. The search for the perfect body, the perfect house, the perfect job—the chains of failure to be perfect.
- There are the chains of sin, fastened upon us by God so that we might learn humility and repentance.

Chains do not remove themselves. Such chains can only be removed by Christ:

- Who but the One who paid the price for our sins can be our peace? We are ambassadors of reconciliation, with good cause.
- Who but the One who knows the deepest of agonies can reach into our hearts and bring us peace?
- Who but the One who is our atonement can break the chains of sin?

In this time and place you meet the Christ, sharing in His body and blood. Commit your troubles to Him; commit your worries to Him; bring your sins to His healing blood. Cast your cares on Him, for He cares for you—even to the point of the Cross.

Homecoming

September 24

It is the blessing of God that many of our childhood memories are erased. Often the pain and suffering that come with growing up are remembered no more. It is a form of amnesia that prevents vengeance, pain and hard-heartedness.

But many of our childhood memories are treasured. To a young boy the word "Grandpa" was magic. Grandpa had time to talk to you, not just at you. His skill with a pocket knife was legendary, and he took the time to teach this to his grandson. We did not often get to see Grandpa, as we moved around quite a bit, but when we went "home" the times were memorable. I remember how happy my mother was when she had her dad around.

When I had children I found that going home now meant to my parents house. I could see again the joy in homecoming. Dad and I would share the good times, and Dad always had the time for his grandchildren. He would tell my son tales of his father, who was a major league pitcher—and thus he encouraged my little leaguer.

Some day, I hope, I will have the chance to be a grandfather. Having had two excellent examples in my life, I hope to be the grandfather my grandchildren remember with fondness. Homecoming should be as warm and wonderful for them as it was for me.

Communion is rather like such a homecoming; it is our gathering before the Lord.

- We have communion with those we see around us, the people in the same pews. It is good to be with them, and to have our Lord present.
- We have communion with those who share the faith all around the world. Not just of our denomination, but all those who name the Name of Christ.
- We have communion with all those who have gone before us, the Church universal, militant and triumphant. By the power of God we take the same body and blood with all who know Jesus as the Christ.

Should we not, then, give thought for those we are in communion with? For those present with us, have we forgiven? Is there any barrier to our communion with each other? For those around the world, should we not praise the Lord for the great and wonderful things He is doing through His church? And for the Church universal, should we not thank God for the sacrifice of His Son, which gave rise to our communion. We celebrate it, knowing that we do so until the time of the ultimate Homecoming, when Jesus returns.

Do Your Worst

October 1

During the early days of World War II the British people, especially in London, were heavily bombed. There was a lull in the bombing, and certain people thought this would be a good time to approach Hitler, asking for some agreement to stop the bombing of cities. Winston Churchill rejected this out of hand; his principle was that there would be no agreement with the enemy of any kind, except unconditional surrender. To Hitler he said, "Do your worst—and we will do our best."

A similar problem faces the Christian in any era. There is always someone arguing that a compromise with Satan will produce good results. After all, everyone else is doing it, right? (If you think this is not a problem, consider how seldom you hear that adultery is sin. And what is the state of marriage in the church today?) There are many ways in which Satan moves for the compromise; here are but three:

- Vengeance. Whether it's as simple as road rage or as subtle as getting even with your childhood enemy, vengeance seems sweet. We justify it to ourselves that we are in the right; therefore we are entitled to it. But vengeance belongs to the Lord; do not steal from Him that which will eat your soul.
- Greed. So often disguised as getting ahead, we often do not see its price. I once asked a corporate vice-president what it took to achieve his position. His answer: "Your divorce papers." He had sacrificed his wife and family to his employer. Our Lord tells us to consider the lilies of the field; all that some of us can see of lilies is the price tag at the garden store.
- Envy. "Competition" is a virtue in the eyes of the world; so often it really means envy. We see our neighbor's fishing boat; we need one two feet longer, with more chrome. We can rationalize it how we please, but for some of us the drive to get what someone else already has is overwhelming. Since we call it competition, it is socially acceptable. But our Lord tells us that He will provide—and knows better what we need.

How is a Christian to deal with such temptations—or besetting sins? The answer, as always, is in the imitation of Christ. "What would Jesus do" is the contemporary way of putting it. Look to His example. For vengeance, He gave back "Father forgive them." For greed, he could say, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Envy? He who is equal to God made Himself as a human, and a humble one at that.

But these things must be remembered to be effective. "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," He said. He overcame it with sacrifice in humility. One of the virtues of the Lord's Supper is that it reminds us of how He conquered the world. He is the Way, the Truth, the Light—and this meal reminds us of the example He set.

The Fireman

October 8

Consider, if you will, that fine specimen of hardy masculinity, the fireman. Here is the man who rescues kittens from trees, exemplifying public service. He rushes to fires and there exhibits his courage in battling the flames. Sirens roaring, he dashes to the aid of the heart attack victim, oozing a professional compassion.

Macho, it seems, has returned to fashion. A man of dirt and danger, skilled in things dangerous, he is our common example of things masculine. Huge waiting lines form for just a few open positions as fireman.

Have you ever asked yourself why this is so? Like the Lone Ranger, the fireman is one who rides to the rescue, a hero—a real man. As the old Westerns had it, the girls all bat their eyes at him and say, "My hero!"

Consider, then, the plight of his counterpart, the fire marshal. No glistening fire truck, just a car going from place to place. He never rescues kittens; he hands out tickets. He appears to be a functionary, a bureaucrat—a nuisance.

One reason is that he seems to be such a perfectionist. He doesn't want some of the oily rags in the sealed container; he wants all of them there. Flammable liquids? Store them in approved containers, in an approved place, in an approved way, or get an approved ticket. He's a pain.

But let me ask you: which of the two saves more lives? We may not be able to count them exactly, but the fire marshal has much the greater effect on life and death than the fireman.

Communion is like the fire marshal. Prevention of sin is its aim, for it is much better to prevent sin than to need repentance. But if it is not prevented, it can be corrected while it is still trivial. How? Examine yourself, as the Scripture commands. Take heed of your temptations, and bring them to the Cross. Take heed of your "little" sins, and bring them to the Cross, asking His forgiveness. Self-examination at Communion is that which keeps us away from sin.

Communion—the great prevention of fires—the fires of Hell.

The Old Man's Gesture

October 15

It seems but yesterday…

He was an old man, but it did not take long to see that he was a man accustomed to respect. He had been a company commander in the Army. Most captains are called "The Old Man"; he was known as "The Bear." Tough as nails and straight as an arrow, he was a man to whom duty was a familiar word, and honor with it. He was, as the phrase is today, awesome.

Perhaps it comes as a surprise to you (and perhaps not), the way in which he honored his wife. His eyes no longer permitted him to drive, so she would take him to their favorite restaurant. When they arrived, she would sit in the driver's seat until he pulled his legs out of the car, pushed his cane into the pavement and slowly rose to his feet. She would watch with apprehension as he carefully came around the car to open the door for her. It is a gesture the world thinks demeaning to a woman; but had you seen it, you would recognize it as a gesture of honor—and love.

Gestures. They are a vocabulary without words. We use gestures in many ways:

- We express anger and hatred with them; the word "obscene" is the most common adjective for a gesture.
- We also use gestures to express enthusiasm and support. Pittsburgh Steeler fans will know of the "Terrible Towel."
- We use them to convey honor, as when we stand for our national anthem.
- We use them, like the old man, to show love.

Communion is, in a way, a gesture itself. How so?

- By this gesture we show support for His church. It says, like nothing else, "I belong in this church."
- By this gesture we honor His name; no other name can command such honor.
- By this gesture we express our thanks for what He did at the cross; we remember His sacrifice.
- By this gesture we express our love for the lover of our souls, the one who first loved us.

The old man is gone home now, as is his lady love. But we take Communion until Christ comes again, bringing with him all those who trust in Him—including The Bear and the lady he loves.

Remorse and Reconciliation

October 22

Do you remember being thirteen years old? It's a memory most of us would rather forget. It is a time of awkwardness physically—and socially. Learning to dance at the age of thirteen will hurt a lot of feet. Learning to deal with the opposite sex can lead to some lifelong scars.

Unfortunately, doing things you later regret is something which just does not seem to leave the human species. With as much fondness as you can muster, think back:

- Was there ever a moment when you said something completely irreversible? Something so stupid, so insulting, so prickly that even today you cannot imagine how those words fell out of your mouth. Then you spent years in remorse, thinking, "If only I hadn't said that."
- Other times it's what you *didn't* say that makes the difference. You had the chance to speak the tender words of forgiveness. Your opponent gave in, and you stood there with nothing to say—giving the strong impression that you didn't care about another person in the world.

Both have the same characteristic: I am unable to change things now. I cannot go back to that time and place; the person I offended may be dead, or perhaps there is simply no way to fix what was broken. Unscrambling an egg is difficult.

So you pay the price of remorse. You go through life with the sadness of having wronged someone you love, and the frustration of not being able to do anything about it. It is a heavy price for a careless word.

Know, then, that Christ your Lord can deal with this. He alone can heal the hurts of long ago. He can lift the pain you caused, if you will but ask. He alone can reconcile the irreconcilable, for only He enters the argument having forgiven both of you. Even those who are dead are within His care.

This is His reconciliation, and it came at an awful price—the very life of the One who knew no sin. Reconciliation is always expensive—to the reconciler.

So, as you take this Communion, I say to you "Rejoice!" Your Lord has paid the price of your remorse; accept His reconciliation as you accept His body and blood. As you do, Remember. He is the One who died for you; let Him break the chains of remorse.

Communion Service

October 29

He is an old man, by any test. But this does not keep him from the service of his Lord. Each Sunday he is at the door, passing out bulletins. When the time comes for Communion, he slips out and comes back in with the trays, just as he has done for years. It seems quite ordinary, until you look at his belt.

Not the one in his pants; the one circling his hips. On this you will find a battery powered machine which extracts extra oxygen from the air. He is often seen with an oxygen tank; this device lets him continue to provide the service he has done for many years.

He's not a "major player" in the church; in fact, if it weren't for his name tag, most of us wouldn't even know his name. But there's a smile on his face as he passes out the bulletins, and he is diligent at communion. It is the way he honors his Lord. It is also a beautiful example of the servant's heart.

Servant leadership. Even the King of Kings and Lord of Lords washed His disciples' feet. It serves as a model for us today. There are those whose dignity will not permit them to stoop; there are those for whom it makes no difference. These are the invisible people—the people who serve without being noticed. It is the mark of a Christian gentleman that he treats the invisible people like real human beings. Some of them will be honored indeed when our Lord returns.

So it is that my wife and I always whisper "thank you" to the person serving us communion. It is a job with no applause, but it is Christian service none the less. Christian service, given out of love, for no applause will come there way. Yet see the dedication of a man who brings his own oxygen machine with him.

If I say "thank you" to such a man, how much more then should I give thanks to my Lord who made this possible, on the Cross. By His example we are guided; by His sacrifice we are saved.

Apostrophe

November 5

We call it “the Lord’s Supper”; but do we know why?

It is the Lord’s Supper

Why?

- Because He is the one who instituted it. It is from His hands we receive it, with all its meaning.
- Because His sacrifice gave it meaning. Otherwise, it is a farewell dinner like so many others.
- Because it is intended for those who are His. If you are the Lord’s disciple, the apostrophe applies to you.

It is the Lord’s Supper

Why this uniqueness?

- Because there is only one Lord of Lords and King of Kings.
- Because there is only one church—and therefore its great symbolic meal is one as well.
- Because there is only one redeeming Sacrifice to be celebrated.

He is unique; so is the Supper.

Why is it the Lord’s Supper?

- Because it nourishes the souls of those who partake of it.
- Because it provides fellowship to those who partake. If it is hard to be angry at one who just passed you the salt, how much more peace should reign between those who share the body and blood of our Lord?
- Because it is a festive meal—it celebrates our Lord’s victory over sin and death.

It is not meaningless, for in the Lord’s Supper all true meaning and existence are found.

His and Ours

November 12

It is a fact, and an example: our Lord, during his Passion, forgave all He could.

- He forgave those who crucified Him, saying “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” There is no sense that He waited for them to ask; no sense that they had to show remorse; the ignorant oppressor received pardon.
- He forgave those along the way. Do you remember the two thieves crucified with Him? One had but to ask, and he received paradise. Jesus probably had never met him before; yet the forgiveness was freely given.
- He also forgave—us. His sacrifice was for our sins, before we were even born.

It seems reasonable, therefore, that He should ask us to imitate Him in this.

- There are those who oppress without knowing it—the unfeeling clerk at the head of the line; the driver who thinks he’s the only one on the road, the socially graceless who would blush if they really knew what they were doing. Do you imitate your Lord, and forgive such as these?
- There are those we meet along the byways of life—not anonymous faces but those who come into our lives from nowhere and seem to vanish in the same direction, leaving behind and impression, but not a name. Some are rude and offensive; but tell me, have you ever been that way to a total stranger? Forgive as you would be forgiven.
- Finally there are those who are in your church. They hold to the things you hold as near and dear; they share your joys and sometimes tears—and once in a while they do something which offends you. It is an offense which is often harbored; rather, it should be brought up so it can be cleaned out. Forgive, as you are forgiven.

So I submit to you that as you take this cup and eat this bread, you receive it as a reminder of the Lord’s gracious forgiveness. Let it also be a spur to your own.

Night of the Candles

November 19

Last Night - At the end of the American Civil War, after the fighting had ceased, a division of the Union Army spent its last night in tents together. The shooting was done; tomorrow they would be disbanded. It occurred to these soldiers that this would be the last night they would be able to use the government issued candles for light—sparingly issued. But for this one night they could light all they pleased, and so they did. The camp ground soon was washed in candlelight, brightly lighting their last night as soldiers.

Christ too had His last night—His last night before His crucifixion. The night took on special meaning for his disciples, for in that night he transformed Passover into Communion, which we still have with us to this day.

Remembrance - Soldiers grow older day by day. There comes a time when they remember the hardships of combat and the men whose lives were more precious than their own. They long for a time of reunion—a time to tell old war stories, to remember those fallen; to care for those now in need who once were comrades in arms, or for their widows and children. It is a time of celebration, a good time, yet it is also a time of remembrance. It is a rare veteran who stands at attention and listens to taps with dry eyes. These men came together frequently, and always remembered the night of the candles.

We, too, have a time of remembrance. Like the veterans we remember the One who walked this earth with us, beyond anything we ever deserved.

Salvation - There is one obvious fact about a soldier's reunion: only those who made it through make it to the reunion. Yet the topic of conversation often concerns those who did not; the heroes who died that others might live; the unfortunate who were so close to leaving when they died; the friends buried at some far off battlefield. Soldiers often enough have the feeling that the reason they survived and others didn't is that God so selected it—no other explanation seems adequate. We remember the ones who took a bullet headed our way.

The Christian celebrates his salvation as well, at the hand of His Lord who sacrificed Himself on the Cross so that we might have eternal life.

Obedience - The unit with the best discipline usually produces the largest number of veterans. This division no doubt remembered the hardships of close order drill under a howling sergeant—and no doubt marched better in the Veteran's Day parades for it. Even if the uniforms no longer fit.

The Christian, too, knows that obedience is the way to becoming a veteran, so to speak. Obedience shows what Christ is doing within. So when He tells us, "take and eat," remember that obedience turns the new Christian into the veteran one.

In Simplicity, Sublime

November 26

C. S. Lewis called it “the most terrifying passage in the New Testament.” John Chrysostom called it “that most sweet section of Scripture.” It is the account of the separation of the sheep and the goats, found in Matthew 25:31-46.

From this passage we may observe what kinds of things God expects us to use to be of service to Him:

- He expects us to use material things, for this is a material universe. But see how simple these things are! They are the basic things of life. We are to use food—but there is no reference to great cuisine. We are to provide water to the thirsty; apparently tap water will do. We are to provide clothing; nothing is said about designer jeans.
- He expects us to use our time for Him as well. Is our time to be used on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem? He says nothing about it—but rather we are to visit the sick and those in prison. Neither of these can command us; both are pleased to see us at our convenience.

It has pleased Almighty God to accept from His children the simplest of material things and the most convenient of service times—and consider them as gift and service to Himself. In simplicity we find the sublime.

Indeed, our Lord uses much the same method in providing this communion for us.

- He uses material things to be our reminders of His sacrifice. The fruit of the vine—next to water, the most common drink in the history of man—and simple flatbread, a flour and water combination.
- He asks us to do so at set times, together, so that we might by our mutual sacrifice of time be reminded of his sacrifice for us.

It has pleased Almighty God to give to His children the simplest of material things and the most meaningful of times (worship) to remind them of His sacrifice on the Cross. In simplicity we find the sublime.

Late Night, Early Morning

December 3

There are those of us whose job requires working late into the night. The project has a deadline, the workers must comply—so it's late at night before your stomach says, "I'm hungry." You stroll down to the vending machines and find them greatly depleted by this time. So what does the late night worker get?

- Most of what's left is comprised entirely of chocolate and sugar. Your doctor condemns the first and your dentist the second, so you look for something which actually has some form of flour in it. A few quarters and some well aimed rattling of the machine produces the gourmet dinner for the night: Twinkies. ™
- Your guilty conscience tells you that you have just purchased calories enough to keep an Alpine village alive through the winter. You must atone; therefore your next purchase is a bottle of designer water—no food value, vitamins or minerals, but at least no sodium or fat.
- You then take this feast back to your desk and eat it—alone. Unless you consider your computer to be a conversationalist; if you do, beware of Twinkie dust on the keys.

But the next morning is Sunday, and there you partake in a very different meal.

- You need no quarters for this meal; it is a gift. By the grace of God you partake in the bread of life, of which our Lord said, "This is My body." Its value is eternal.
- The cup you share is that of atonement — atonement for sin. Our Lord paid the price for our sins on Calvary, paid without limit. "This is My blood"; its value is beyond our imagination.
- You eat this meal alone with your thoughts—but in the presence of other believers, and in communion with many, many other believers.

You are what you eat, we are told. Feed on Him, for He is the food of the spiritual man. In Him there is no junk food.

Trifling With Simplicity

December 10

If there is any irresistible, stupid urge in the human species it is this: tinkering with simplicity.

Consider, for a moment, that simple device known as a hammer. There are hundreds of designs for the ordinary hammer; there are thousands of specialty versions. A visit to one web auction site turned up a geologist's pick, a curved claw hammer, a straight claw hammer, a lathing hatchet, a poll claw hatchet, a shingling hatchet, a broad head single bevel hatchet, a ball peen hammer (small), a sledge hammer, a splitting maul, a crate hammer, a cross peen hammer and a wooden mallet. This does not include three varieties of hammer described by the sellers as being "unusual hammers."

The urge to make the simple into the complex—or at least the fancy—extends to the Lord's Supper as well. Its origins are detailed in the Old Testament and confirmed in the New Testament. Its parts are simple: unleavened bread and wine. But we often substitute leavened bread (as being easier to tear a piece of) and grape juice (since Mr. Welch, of Welch's Grape Juice, told us that the Scripture could not possibly mean wine). It is served in all manners, including one church which had the elements served by dancers.

But see the elegant simplicity of our Lord in His choice of elements:

- Unleavened bread was chosen originally because of the haste of the departure of the Israelites. The Christian knows this too; it is a reminder that this world is not my home. Leaven (or yeast) is also the symbol of sin; the ancient Jew was to get rid of it at Passover.
- Wine was chosen first for its blood like color. But we can also see that it was probably the best antiseptic they had; it kept indefinitely as well. It is a fitting symbol of the blood of Christ which cleanses us from all sin, and brings us to eternal life.

So I must ask: do you see the Lord's Supper as a show? Do you critique the meditation, get cranky about the music and think the whole thing poorly done? He made this His memorial not so that you would be dazzled—but that you would remember.

The Betrayer

December 17

Perhaps you've never thought of it this way, but there is great comfort in the way our Lord treated Judas, His betrayer, on the night of the Last Supper.

- It's a comfort to know that Christ had the power to escape the Cross - twelve legions of angels, if you recall - but chose instead to be the Lamb of God. By exposing the betrayer Christ might have effectively prevented the Crucifixion, and triumphed over a secret enemy as well. But He didn't.
- It is also a comfort that Christ knew His betrayer - and did not openly condemn him. When you ask why, the only answer that comes to mind is that Christ knew His purpose: to seek and save the lost. Perhaps He yet hoped for repentance from the man.
- It is a further comfort that, in the most trying and tense period of His life, Christ consistently acted with mercy, even to Judas. He had no thought of vengeance.

Each of the disciples looked inside himself and was obliged to ask, "Surely not I, Lord?" All of them knew themselves to be sinners, capable of such an act. Remember that Peter, the leader of the disciples, would betray Him three times. So Christ's forbearance with Judas shows us that even the vilest of sinners has hope in the Cross.

We may look also at what Christ did do about Judas:

- He began by identifying Judas - to Judas. Make no mistake; God knows your sin - no one better. He did this so that Judas would know that such sin could not be hidden.
- Beyond that, Jesus warns Judas of the consequences of his actions - better if that man had never been born.
- But He does not expose and publicly humiliate the man. God is strong in His mercy; He is asking the man to repent, even if it happens privately. Some of us are more afraid of public speaking than going to hell.

Christ's open hand was refused; He went to the Cross, and Judas to a suicide's grave. But even in this we may see an example in Christ:

- Christ offers mercy even when there is no hope that it will be accepted. Mercy does not depend upon the worthiness of the recipient but on the love of the giver. By example, then, we should offer mercy and forgiveness even to those we think will never accept it.
- When that mercy is spurned, we should imitate our Lord. Jesus did not rage at this ingrate; even at the moment of betrayal He calls Judas, "friend." Christ is our model of patiently enduring suffering and evil. This is a virtue open to any Christian.

When suffering rises and evil is close at hand, remember your Lord - who went to the Cross without complaint or vengeance. Even when He is silent, His actions still speak.

The Incarnation

December 24

Joh 1:1 NASB In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

From the very dawn of time, the Father planned it this way.

- The Word - the message of the unimaginable God - existed when time did not.
- That Word was with God from before the beginning - from eternity to eternity.
- The Word was God.

How? Who can say? It is the character of God the Father that He must bring His love to His children; as His character is eternal, so the Word is eternal. Nor can the Word be apart from the Father; indeed, God is One, so the Word is one with God.

It sounds so philosophical, as John writes it. But the Father has a plan to make it clear and plain to His children: the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.

- Think of it: the very essence of God in human flesh. To meet Him is to meet the Father, for they are One.
- His disciples record his life; in particular they record the fact that they saw Him in the glory He has with the Father. Their eyes saw this salvation.
- He is the only One - the unique, only begotten Son of God.

At Christmas we see His humanity in the manger and His divinity in the angel chorus. It is a pleasant scene; it's a rare human being who does not love the sight of a baby. But just as the Word was from the beginning, so the plan of God was also. This baby grows to be a man, a man with a purpose: He is the Lamb of God. We see His humanity in the garden; his divinity on the Cross. That sacrifice was planned before time was; its beginnings were in a manger at Bethlehem; it’s ending on the Cross. Remember that; the baby in the manger came for a purpose - that you and I might be redeemed.

The Desk Drawer

January 4

Most of us have a desk drawer filled with a clutter of objects. We might find pens with no ink; postage stamps which used to be first class; old business cards, some wallet size pictures and other odd clutter. But amidst all this there are the items that we mean to keep, for they are precious to us. They are keepsakes – items which we keep for the sake of another person. It might be Dad's old pocket watch – a reminder of his constant promptness. It causes us to remember him – and pass that memory on to our children too.

"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you" (1st Corinthians 11:23). That's how Paul phrased it. The Lord's Supper is precious first because it was given by our Lord. We do this to remember him. But like those precious items in our desk drawer, we pass this on to the next generation. In so doing we accomplish three things:

- We connect with our past – the saints who have gone before us – and proclaim our unity with all the church.
- By being faithful in this we stay steadily on course in our lives, being repentant each time.
- Keeping it as we found it, we pass it on, unblemished, to the next generation.

We do this only with things we consider important. To you, my dad's watch has only antique value, but I value it more highly. The Lord's Supper, however, is prized by all of us. Done with honest devotion, it is our proclamation of the faith. In doing this we proclaim his death, and thus his atonement. By this we show our belief in the resurrection – and his soon return.

As you partake, remember who gave you this – and at what price. Your desk drawer contains no keepsake as precious as this.

The Ferrari Incident

January 11

There are many ways to get yourself fired from even the simplest of jobs. Somewhere in Southern California there is a former valet parking attendant who experienced a most interesting method.

He was working at a very exclusive restaurant, parking cars for their elite customers. One such customer drove up in a Ferrari. Not just any Ferrari; a custom built automobile with a unique gearbox and capable of speeds in excess of two hundred miles per hour. The owner quite naturally asked if the young man could handle such a car. With more confidence than sense he told him that it would be no problem. Touching the gas, the attendant flew up the first ramp in the parking structure – and directly into a wall. The management yanked him out of the wreckage and fired him on the spot.

We might ask a question: did the Ferrari turn this young man into a poor driver, or did the Ferrari simply reveal his incompetence? Of course, we know the answer to that question.

The same thing applies to Communion. It reveals our unworthiness; it does not cause it. If we claim a relationship with Christ, then his presence will show us for the sinners we are. If we do nothing about this, Paul tells us that weakness, sickness and even death result.

What shall we do, then, to come before the Lord in a worthy manner? Repent. Repent before you walk into the building; repent before you take Communion. Then follow through on your repentance. Approach the Lord with clean hands and clean heart.

Beware: God is not mocked. A mumbled prayer of pseudo-repentance does not deceive him. He knows your heart. To take his Communion unworthily is no light matter to him – and will soon be no light matter to you.

Optical Instruments

January 18

It is hard to conceive today, but most of the history of mankind was without any form of optical instrument. Today we have telescopes which cost billions of dollars – and can see to great distances, producing pictures which inspire awe at God's creation. We have microscopes which can scan down to the level of individual atoms, revealing order in even the smallest of things. More mundane, but more common, are the glasses on your nose – which reveal the chaos that is rush hour traffic.

But none of these instruments is suitable for the greatest of vision: to see God. For that, our Lord tells us, you need a very different instrument: the pure heart. Blessed are the pure in heart, Christ tells us, for they shall see God. How do you obtain such an instrument? Repent and be baptized. More importantly, how do you keep it working? Only by repentance; for this reason we are taught that we should examine ourselves before taking the Lord's Supper.

Therefore, let us come to Communion with pure hearts, and see what can be seen in purity:

- We shall see God, and know both his righteousness and his love. Righteousness, for the Cross paid the penalty for your sins and mine. Love, for it was God's Son who paid that price.
- We shall see the sacrifice of God. The ancient Hebrews were taught to sacrifice to God. This is in imitation of Christ himself, the God who sacrifices for us.
- We shall see his salvation, for this meal commemorates the gift that gives us eternal life.

The telescope and the microscope show us the glory of God's creation; the pure heart shows us God Himself.

Let Me Draw You a Picture

January 25

How many times have you said it: “Let me draw you a picture.” We use the technique to explain things we think are simple – which sometimes are also profound.

The Cross is just such a picture, if you know how to explain it correctly:

- The vertical beam is anchored in earth, but it points toward heaven. Do you see that the route to heaven goes through the Cross?
- The horizontal beam has its story too. Some might see it as stretching from past to future; others will see it holding the arms of Jesus, stretched open wide,
- At the center of the Cross is Jesus, the central figure of mankind. Without his sacrifice, the Cross would picture nothing. Vertically, He is the bridge between man and God.

As if to explain the Cross, Jesus has drawn us a picture of His sacrifice – that picture is the Lord’s Supper.

- The bread, which represents his body, is a common thing to us. That body was a common body, one just like our own. He shares our humanity; he sacrificed that human life for us.
- The wine, which represents his blood, tells us that his blood was shed for us. Life is in the blood, the Jews were taught. In a sense, when we take the cup we are drinking life to ourselves.
- It is called Communion – for in it we commune with our Lord, who created this memorial. We also participate in common with each other, linking Christian to Christian in Christ’s eternal embrace.

See the picture before you and know the Truth.

The Supreme Miracle

February 1

C. S. Lewis called it "the supreme miracle" – the incarnation of Christ. The fact that God came in the flesh of a human being is the root of our salvation – and a constant target for those who wish to undermine the faith.

Why did God do this? What would cause him to humble the Son to the point of taking on human form – a humbling greater than any that we could accomplish?

- It is in keeping with God's character. God is love; therefore he is moved to help to his wayward children. God is righteous; therefore he is moved to pay the proper price for that help.
- His purpose was simple: our salvation. Not just that we would be forgiven, but that we would be given eternal life.
- His method was to share in our death so that we might share in his life. God became a man so that we could become like God – eternal.

The physical nature of Christ's body is clear from the Scripture. It is the same physical nature that we have in our bodies. It is common flesh, not some special version of it. Christ is fully man. The point is so powerful that John tells us (1st John 4:2) that we can know the Holy Spirit by the fact that the Spirit confesses that Christ has come in the flesh.

The memorial he gave us, the Lord's Supper, is both physical and common as well. It is real bread; we hold it in our hands. It is a common form of bread. The cup comes from a common fruit, the grape. It is a commonplace item too. It's a reminder that Jesus is one of us.

So when you take, remember how humbly Jesus came to us, for he came in the flesh – and all for the purpose of your salvation.

Appearances

February 8

She's at the health club every night. Most of the regulars know her story. She works out, and her body is in good shape. She knows how to keep it that way.

She wears her wedding ring – a symbol of hope and despair. While she's at the gym, her husband is with another woman. It's not that she's unattractive; it's just that the other woman is twenty-five years younger than she is. Her husband values women – all women – by their appearance. By his standards she is old, used up and worn out.

That's the story of our society. We buy cars only if they look cool; a big, roaring engine helps too. Our clothes must be the latest style. Our homes require interior decorators to obtain just the right look. We must keep up appearances. Appearance is everything.

Consider, then, the Lord's Supper. Even with all the elaboration possible, it is a simple ceremony. Its elements are simple too. Have you ever heard of "designer bread?" The cup of wine or juice is rather plain as well. If it's wine, we see no vintage marks, no cork presented by a waiter in a tuxedo. Grape juice doesn't come with vintage marks, just an expiration date on the cap. What kind of show can you make with these?

The truth is this: those elements are not for appearances. By their very simplicity they invite us to look beyond the outward appearance to discover what they really mean. "This is my body; this is my blood," said the Creator of the universe. Do not judge by appearances, but rather discern the true meaning – and its impact on you.

"Do not judge by appearances" – this is required of the Christian at Communion. It might possibly be a good rule in life, as well.

Car Care

February 15

The care of an automobile is a required lesson for daughters. As grease does not usually match the eye shadow, we teach them these three things:

- Take it in to your mechanic for regular maintenance
- Take it in immediately at the first sign of a problem.
- If you don't, your purse won't like the result.

Paul tells us much the same thing about examining ourselves for the Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NIV (31) But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. (32) When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

It's just like caring for the car:

- The life of prayer and devotion keeps us pure hearted, and free of judgment.
- If there is sin, judge yourself first. This pleases God, starts reconciliation and serves as a warning for the future.
- If you don't do these things, God will discipline you.

Let's understand what "discipline" means. We use it with regard to our children, to train them to do what is right. We also speak of a "disciplined athlete," one who is prepared for his particular event. God disciplines his children to prepare them for the tasks they have ahead. Discipline yourself or God must discipline you.

How do you do this? Before you come before the Lord in Communion, ask yourself some questions:

- Is my life dominated by anger, envy or lust?
- Or have I reached a lifestyle of greed, gluttony and laziness?
- Worse, is my life filled with pride?

Let a man examine himself. It saves so much trouble.

Cruel and Unusual

February 22

The courts of the United States are sometimes called upon to rule on the legality of some form of the death penalty. The Constitution prohibits "cruel and unusual punishment." If our Supreme Court could be transplanted to the time of the Roman Empire, what would they make of Crucifixion?

It is certainly cruel. For example, in Christ's case, we have:

- The constant mockery, including the crown of thorns.
- The severe flogging – often sufficient to cause death itself.
- Carrying the cross – again, public mockery combined with the exhaustion weakening the body.
- The victim was nailed to the cross.
- When the cross was stood upright, the victim was left to die an agonizing death. It was considered merciful to smash the legs of the victim to hasten death.

It would seem that the qualifications for cruelty would have been fully met. Interestingly, the qualification of being unusual would not have been satisfied – crucifixion was a common form of execution. Indeed, millions of Christians died on a cross during these times. Some of these were even soaked in tar before being crucified, then nailed to the cross. Later, after much agony, they would be set alight as night fell – to serve as street lights.

It is unlikely that you and I will die such a death. Indeed, death in our times is usually a rather sanitary procedure in a hospital, comforted by pain killers. All the more reason, then, that we are given Communion as a reminder of the horrible death Christ suffered – for us.

That's right; he died for us. His purpose in coming was to provide the atonement for our sins. It is fitting that we should remember his death, for it gave us our life. Think on this as you partake.

Matched Set

March 1

Perhaps you have someone like Aunt Alice. She was an avid collector of collectables, one of which I inherited. It's interesting to see how the makers of these things try to create value for the collector. For example:

- These two medallions commemorate a historic event – Nixon's trip to China. They're big – the silver one is over five ounces.
- The two medallions are a matched set, one of only three hundred sets ever minted.
- The silver one is almost pure silver.
- There's an impressive display case, and several items documenting the authenticity of the set.

She paid seventy-five dollars for the set in 1972. They are now worth seventy two dollars. Sometimes things just aren't as valuable as they might seem. Sometimes value just doesn't keep.

It is not so with the atonement of Christ. Its value never diminishes or changes.

- The value never changes, for it brings salvation from sin and eternal life.
- It is the same value for each and every one of us. There is no such thing as a "better" atonement.

The value is eternally unchanging, for God is eternal.

Christ asks in return that you remember his sacrifice. You didn't pay for it, he did. The price was his very life itself. For this God has given him the name above all names. All he asks of you is to remember what he did. So as you take the cup and the bread, remember the price that he paid – and thank God that its value is eternal, and eternally yours.

In The Garden

March 8

At the Lord's Supper we are often told to think upon the suffering our Lord endured for our sake. Have you ever considered that a part of that suffering was the anticipation of what would happen?

Consider that night in Gethsemane. Christ goes to the Father in prayer with a great deal on his mind:

- Of course, he knows the pain that is coming. Would this not be made worse by the fact that he did not deserve it? The guilty at least know why they are suffering – and that they earned it.
- He is also contemplating his death – often considered the greatest of human suffering.
- He knows, too, that the Crucifixion will cause him to be separated from the Father – severing a relationship both dear and eternal.
- Finally, he knows he will be betrayed by one disciple, and abandoned by all the others.

This might seem to be a little thing to one who is God. But our Lord is also completely human. In his sorrow he does what human beings do.

- He takes three of his closest friends with him. In sorrow, do we want to be alone? The arm of a friend on your shoulder is a great comfort.
- But he prays alone. Some things are too deeply personal for anyone but God to hear.
- So great is his distress and sorrow that he asks his friends to keep watch – to allow him to put everything into that prayer.

Pain is in the body; suffering is in the mind. As you partake, remember the agony of anticipation our Lord suffered – for you.

The Postage Stamp

March 15

Consider the humble postage stamp: It costs relatively little. The design may be genuinely artistic, or it might just be a picture of Daffy Duck. In itself, it means little – but the letter it carries can mean a great deal.

Think of what might be inside that envelope!

- If you're a college student, it might be that very welcome letter from home – with a check from Mom.
- It might be from an old friend, telling you that he stands with you in your troubles – an arm around the shoulder from a distance.
- It might be a letter granting you forgiveness for something that happened forty years ago – and has festered ever since.
- Perhaps, even, it is a letter which assures you that you have a warm welcome waiting – at home.

Communion, in a way, is God's postage stamp. The elements themselves cost very little. It doesn't really matter if they are served from an unadorned wooden tray or a fancy, gold plated metal one. But think of what they bring:

- A Friend who will stand by you in all your trials. Indeed, a Friend who has been through horrible trials, one who knows how you feel even when no one else can comprehend it.
- Forgiveness – for any and all things that you have done, given by the only One who can genuinely forgive. Sin is powerful – but Christ has the authority to forgive sin.
- Reassurance of a "welcome home" – a welcome when you die from the one who holds the keys of hell and death. It's also a welcome from the one who will one day divide the sheep and the goats.

If you will come to him in repentance, remembering the sacrifice he made for you, he will grant you the results of that sacrifice – a Friend, forgiveness, and a forever welcome at home.

Souvenirs

March 22

Souvenirs are often simple things. If you've ever had to clean out Mom's house after she died, you found that she had a lot of simple memories of her life:

- From her days in High School, she had photographs of friends and simple memories – pom-poms, pennants and such.
- Her husband was a veteran of the military. She kept his medals and ribbons as a memory of his service (and her service as a military wife and mother.)
- From their travels she kept any number of knick-knacks. These were things like a paper cocktail umbrella from a restaurant long out of business.
- Poignantly, she kept programs from her friend's funerals. They were one last thing to remember them by.

Christians keep memories like that too. We keep little things that remind us of the good times (things we made at camp, for instance). Often enough we have items which recall our service to the Lord – most teachers have a handmade something from one of their students. If we've been on the mission field – even for a very short term visit – we usually have some knick-knack from the country we visited.

And we have a memorial of one particular death. Our Lord knew the importance of such a memorial. He gave us the Lord's Supper as such.

- We take the wine or juice as a memory of the blood he bled on the cross for our salvation.
- We take the bread as a memory of the broken, suffering body that hung on that cross.
- We do this until he returns; indeed, the very act of taking this Communion is a proclamation that he is coming again.

It is good to know what things should be forgotten. It is better to know what things should be remembered.

Pinch Hitter

March 29

Baseball fans know what a pinch hitter really is. It's a phrase so common in our language that it has passed into usage into other areas of speech. But like many such transfers, the people using it outside of baseball often get it wrong.

How so? In baseball, you bring in a pinch hitter because that hitter is better than the other one. The common example is bringing in a pinch hitter for a pitcher. Pitchers are usually poor hitters; the manager may decide that losing that pitcher's services on the mound is not as important as a better chance to get a hit. That's the original usage. Often, the phrase is now used to mean not "a better performing substitute" but just a substitute – often meaning "whoever we could get."

Christ is our pinch hitter in the matter of sin and death. He's not just a substitute; he's the only substitute who can actually do the task. Here's why:

- The penalty for sin is death. If someone is to pay that penalty for me, that someone must not also be under sentence of death for sin. Dying for your own sins means you can't die for mine. In short, that someone must be sinless. I'm not; Christ is.
- The penalty must be paid in the manner prescribed by God for an effective substitute. Christ did so in accord with the Old Testament law, at just the right time.
- If someone does pay that penalty for me, how do I know it's effective? We have the Resurrection, clear proof of triumph over death.

Baseball fans often can give you every detail of the last time their club won the World Series. If they had tickets, the ticket stubs are preserved forever as memorabilia. Communion is our method of remember the triumph over sin and death that Christ achieved at the Cross. He is our pinch hitter – not just any substitute available, but the one who could do the job we cannot. Remember his death as you take this bread and drink this cup.

Great Beginnings

April 5 (Palm Sunday)

We celebrate beginnings. The birth may be in a secluded hospital room, but the flood of grandparents and other relatives begins very, very quickly. (There's a reason God made them cute). Later in life we celebrate graduations, markers in life of our children going "to the next level." Then there are weddings – celebrations of the union paralleled by that of Christ and the church. Have you noticed, then, that all of these are accompanied by memory keepers – photos and other souvenirs?

On the original Palm Sunday, Jerusalem celebrated what they believed to be a great beginning. They saw a new king coming to them, one who would throw off the world's ways and govern in God's way. Indeed, this king was somehow connected to the eventual coming of God on earth – the time when God would himself dwell with his people. This, they knew, would bring in a golden age of peace and prosperity that would never end. These expectations were disappointed; five days later the new king would be crucified by the local authorities.

Or were they really disappointed? Were those expectations so unreasonable after all?

Did they get a new king? Yes, they did. He wasn't the king they expected, in the world's way, but a king as given by God. He is known as the Prince of Peace, and his kingdom still grows to this day.

Did they get the presence of God with them? Indeed, Emmanuel is his name to this day – God With Us. In the person of the Holy Spirit he is with us still.

Did his coming usher in a golden age? Perhaps not – but he is coming again; perhaps it is just a matter of patience.

Celebrate with us now the Great Beginning – the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. His atonement gives us our redemption; his resurrection assures us of life eternal. We do this until he comes again – the next great beginning.

While It Was Still Dark

April 12 (Easter Sunday)

Many wives will sympathize with Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb on Easter morning. They had started out, John tells us, while it was still dark. Any woman who gets up early to throw a load of laundry in the washer knows the feeling. The women were coming to anoint the body with spices – considered women's work in that time. They walked there with no light – both physically and spiritually, for they were expecting a corpse. But do you notice that they did their task promptly, without hoping that someone else would volunteer? Even in the hopeless times, duty's call should be answered.

Sometimes Communion seems like that to us. It's something to occupy some time between the music and the sermon; it's a ritual that we've done this way for years. A ritual, but an empty one. We're glad to hurry through it.

How is it that we fall into this dreadful habit? We have no light; it is still dark in our minds. How do we bring light to our minds? By examining ourselves, so that there will be repentance to cleanse the heart and clear the mind. If we will not do that, an empty ritual is all that is left.

Some might ask whether or not just performing the ritual is enough. Some of us were taught that way; don't think, just do it. Indeed, the fancier the ritual, the better, right? To dispel this illusion you need only recall the words, "let a man examine himself."

We must not forget that we do this in memory of Christ's death – and we will do it only until he comes again. Communion looks forward as well as backward. The true meaning is kept alive in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. To bring this out, we must remove sin as a barrier between us and the Risen Lord. Examine yourself, and submit yourself to him. Does it seem like he will never return? Patience, child; first the cross – then the light.

Drink Responsibly

April 19

Perhaps you have seen the ads or heard the commercials. Stuck in at the end will be something like, "Megalithic Brewers urges you to drink responsibly." It is an almost pious appeal, showing their sober concern for our drunken welfare.

Of course, the cynical among us might think that they are doing this to avoid lawsuits from the victims of drunkenness – who often are the drunks themselves. But isn't that the way of the world, to say one thing and mean something entirely different?

A similar warning is given to the Christian. We too are advised to "drink responsibly" at the Lord's table. Perhaps we might look at irresponsible drinking:

- Irresponsible drinking might be treating Communion as nothing more than a stale ritual, something we do every week at this time, and no more.
- Irresponsible drinking might be to partake without self examination. Some of us, as C. S. Lewis put it, want to "let sleeping worms lie."
- Worst of all, how irresponsible it is to drink hypocritically, to give others the impression that you really believe when you are just keeping up a reputation you don't deserve.

Irresponsible drinking has its consequences. We all know the consequences of drunken driving; but did you know that those who take Communion in an unworthy manner can be afflicted with sickness and even death? Did you think that God Almighty would allow those who insult the sacrifice of Christ to go undisciplined?

Responsible drinking is this: "Let a man examine himself." By examining yourself, confessing your sins and repenting, you prepare yourself for the memorial which proclaims your salvation by sacrifice. Do not do this lightly; drink responsibly.

Funeral Dinner

April 26

It is the custom in many Christian churches to end a funeral with a dinner. At my father's funeral the dinner was at home, the ladies of the church and friends providing the meal. For my mother's funeral, we went to her favorite restaurant. But in both instances the meal was not centered on the actual food, but the memories we shared of my parents. Stories were brought out by friends and family, some of which I had never heard, as we celebrated a long life in Christ. It was a reunion of family and friends, and a good time. One reason we were so upbeat: as Christians, we share the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead.

Communion is somewhat like that. Indeed, the Bible tells us that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper somewhat like we might have a church dinner. Unfortunately, this brought abuse which humiliated the poorer brothers in the church, so the Lord's Supper was separated from ordinary church meals together. It still bears some resemblance to those funeral dinners, though:

It is celebrated in churches humble and grand – simple elements served in the style of the congregation.

It is a time of memory – thinking about what Christ has done for us, his sacrifice and our salvation.

It, too, is celebrated in "sure and certain hope" – of our Lord's return in glory.

As you partake, then, remember these things. Do not be dazzled by the elegance of the serving trays, or ashamed of their humble simplicity. The caliber of the meal is not the caliber of the person celebrated. Remember too that you do not partake of Communion alone; we, the church, take it as a body. Most of all, remember what Christ has done for you in his atonement, granting you salvation.

Photographs

May 3

The advent of the computer and the digital camera has convinced many of us that we, too, can be photographers. One reason for this is the abundance of computer programs used to treat the photographs we take. Consider what one may do if you have a lousy photograph:

Most commonly, we "catalog" the photograph. We file it away and, having done something with it, we consider the matter finished.

We could also "enhance" the photograph. For example, programs often remove the "red eye effect" of flash photography. Once we have it looking the way we want it, we might then "share" it with others, in several different ways. If we're really proud of our enhancements, we might even print it and frame it.

Of course, there is the hard method. You fix the problem. You take another picture, this time with the right light, framing and other elements of photography.

Photographs are a graphic memory; our minds have memories of other sorts. Have you considered that we can treat the memory of our sins in much the same way?

We might just tell ourselves that yes, that's a sin, and catalog it away. Having filed it, we forget it.

Sometimes we enhance our memories – we justify ourselves, or tell ourselves it really isn't a sin. This can rise to the point where we actually begin to brag about what we have done – sharing our triumphs instead of being ashamed. If this goes far enough, we might even have a trophy of this for our desk. Greed often produces a physical testimonial.

But you could handle it the hard way. You could repent.

"Let a man examine himself." It is not an idle thought, nor is it a suggestion. If you are to approach the Lord God Almighty in the sacred rite of Communion, you should do so with a clean heart. A clean heart comes from self-examination and repentance. Therefore, do not file and forget, nor justify, but repent.

Going to Jail

May 10

Have you ever been to jail? Thousands of Christians have, not as criminals but as those involved with various prison ministries. It's not easy to recruit volunteers for this ministry; some people feel that prison might just be contagious. Indeed, it's not for the faint-hearted:

It's a frightening experience, especially the first time. Often enough the prison officers consider visitors – especially those not part of a group ministry – as simply the criminals who haven't been caught yet. To be despised in a cold, official manner is unpleasant to the mind – especially when reinforced by the clang of steel gates between you and freedom.

The experience has its moral effect as well. One woman, after her first experience visiting a friend in prison, said that she just wanted to go back to the motel, burn all her clothes and take a shower with a scrub brush and lye soap.

It's hard to remember, sometimes, that the prisoners are human beings too. Whatever your crime, it is a climate of fear – you are surrounded by some of the worst of humanity. One Christian received a panic phone call from his friend in prison: "I'm in a cell block with 14 guys – and you know two of them." "Who?" "Sirhan B. Sirhan (Robert Kennedy's murderer) – and Charles Manson."

Yet in this world Christianity flourishes. Why? Perhaps it is simply that they have time to sit and think – and repent.

What is this to us? Simply this: these men and women, too, are those for whom Christ died. When you take the Lord's Supper you proclaim his death – even on behalf of such as these. We must remember that all of us are sinners. Christ never made a distinction between good sinners and bad; he died for all. His instructions for salvation start with, "whosoever will."

As you partake, consider the extent of his sacrifice. Not just for the righteous, not just for the worthy, not just for the nice guys – Christ died for "whosoever will." Even the least of these may have pardon. Remember how great his sacrifice, how great his love.

Eucharist

May 17

One word for the Lord's Supper, or Communion, is "Eucharist." It is not in common use in evangelical churches, but remains with the liturgical churches. The word itself was in more common use in prior centuries; the changes in the English language have confined it to particular churches.

The word itself, however, comes from the earliest days of the church. Much of the early church outside Jerusalem spoke Greek. In that language, the word used for what we might call Communion was eucharistia – which means, simply, "thanksgiving."

Have you ever thought of the Lord's Supper as a time of thanksgiving? We can certainly see it that way in our own personal lives; I have much to be thankful for.

I am thankful, first, for my salvation. That Christ died for one as yet unborn – me – is something to be thankful for indeed.

But he did not give me just one chance at salvation. No, when I sin (as all of us do) he is faithful and just to forgive my sin as I repent. Such patience!

I am thankful, too, that by his sacrifice he broke down the wall between me and God the Father. He is the peace that allows me to approach God Almighty and call him "Father."

We as a church have reason to be thankful too. Among many other things, we should be thankful for:

By his sacrifice he has established the church – Christianity is not a solo flight!

By the example of his suffering we are prepared to suffer; by the example of his death we are prepared for martyrdom. Who can say that it will not happen to us?

By his word we know that we celebrate this meal "until he comes again." We are thankful that we know of his sure and certain return.

As you meditate upon the Lord's Supper, remember: Give thanks. He did this for us.

Sacrifice

May 24

Have you ever considered the motivation for ordinary human beings to make sacrifices?

Sometimes we do it for those we love. Grandparents have been known to be extravagant towards their grandchildren.

Sometimes we do it to obtain some good thing – we save money for a college education, for example.

Occasionally, we sacrifice to honor someone or something – a gift given "in honor of" someone, given as a token of our respect and admiration for that person, for example.

Often, it's simply "the right thing to do." We pay our bills on time despite the thought that we might like to use the money for something else.

Jesus had much the same set of motivations in his sacrifice at the Cross:

Sacrifice for love? Indeed, so great is God's love for us that he gave his only son as a sacrifice for our sins.

Sacrifice to obtain some good thing? It is by Christ's sacrifice at the cross that he obtained the church, the "bride of Christ."

Was that sacrifice in honor of someone? Indeed, Christ honored the Father by being obedient to him, even obedient to death.

Was it "the right thing to do?" From before the beginning of time this was planned; from the earliest sections of Scripture it was prophesied. Though Christ asked to avoid the cross if possible, his prayer showed he knew the right thing: "not my will, but yours."

Therefore, when you remember Christ's sacrifice by taking this Communion, remember the great love which moved him. Remember that he provided the church, so that you would not be alone. As you remember, honor God by your obedience to him. And do so until, as prophesied, he comes again.

Seeing Things Unseen

May 31

Many living today are proud of their hard-nosed, "show me" attitude towards life. But if you examine it, even such people still have the problem of seeing that which intrinsically cannot be seen. A simple example of this is ever-present: the wind.

It's easiest done, I'm told, at sea with sailing ships. An experienced sailor can tell you wind speed and direction simply by looking at other ships. Determining the course of the other ship and the set of her sails will tell the speed and direction of the wind.

On land it's a bit more difficult. But all of us are familiar with the sound of the wind; trees bending in the wind are familiar sight. We see the unseen, then, by its effects.

In the air it is more difficult. The best methods use radar – that is, we use the unseen to see the unseen.

We may be assured that others do this to measure the Holy Spirit in our lives. Some see us as sailors do – they see the direction we're headed in, and the actions we are taking (like setting sails for that sailor) and can then determine just how much the Holy Spirit is in us. Others see us like the trees – bent, and making a howling noise. Our anger and our words also tell others about the Spirit within. People see our results and estimate the unseen cause.

We have a more difficult problem in Communion. All that we can see are the visible elements of bread and wine; how does the Christian see beyond this? Those looking at us see the visible; when we look at Communion we must see the unseen – and discern the body and blood of Christ. We do it (like the radar for the wind) with the unseen –the power of the Holy Spirit. If we see only the elements themselves, we see nothing. But if we have the Spirit open our eyes, we see the body and blood of Christ – the sacrifice he made on the cross for our salvation. As long as Christ remains unseen we will do this. When the faith becomes sight, we will need it no more.

I Also

June 7

If you remember the story of the centurion of Capernaum – the one whom Jesus said had "great faith" – you will remember that he said he was a man under authority. What you may have missed is that he said "I also" am a man under authority. (The NIV translates this rather poorly, but almost all other translations get it clearly.) It's not just that he was in the army; he recognized that Jesus, too, was under authority. His faith was based on his understanding of how authority works, a concept which was very familiar to him. It is a source of great faith.

Whether or not the centurion truly comprehended who Jesus is, we do not know. But we do know under whose authority Jesus acted: that of God the Father. We may observe two things:

First, if you acknowledge authority, you are obliged to be obedient to it. Christ was obedient to the Father's authority, even to the point of death.

Second, His obedience was perfect, for he and the Father are one. His will is the same as the Father's; he therefore does his Father's will.

What exactly was that will? It is God's purpose as set forth from the beginning:

First, that the curse of sin be lifted from mankind.

Second, that sin be paid for – that God's righteousness would be satisfied at the cross.

Third, that God's love be shown to all mankind.

Fourth, that man be reconciled to God.

All this was accomplished at the cross.

At the time of Communion Christ commands your obedience to him, just as he was obedient to the Father. Just what is that obedience? That you remember his sacrifice. Given what he has done for you, is that obedience too burdensome?

Warning

June 14

Most of us see them fairly frequently – flashing yellow lights mounted on a barricade, or on top of a traffic sign, even on the back of trucks. Their purpose is consistent: to warn you of something. They don't require that you stop, necessarily, but they do require you to decide what to do. You are the one who must look for things to be wary of, and take appropriate action. More importantly, you are responsible for your actions. If you fail to take warning, it's your neck that you risk.

Communion, in its own way, serves a similar function in the life of the practicing Christian.

One warning is this: are you omitting Communion altogether? You are commanded to partake; you have the example of others around you. And if you refuse?

Another warning comes of taking Communion lightly (1st Corinthians 11:27). Is it something you do every week because it is something you do every week?

A third warning, most serious of all, is in taking Communion and also taking "the cup of devils" (1st Corinthians 10:21). That means one who has no difficulty acting like a heathen on Saturday night and a saint on Sunday morning.

Like the flashing yellow lights, these warnings should compel you to action. If you are one who skips Communion, it may be that you know you should reconcile with your Christian brother – and can't face God until you do. Then reconcile. Do you see yourself taking it lightly? Then use your head: see with your mind's eye, and see the body and blood of Christ – no light thing. Are you that heathen on Saturday and saint on Sunday? You know the word: hypocrite. You can only correct that problem by renouncing either Saturday night or Sunday morning. You know the right answer to that one; have the courage to follow through and do what you know is right. The lights are flashing; take warning and then take action. The results are your responsibility.

Blood Pressure

June 21

Consider, if you will, the measurement of human blood pressure. First, it is a dual measurement – it measures two things because measuring one is not sufficient. Second, have you noticed that the medical people do this every time you come in? You can go in to be treated for acne and they will still take your blood pressure. Third, it is a diagnostic of other diseases, not a disease in and of itself. You measure blood pressure, but the doctor uses it for many purposes.

Communion is much like that. In its own way it too is a measurement, bearing some resemblance to blood pressure:

It too is a dual measurement – we examine ourselves in both the body and blood.

Like the Apostles, we do it every week. Last week's results are not sufficient for this week's examination.

It is a diagnostic – one which allows us to treat conditions such as the hardened heart, the unrepentant mind, hypocrisy and pride.

We said it is a dual measurement of the human soul. Let's look at each measurement:

We examine ourselves as we partake of his body. We should cast our minds back to the ugly scene of the Crucifixion, and remember that Christ went to that cross voluntarily – because he loves us. We are to show that same love, and the same spirit of sacrifice. We need to examine ourselves in this: is our love shallow, or deep? Are our sacrifices coming from our excess, or from our substance?

We examine ourselves as we remember that the blood he spilled is the blood of the new covenant – a new relationship with God. No longer is God distant from us, up a chain of priests, reachable only with animal sacrifices. The way to God is open, because of Christ's blood. Are we in such a relationship with God? If not, it's not his fault.

Measure yourself each week; then act.

The Colonel's Visit

June 28

Children growing up in the home of a young military officer will quickly find that having the colonel over for dinner is no simple affair – not even for the children:

The house must be cleaned, even your bedroom.

The table will be set with the good china and silver, and set to micrometric precision.

The children will be scrubbed and well dressed.

Most important, the children will be on their very best behavior. This is not a time for dad to find out just how mean you can be.

There are certain parallels here to Communion; we might ask these questions:

Is your house clean – are your relations with family and friends free from thoughts of vengeance, for example? Can Christ accept your worship if not?

Like the best china and silver, do you bring your best to your Lord? (You might want to look at that offering check.)

Are you, personally, clean? Have you repented of your sins and asked your Lord's forgiveness?

Are you on your best behavior? Do you approach this memorial with reverence and sincerity?

Sometimes we miss these things in preparing for Communion. Given what we know of its importance, how does this happen?

One reason is that Communion comes so often. It's not "special." But Christ is.

Distractions – of all kinds – do their damage. One reason we pray "in the closet" is to practice tuning out those distractions.

Worst of all is sin in your life – clean hands are required.

Sometimes it seems that the colonel gets better treatment than the Christ. Just who ranks number one in your life?

For the Person Who Has Everything

July 5

Neiman Marcus has long had a section in its catalog featuring a Christmas gift "for the person who has everything." Some of those gifts included:

For a mere $110,000, a motorcycle capable of speeds up to 190 miles per hour. Excellent for senior citizens commuting to church.

You prefer four wheels? How about a replica of a 1914 Stutz Bearcat racing car?

A personal favorite: his and hers matched Brahma bulls, with the note solemnly stating that they would be "gift wrapped as best we can."

Compare these with the gifts that every Christian is given:

God has given us himself, in the person of Jesus the Christ. We give things; he gives himself.

In so doing God has given us our salvation. We don't deserve it; therefore it must be a gift.

Cars, motorcycles and cattle soon go the way of all things temporal. God gives us eternal life.

Which brings us to a problem: what do you give to the God who quite literally has everything?

We are taught to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to him. Parents are pleased when their children do as they are taught; how much more pleasing is this to our heavenly Father?

Our love – heart, soul, mind and strength – pleases him too, for God is love.

But here at Communion we give something small – but very pleasing to him. We remember what he has done for us. As grandparents love thank you notes from their grandchildren, so too God is pleased when you remember his sacrifice for you. As you partake, then, remember just what great gifts you have been given – and what price was paid to give them. You cannot repay or earn them, but you can remember and give thanks.

Aerospace Ways

July 12

It is not long before the beginning aerospace engineer will hear the phrase, "Beat to shape, trim to fit, and paint to match." When the internal design changes, it often requires the surface of the aircraft to be modified – to keep the aircraft flying. Christianity has somewhat the same process.

"Beat to shape" – in the original, changing the shape of the sheet metal as required. For the Christian it might take one of these forms:

God may use our trials to bring us to salvation – those who found Christ as an adult often have this experience.

Once we are Christians, God often uses our pain and suffering to shape us a particular type of Christian, to encourage others.

Often enough our trials are shared – so that in their endurance we may be brought together to be one.

"Trim to fit" – the major changes made in pain in suffering, other changes made in quieter (and perhaps deeper) ways.

How often the teacher hears someone tell him that his lesson must have been tailored just for that one person. No, just God trimming.

Sometimes it's reading a particular author; how many lives have changed by reading C. S. Lewis?

Such minor corrections are given to us in the examples of others.

"Paint to match" – making the appearance on the outside be consistent. Why would a Christian be concerned with appearances? Because they are a way of telling the truth. On the inside we have received the grace and glory of God, given at the Cross. On the outside, therefore, we must tell that truth.

We have been given a way to do this in Communion. For as often as you partake, you proclaim the Lord's death – and thus the grace that flows with it and the glory of God who gives it. He is making you into what he wants you to be; acknowledge this, and let the world see it too.

Substitute

July 19

One of the most difficult aspects of the English language is that a given word may take one several shades of meaning, depending entirely on the context. Take, for instance, the word "substitute:"

One meaning is that of an alternative – two equal and interchangeable items. For example, swapping a blue car for an otherwise identical red car at a rental agency.

Another possibility is an artificial substitute – as in a sugar substitute for your coffee. Not really interchangeable, but used for the same purpose, sweetening your coffee.

Sometimes we use the word to mean a counterfeit or imitation, as a thief might substitute a copy of a painting for the real thing.

None of these meanings touches on the Christian use of the word – which is a vicarious substitute, Christ at the cross, dying in our place.

Satan certainly likes to baffle us with other meanings of "substitute." For example, we have:

"All religions are equally true" – so anything would be a substitute for the true faith. Satan tells us they are interchangeable.

We also have synthetic religions – substitutes for the real thing just like sugar substitutes. Not really interchangeable, not really as good, but avoiding what we see as drawbacks.

There are also counterfeit religions – those with their own "special revelation." Add this and subtract that – it looks the same, but it isn't.

The real use of substitution is what Christ did for us on the Christ. Please note these two things:

First, he did what we could not do – atone for our sins. Only the sinless man could do that. He is our necessary substitute.

Second, he didn't do it for himself, but for us. He did it on our behalf, because of his great love for us.

At Communion we remember this. Christ commands those who love him to remember his sacrifice at the Cross. Accept no substitutes.

Prison Conversion

July 26

Most Christians will recognize the name, Chuck Colson. For those who don't, a little history is in order. Chuck was one of the main figures in the Nixon-era Watergate scandal. For his part in this he was convicted and sent to prison. Prison gives you plenty of time to think, and think he did. He became a "born again" Christian there.

When the news became public, the general reaction of our cynical press was that this was a "Sahara Snowflake" conversion – meaning that once Colson left prison his conversion would last about as long as a snowflake in the Sahara desert. It was assumed that his motive was to get more favorable treatment in prison. (This is an ignorant assumption; being a Christian more commonly makes prison life worse. Prisons, too, are "of this world.") But as he maintained that conversion after being released, opinions changed.

The principle is sound, though. We are to judge the truth of such a conversion by its fruits. If you go around with a "holier-than-thou" attitude, people will question the genuineness of your faith. If you don't walk the talk, they will see a hypocrite, not a real Christian. If they see your anger controlling you, they will know that you are not under the lordship of Christ.

So how does the world know you are genuine when you come to Communion? What signs should you be exhibiting which show that you receive the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner?

Repentance – have you confessed your sins, asking forgiveness, turning from those ways?

Reconciliation – have you reached out to those who are not at peace with you?

Reliance – have you placed your full trust in Christ – even to the point of facing death?

The way to look genuine is to be genuine.

Body of Christ

August 2

Those familiar with the Scriptures will quickly recognize three different but related meanings for the phrase, “body of Christ.”

The first meaning is the most obvious: the actual, physical body of Christ. One of the most important tenets of the faith is that Christ came in the flesh – not some angelic visitor, or vision, or mental image. He has a body like every other human being.

The second meaning comes after the resurrection: it means the church. We, as his people, are the body of Christ.

The third meaning, expressly stated by Jesus, is the bread which is used in Communion. “This is my body,” he said.

These meanings can be used to help us discern the body of Christ when taking Communion. The first is easy: do we acknowledge that Christ came in the flesh, and suffered in his physical body just as we can suffer?

When we contemplate his body as the church, we realize that our faith is no solo flight. By his command we are to accept this organization as his will for us. Along the same vein, we also know that if we are a part of the church we represent our Lord to the world.

The bread as body presents us with two thoughts:

First, bread is physical. In using a physical token, we acknowledge the physical reality of Christ.

Second, we are what we eat. Christ is the food of the full grown Christian.

All this will become clearer when he returns. Then we shall see him in his physical body – the resurrected one. Praise God, we will be raised with just such a body as well. The church – one Lord, one body – will rise to meet her Lord and join him. But we will no more partake of the bread in Communion, for faith will have become sight. We take this bread and cup in hope – the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to come.

Skull and Crossbones

August 9

Have you ever considered the symbolism on the rather common version of the pirate flag, the skull and crossbones?

The skull and crossbones symbolize death, of course.

The black background symbolizes evil.

So why, then, are pirates always played by romantic leads such as Errol Flynn? Why is it that such a symbol is sold – and to little children – at places like Disneyland?

Perhaps more significantly, why is it that women just seem to love their pirates?

One reason might be that they want a bold, dominant, alpha male – who of course has sense enough to do just what his wife tells him.

Another thought is that pirates are dangerous; knowing one is an adventure, and most of us have a taste for adventure – as long as it's not really too dangerous. (This explains roller coaster rides, too.)

Besides, we all know it for what it is: play acting. Nobody ever got busted for flying the Jolly Roger from the staff of his fishing boat.

But a lot of Christians have been busted – even crucified – for the act of insisting on the Lord's Supper instead of doing things the world's way. Millions of Christians died just for refusing to symbolically worship the Roman Emperor. Apparently some symbolism is more meaningful than others.

This symbolic act is easy to interpret. In the bread we see Christ's body; in the cup we see his blood. Like the skull and crossbones, these things symbolize death. But the act itself is a proclamation of love, not of evil. Indeed, it is also a proclamation of life, not death, for we take this bread and drink this cup until our Lord returns.

So as you take this supper remember that it is no light-hearted, amusement park bauble. It is the body and blood of Christ and it symbolizes life eternal.

SS Catalina

August 16

A recent article in our local paper announced the scrapping of one of the most romantic ships of the twentieth century: the SS Catalina. She sailed from Los Angeles to Catalina Island. A pleasure cruise on the Great White Steamer, as she was known, was a romantic occasion. The ship featured a large dance floor, with a "big band" orchestra. When she arrived, her deep ship's horn started the traditional reception: speedboats racing around her. The article included happy memories from many former passengers.

Why do we remember such things with so much fondness? There are several reasons:

We like to remember pleasant times. This is especially true when the episode has a happy ending.

We like to remember significant events in our lives. If it's the trip where you met your husband, it's memorable.

Sometimes, the experience is a "once in a lifetime thing." Do you remember where you went on your honeymoon?

But ultimately, nostalgia was not sufficient to keep the ship afloat. Pleasant memories didn't keep her from the breakers' yard.

What kinds of memories do move us to action?

People who made an impact on our lives do – have you ever answered a call for help from an old friend?

Often, the memories are of hard times. Have you ever said that your children would not have the hardship you did growing up?

Frequently enough, the hard times end with victory, and we continue to preserve and celebrate the victory.

Communion is like that. Jesus of Nazareth has had more impact on more people than anyone else who walked the earth. Communion celebrates the death of Jesus – and has continued for two thousand years. That death ended in victory – so we celebrate this memory.

The Whistle

August 23

Most of us have owned a common police whistle at one time or another. Children are fond of them; anything that makes a loud noise does seem to appeal to them. But there are adult uses too:

Whistles are used to get our attention. Sometimes we need to focus on the danger at hand, and the sound of a whistle does that for us.

As Boy Scout leaders know, giving each child a whistle makes it easier to find a lost Boy Scout. All he needs to know is to whistle back.

We also use whistles to direct traffic – drum majors start a march with them, police officers direct traffic with them.

But did you know there is another, more exuberant use of the whistle? It is used as a musical instrument! Particularly in jazz and Caribbean music, it provides a joyous sound – very often like listening to a parade.

Communion parallels much of that. Perhaps that seems an odd way of looking at it, but think about it:

We are commanded to do it regularly. It's one way God gets our attention. By this we must have a time to go before God Almighty; he thus has our attention – and, we hope, repentance.

Often enough, some of us are "found in the woods" – coming to Communion. The week leaves us feeling lost in the world; the Lord's Supper is a welcome home.

If we are repentant, then it is at Communion we get directions confirmed. Sometimes it is easier to hear the still, small voice when the room is hushed in reverence.

But in Communion there is also an element of exuberant joy, as if we had joined an angel chorus. For if we share in the death of Christ, do we not also share in his victory over death? Indeed, if you can take Communion honestly, is it not an assurance of your own salvation? And exuberance? The parade will begin at his return, but even now we proclaim his return in taking Communion. Let your joy be full; Jesus has triumphed over the grave.

The Mask

August 30

The Mask came into church today. He – or who knows, is it she? – is sitting with us right now. The Mask often is here with us; it's just that we usually don't recognize the Mask. Indeed, what is there to look for? The Mask is all smiles; the children are doing just fine; everyone's healthy – and no one's heart is troubled with spiritual problems. It's better than that; the Mask is never offended, for no one can offend the Mask. Never offended, the Mask never needs to forgive. You won't get much chance to look at the Mask, though; it might crack under the strain of serious conversation.

You might ask why the Mask comes here at all – why not just plain honest folks? You don't understand: the Mask knows that this is not a hospital for sinners but a health club for saints. Therefore, the Mask should never be in pain. But behind the mask there is pain, and this must be kept from sight. The Mask, you see, helps its wearer hide in plain sight. For without the Mask, wouldn't people begin to judge? Wouldn't they say that the Mask's troubles are of his own making, and therefore leave him condemned to stew in his own juices?

What are we to do? Perhaps we might tell the Mask some simple facts. First, you're right – we can't see through your Mask. You won't let us. And even if we did, we'd be afraid to look – for seeing through your mask might expose cracks in our own. We might even have to take off our masks to see through yours. So do not fear us.

But give some thought to your Lord, Jesus Christ. Do not think that you can deceive him, for blackest night is like clearest day to him. But he does not judge you; rather, he wants you to bring your troubles to him. He longs to hear you repent; he longs to hear you forgive. He went to the Cross to have mercy triumph over judgment. Indeed, as he has no mask, removing yours allows sweet fellowship between you and him. Perhaps you could set an example for the rest of us. Repent, and then receive.

Under His Wings

September 6

One of the instincts built into human beings is to seek shelter when threatened. It's a good thing, but have you noticed that the shelter depends upon the threat? If you are in a lightning storm, you seek shelter which has a lightning rod. If it's a tornado, you look underground for a storm cellar. If it's an earthquake, you do the opposite – you want to be outdoors. Indoors or outdoors – it depends upon the threat. But in all cases you seek a shelter which is stronger than you are.

But what if the threat comes from within? Where do you seek shelter from yourself? Where do you hide from problems of your own making?

Some of us simply deny them.

Others treat the symptoms with drugs or alcohol.

Many just blame the problem on someone else.

Surely, though, the answer is just as simple as before: you seek shelter in that which is stronger than you. Denial, drugs and blame simply don't work, for they too spring from within. You cannot conquer weakness with weakness.

So it is that the Lord tells us that we are to seek shelter in Him:

Psalm 91:4 He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.

His shelter is not just shelter, but care and love. You are sheltered by one who has shown you the ultimate proof of his love – the Cross.

Communion is a memorial of that love and care. When you partake, you confirm that you have accepted that care. You have found the one who is stronger than self, and have taken refuge in him. As you partake, then, remember your own weakness. Then thank him for the love which extended his power even to the worst of sinners. This do, in remembrance.

Just Between You and Me

September 13

Just between you and me, God, I hate coming to communion. I have my failures, you know, and I really don't like to have to talk about them.

Take my anger, for instance. Why do I go into a foul-mouthed rage when some idiot cuts me off on the freeway? I mean, I knew the idiot was out there somewhere. It's just a matter of time before he finds me. So why do I explode like that?

Another thing – vengeance. I have these daydreams of doing something really horrible to someone just because she flew off the handle at me. It gnaws at me; I'm not a cruel person – am I?

Self-control, that's a big one with me. My eyes are after every pretty girl; my mouth is after every dessert with chocolate. I'd be in a lot more trouble if I weren't so lazy about it.

But I'm not lazy when it comes to making a buck – just the opposite. I cut every corner I can for money. But who wouldn't? I live in a world where there is always more to want – and I always want more. After all, my best buddy has a bigger fishing boat than I do, you know.

You know, you wouldn't think I could be proud of all that – but I am. It's not anger, it's righteous outrage. It's not cruelty, it's what they deserve. At least I'm not as bad as some people – somewhere. As long as people don't attack my pride, it's harmless, right?

Just between you and me, God, I love to come to communion. It's the only time in the week I can look in an honest mirror. I look down at the bread and cup; I know I'm looking at the body and blood of a better man than I am. How can I stand proud when a better man than I had to take the punishment I deserve? When he did it not because he had to but because he loved me? It's when I see myself as I really am.

I love to come to communion, Lord. That's where I can see forgiveness, because forgiveness comes from love, and your love is in my hands. Don't let me forget, Lord. I'm the sinner, you're my salvation. Don't let me forget, Lord. You paid the price, I got a new life. Don't let me forget, Lord, don't let me forget.

The Price of Obedience

September 20

It falls to a select few Christians to receive a high and hard calling in the faith. Most of us are called to lowly things – which just might be a practical form of "lead us not into temptation." Most of us are not cut out to be heroes, leaders or even modestly famous. Those who receive the high and hard calling are, in a sense, privileged. They receive high honor and recognition for this calling; most of us will receive the simple, "Well done, good and faithful servant." But for that honor there is sacrifice – hard work at the very least. Often enough that sacrifice carries with it martyrdom – the honor of dying for Christ. Indeed, the ultimate example of the high and hard calling is in our Lord himself, who was sent to take away the sins of the world.

There is a secret to those who succeed in the high and hard calling, and it is one we can use: obedience. Permit me a comparison. Some of you will remember Jim Jones, the preacher who led his church to mass suicide in Guyana. Compare him to Billy Graham. Both men worked hard. Both men made sacrifices to achieve their goals. Both were loved by those who followed them and derided by the world around them. But only one was obedient to his Lord; the other followed his own vision.

Things go right, you see, when you follow the instructions given by God. That's Christian obedience. The ultimate example is, again, in Christ himself – who was obedient to the Father, even to death.

The ultimate price of Christian obedience is one most of us will never pay: death. But is it not obvious that there can be no greater price a man can pay? It is a fact that millions of Christians paid this price; many were martyrs simply because they would not proclaim Caesar as a god. In this they followed their ultimate example: Christ.

It is fitting, therefore, that we should remember that obedience. The time may yet come when we are called to imitate it; therefore it is good to keep the example fresh in our minds. Do this – in remembrance of Him.

Undeserved Love

September 27

It is a Norman Rockwell classic. The young boy who has just received an injection is pulling his pants up – while standing on a chair, carefully examining the medical degree on the wall. Is this guy a quack?

The truth is that most of us judge our family physician not by the medical degree on the wall but by his manner in treating us. The famed neurosurgeon can be a graceless clod, but our family doctor had better know how to dispense sympathy as well as antibiotics.

Note, too, that we expect this kind of sympathy even if the medical problem is our own fault. For example, suppose you cut yourself on your table saw. It's easy to say, "I definitely shouldn't have done that." It's your own stupid fault, really. But you don't go to the doctor to be lectured or laughed at; you go for sympathy and stitches.

It is a fact: we often don't deserve the sympathy. Many of our medical trips are caused by our own actions, but we still expect the sympathy. It's true in spiritual matters as well. If we seek forgiveness, we want it to be from the heart – which, by the way, is why we are commanded to forgive that way (Matthew 18:35). Cold charity and dutiful sympathy are a meal of cold, shriveled leftovers.

The only way forgiveness comes with sympathy is from a heart that loves, for only love can forgive that way.

That is the core of Christ's forgiveness for us – his great love for mankind. The proof is at the cross; there is no greater love than this. It is in this great love that he asks us to be reconciled – to God, and to each other. As God forgives us with gracious sympathy, we should forgive one another. So communion, then, is a time of repentance and forgiveness. Even more, it is a time of remembrance. The emblems before you are a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for you. More than that, they are a remembrance of Christ's unsurpassed love for you. Do this, in memory of him.

In Prison, Lonely

October 4

Sherlock Holmes called them the "agony columns." They are the personal ads which even yet appear in the newspapers, and increasingly on various web sites. A common one comes from someone who is an inmate, seeking someone to write and perhaps to visit. Prison is a surprisingly lonely life. You are surrounded by thousands of sinners, each looking out for number one. You are therefore alone in a crowd; you dare not seek help – for that betrays your weakness, and you will be crushed. Surrounded, yet completely alone.

In such a life the letter from outside is greatly prized; a visit is like a light in a dark tunnel. For most prisoners, these things are rare. There may be thousands of prisoners in the institution; a few dozen will get a visit. Letters are a little more common, but also rare.

Those of us outside may say, "It's your own fault. Stew in your own juices." That is usually true – but does nothing to comfort the lonely.

In a sense, we should understand this. We are all prisoners on Planet Earth. We too are surrounded by sinners, who are admittedly more polite about it. And, if you will, it's our own fault, for we are sinners all. Our lives are no doubt more pleasant than that of the prisoner, but our chance of being lonely is still great. Consider that we trust our fellow sinners much more; when they fail us the rejection and loneliness is even greater. We are serving a life sentence; no hope but death.

But for the Christian there is hope. Do we prize a letter from home? Yes, we have a whole Bible full of them. We have not been left alone. Is not the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, indwelling us? We have not been left alone. But the great comfort comes at communion – it is a visit from our Lord. He tells us, "this is my body."

There is greater hope than that. We celebrate this memorial until our Lord returns. It is then that the bars of death will be torn away. We shall see the end of tears and loneliness, and celebrate indeed.

Rain

October 11

It seldom rains in Southern California. It rains a great deal in Iowa. The farmers in Iowa usually welcome the rain as necessary for growing corn; once in a while there is too much, but usually "no rain" is bad news in Iowa.

It's different in Southern California. Rain is welcome – in the abstract. You'll hear things like, "We really needed the rain – there's been such a drought, you know." But rain in person is not welcome – especially on the freeways. Rain lifts the large accumulation of road oil and other things. But there is usually not enough rain to wash this away; just lift it. This turns the freeways slick, like glare ice. Traffic accidents pop up everywhere.

Our reaction to Christ is somewhat like that reaction to rain. Some of us, to be sure, welcome him unconditionally. When life seems to be one long drought of love, Christ is welcomed like rain in Iowa. But for most of us, Christ is more welcome in the abstract than in the personal. We nod agreeably as the Communion meditation is delivered – thankful that it has no personal impact on us. Because if we let it, we'd find that Christ is not so convenient in our daily lives. We're sinners; we want to let sleeping worms lie.

Now is the time we meet him in person, so to speak. Our abstract approval must give way to the knowledge that we are sinners – and sin makes us uncomfortable around the sinless man. We want to hurry through this part of the service.

But he established this reminder not to show us that we are sinners; we already knew that. He established this meal to remind us of his forgiveness, and the price he paid for it. It is not our sin we commemorate but his grace. So, don't be uncomfortable as you partake; rather, be grateful. It's not about us; it's about him, and all he has done for us.

Feasting Alone?

October 18

Every Christian businessman eventually encounters the difficulties of business travel. It's not just the delay at the airport, or the 800 lb. gorilla in the seat next to you. The Christian businessman faces a frequent dilemma concerning his evening meal.

He can, if he desires, take the "party" option. This might take the form of dining with a vendor determined to wine and dine his way into a sale. It might also be with his fellow travelers who view a road trip as a convenient time to do that which they couldn't do at home. He will often be ostracized because he doesn't take one of the girls to his room. Indeed, they will wonder why he isn't at the bar every night just for that reason.

Otherwise, he can feast – alone. This takes the form of an overstuffed restaurant meal delivered to the room, or the chance that he can find a coffee shop nearby. It's best to bring a newspaper or a book.

You can thus imagine what a pleasure it is to be on the road but able to dine with friends or family. It is a rare thing, but much more pleasant.

We enjoy a restaurant meal; the ancients would have known this as enjoying a feast. A feast is an occasion out of the ordinary:

We feast; we enjoy the plenteousness of the food. One does not feast while on a starvation diet. Have you ever noticed that restaurant portions are rather large?

We feast; we enjoy the variety of the food. That's why restaurants have menus.

We feast, we enjoy the company. It's not just a meal, it's an occasion.

Communion is rather like that. At Communion we enjoy the plenitude of God's grace, forgiving over and again. At Communion we enjoy the variety of God's grace – even the "vilest offender" is pardoned. More than that, at Communion we enjoy sweet fellowship with Christ. Communion was instituted at Passover – a feast. It is a spiritual feast; enjoy it with a glad heart. God's grace is here in abundance.

First Communion

October 25

In those denominations which practice infant baptism or christening, a child's first communion service is a major event. It is customary for the girls, for example, to wear a white dress, and it's not unknown to have a party afterwards to celebrate the occasion. Indeed, anyone's first communion service is a major event in life. But there are several items available for sale which might not seem quite as normal as a white dress:

- For the girls, a matching set of soap and perfume for the occasion.
- For the post-communion party, a band, of course – one that specializes in rock music for first communion parties.
- Need something cheaper? How about a first communion mouse pad?
- Or a specially engraved pen and bookmark set?
- A commemorative tie tack for the boys is available.
- And finally, for those who have all of these already, a personalized, extra large size first communion chocolate bar.

Our Lord, in instituting Communion at the Last Supper, did not see fit to prescribe any of these. Indeed, what he instituted had a very different set of virtues:

- First, he implemented Communion in simplicity. Nothing elaborate is required, merely bread and wine. It is something that any church can afford.
- The elements of communion are rather common, in both senses. No one sniffs the cork to check the vintage; bread and wine are easily available.
- These elements are simple, but also symbolic. In this we meet the body and blood of Christ. Simple does not exclude the profound.

It does not matter your status in life. Rich or poor, gifted with good taste or blessed with a sense of the wacky, Communion knows neither fashion sense nor required income. It is a gift, to remind us of the greatest gift ever given mankind – the body and blood of Christ, given for our sins.

Self Examination

November 1

The church which your author attends has recently made a deep commitment to what is called Consumer Christianity. This has had a particular effect upon the communion service itself: the service has been revised to completely prevent self-examination. The usual method is to have a special number by the worship team which is loud and intrusive.

Upon inquiry, the explanation is given that communion is a time of congregational praise, not as solemn remembrance. The music is fast and happy (the definition of "praise" music today) so that one's mind does not focus on self examination, but clapping along.

Communion is now secondary in worship here; it is "fit in" to the service wherever it can be fit to accommodate the music and the message. Those who object are classified as fossils and then ignored.

Why are we doing this? Consumer Christianity, by definition starts by finding out what people want, then delivering it to them. It's fairly clear that people don't want guilt; it's unpleasant and pop psychology says it's bad for you. So if you have a portion of your service that causes guilt, you change it. It keeps guilt from spreading. It keeps people happy.

Why, then, does the Scripture command that a man should examine himself? The answer is relatively simple: self-examination reveals the guilt you already have – and leads therefore to repentance. We are commanded to do this regularly at communion for the same reason we remove splinters quickly: the pain goes away faster, and the infection has no chance to spread. Regular self-examination does the same thing with regard to sin in your spiritual life.

So I encourage you today: examine yourself. Take the time to see if there is sin in your life. If there is, repent of it and seek the Lord's aid in keeping it away from you – "deliver us from evil." Then take the Lord's Supper, knowing that it was given for you so that you might receive the Lord's forgiveness. Forgiveness – whether it was on your spiritual shopping list or not.

Latitude and Longitude

November 8

Since the earliest days of sailing, ships have always needed to know where they are. This is expressed in latitude – how far north or south of the equator – and longitude, how far from a north/south line running through Greenwich, England. Latitude is easy to find with a sextant – but until the invention of very accurate clocks longitude was difficult. So the method of sailing was simple: find the latitude of your destination, sail along that latitude until you arrive. The system is extremely simple, and was used on a daily basis.

This worked well until you met an obstacle – for instance, a chain of islands in the way. Then things got complicated! For that you needed a few more things:

First, you'd need a series of charts to tell you what you will encounter on the way.

Then, you need a navigator to read those charts, and guide your ship through the obstacles.

Likely enough, there would be times when you also needed good seamen on whom you could rely.

In a way, Communion is like our sextant – simple enough, used frequently. In the Christian life we need that constant checking to make sure we are on course. We have the Bible as our chart; Jesus as our navigator and the church a collection of seamen of experience. Piloting the ship needs all of these.

Some of us act like our ship is sailing in Kansas. We are surprised when things change and new troubles come along. That's one reason we are reminded to examine ourselves every time we take Communion. This lets us know where we really are on the spiritual journey of life. By making course corrections while they are still small, we keep the ship sailing smoothly. Is your life in Christ sailing smoothly? If not, take the time to examine yourself. You may just see the course corrections you need to take.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

November 15

Do you remember Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice in Fantasia? The brooms carrying the water into a flood? Ask yourself: why did Mickey want that sorcerer's hat?

First, of course, he wanted someone else to do his work. He wanted to kick back and relax. But more generally he wanted three things:

He wanted power – to get things done without Mickey doing the work.

He wanted prestige – think about wearing that hat!

He wanted pride – think of sending the stars around at your command, the wind and waves obeying you!

It's important to note that the sorcerer wanted the same things – it's just that he was better at getting them.

The Christian gets a very different life. First, there is work to do in the church, and the Christian does it. At Calvary, Christ did that which we cannot; but he commands us to do our part, even carrying water. Power, often in dramatic form, is ours – through God, not our own will. Prestige we will have, the prestige that comes from "Well done, good and faithful servant." Pride? It is replaced by humility. It's a very different lifestyle indeed.

That's the choice we have to make. We must choose either the world's way, and pick up the wizard's hat, or Christ's way, and pick up the servant's towel. One brings power, prestige and pride according to our abilities and our chances. The other brings service, a workman's reputation and a life of humility.

Perhaps that doesn't sound like much of an option, put that way. Remember this: Christ died on the cross to give you that option. As you eat the bread and drink the cup, remember the price paid that you might be a servant in heaven, rather than a wizard in hell.

Safety Signs

November 22

Most of us who have worked at a major corporation are familiar with the ubiquitous safety signs. Often enough, warning signs are humorous – and sometimes intentionally so. For example:

"Be Aware of Invisibility" (Huh?)

"Caution: Pedestrians Slippery When Wet." (I would rather think so, wouldn't you?)

"Caution: Water on Road During Rain." (Must have taken a lot of research to figure that one out.)

"Do not look down the barrel of the laser with your remaining good eye." (Not a mistake you can repeat too often, that.)

Seriously, we use signs to prevent problems. Sometimes they alert us to a danger we didn't know about, but more often they remind us of the dangers we do know about. They are there to keep us from repeating our mistakes – and tell us how to get help when we do repeat them.

Communion is like that in a way:

First, we are to use the time of self-examination to hear the Spirit alert us to sin which lies ahead of us – in time to prevent it.

Second, in examining ourselves we are reminded of our sins – so that we might not repeat them.

Third, when we do sin, Communion reminds us that we have the chance to repent – and be forgiven.

Safety signs are of no use unless you heed them. Communion is of no use unless you use it as Christ commanded. Therefore, examine yourself, so that you may know your own sins, repent of them and keep them from returning. Then praise God that he has provided you forgiveness, even at the price of his only begotten Son.

Ordinary and Sacred

November 29

Have you ever considered just how ordinary the Lord's Supper really is? Those who prepare it could tell you that there is nothing magic about it. Mankind has been making bread for thousands of year; wine, no doubt, goes back as far. The elements themselves are routine staples of human existence. However they are served, human hands – sinners' hands – are used to assemble them before worship.

Yet we say that these things are sacred. How is it that we see these things as holy when they have such a common origin?

First, they are holy from the source – Christ himself. When light passes through a dusty room, it does not become dirty. It just shows the dirt; the light remains pure. So it is with Communion.

Next, they are holy by the command of God. This is not something devised by the mind of man but instead it comes from the grace of God. He commands it; He is pure; and to the pure, all things are pure.

Finally, as in the Old Testament, things are made holy by sacrifice of blood – in this, the blood of Christ on the Cross. There is no greater sacrifice.

Sinners, therefore, handle the things of God. Just as you will handle them in this ceremony. How is it that God permits such a thing?

To begin with, they are the things of God – but also the things of men. Just as Christ is fully God, and fully human, so are the things he called his body and blood.

It is permitted also for God's purposes: for in the Lord's Supper he shows us his divine grace.

He does ask one thing of us: that we examine ourselves before partaking in this meal. His purpose is grace; grace comes with repentance. Repentance comes from examining ourselves, confessing our sins and weaknesses. Only then can that which is sacred bring grace to the sinners who love the Lord.

Shame of the Cross

December 6

It is hard for the modern Christian to associate the Cross with the word "shame." There are a number of reasons for this:

The death penalty is rare today; it was common then.

Criminals were seen as despicable human beings then; now they seem much more like victims of their environment.

Executions are private, veiled to the public today. Then, an execution was a form of entertainment as well as a warning.

The shame extended to the criminal's family, as well. Today the mother of a serial killer receives a fair amount of sympathy, having such a personal disaster. In those days, people assumed she was just as evil.

Few of us approach the shame of the Cross. We are perfectly willing to hear the gentle Jesus speak to us; but we are quite uncomfortable when the suffering Savior speaks. We seek his comfort in times of suffering, but seldom share his suffering as the honor it is. If you think not, what is your reaction when you hear Christianity mocked? Do you shrink away quietly, or are you willing to proclaim your Lord? We can share his suffering; we can also share his shame.

Communion is a reminder of Christ's conquest.

First, he conquered the shame of the Cross. Once a symbol of evil, it is now placed in honor in the church. It is no longer a symbol of shame, but of Christ's sacrifice by which he conquered shame.

It is also a symbol of the conquest of sin. Before the Cross there was no true forgiveness; only the poor atonement of animal sacrifices. Now, the blood of Christ cleanses all who believe.

It is the symbol of the conquest of death. Without the Cross there is no Resurrection. We know that his resurrection is just the first; at his return, all the dead in Christ shall arise as well.

Shame, sin and death – Christ conquered them all. He did so at great price; he did so out of great love. As you partake, remember the shame – and the conquest.

Divine Style

December 13

Glory is to God as style is to an artist, we are told. It is an eternal characteristic of God that he shows us mercy – and does so in a style which befits the Almighty. Consider the elements of His style of mercy:

First, he is compassionate. Christ did not go to the Cross grudgingly, but willingly. We did not earn the Cross; he freely gave it. He gave it to us out of his great love and compassion. Indeed, he became man so that he might share our passions – and we his.

Next, he is kind. There are passages in the Old Testament which show the God of wrath; there are passages which show the God of mercy. At the Cross we see the kindness of God, for he died for the unworthy. If you are kind in feeding the poor, how much more kindness is in the Cross?

Did Christ go to the Cross with head held high, reminding one and all of his greatness, of how he was condescending to us? No. He went to the Cross like a lamb to the slaughter – in great humility. There is no trace of pride and arrogance, only the model of humility for his followers.

Indeed, because of the Cross he now calls the sinner home – and does so with consummate gentleness. The Omnipotent God applies no force to his children; softly and tenderly Jesus is calling the sinner home. The gentle Jesus needs no ax to break down the door; he stands at the door and knocks.

The mercy of God is also patient. He waits for the prodigal to return home, never giving up hope of the sight of a son coming over the horizon. Even at death's door, God's mercy is still available.

Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience – these are the primary colors with which God paints his mercy. It is good for us to remember the style of God. It reminds us that none of us deserve the salvation we are given. It also reminds us that when we leave this place of Communion, we should imitate our Lord – in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We follow our Master's way, in our Master's style.

Dealing With Sin

December 20

Man is the creating creature. We can be very clever in our creations – especially when dealing with our sins. Communion is a time in which we are to examine ourselves; unfortunately, it is also prime time for creative excuses. Have you heard these?

"What sin?" Like Satan in the garden, we're pretty sure that God didn't mean to call that a sin. Surely that's just a legalistic interpretation of the Scripture, right?

"It's not as bad as all that." Sure, it looks like a felony at the moment, but perhaps we could plead guilty to a misdemeanor, your Honor? This misses the point: either way, we're still sinners.

"Don't worry, God. I'll make it up to you." We have this picture of God as cosmic bean counter; if we have more white beans than black beans, all is well, right? No. God's standard is perfection; in his love he offers mercy.

"I don't think you understand my situation." Some of us have the disadvantage of coming from a broken family; others have the disadvantage of coming from a Christian home. Either way, it's an excuse for the way I behave, isn't it?

"In this instance, I have an excuse." Maybe I plead circumstance, or provocation. We often use one sin as an excuse for another. My anger flared up; she yelled at me first. Surely I am excused because of it?

"If I can convince myself that I'm innocent, surely God will believe it too." God can hardly expect me to repent if I decide I'm innocent – and come to believe it. Deception is still a sin, even self-deception.

"It's not my fault." Blame someone else.

It is an interesting fact: the Scripture never tells us which of these techniques are valid. Indeed, we are told that we are all sinners, and all of us need to repent. Praise God, then, that his mercy is made available for all who do. Examine yourself; throw away the excuses and accept the mercy of God purchased at the Cross. Pride needs excuses; mercy never does.

Abundance

December 27

Christmas is a time of abundance for many of us. Many of us are delighted at the sight of a Christmas tree, lavishly decorated, topping a mound of gifts. Even those of us who are old enough to have everything except a place to put it and memory to find where we did see the tree as a reassuring sign of material abundance. The children among us see such a thing as almost magical. Even the youngest child loves the bright colors – and the empty boxes make wonderful playthings.

The word for "abundant" in the Old Testament has a more specific meaning: "to exceed a measure." To be abundant is to exceed whatever measure you have for "enough." That's typical of how God deals with us. He is not stingy with our blessings. Nor is He inclined to "just barely enough." No, he asks us to call on him to bring out blessings as if the windows of heaven had opened upon us, pouring out a blessing for which we haven't room to put it. God is not constrained by our measurement; rather, he exceeds it so that we might know that he is God.

Nowhere is this clearer than at the Cross. There is no sense that the blood of Christ is barely sufficient; nor is there any sense that we have to make up some deficiency in it. No, it is an abundant grace. As Paul tells us, where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Our sins can be measured; God's grace knows no such limits.

The wrapping paper on Christmas gifts tells us that good things are inside. Such paper is often brilliantly colored, even gaudy in its appearance. The sign of God's gift to us is quite different. The cup and the bread are simple symbols. Some churches perform this with implements of gold and silver; others with less ostentatious (and less expensive) materials. But in all cases God's sacrifice is given to us in simple form. Nothing we can do could accurately picture God's abundant grace. But he has given us the means to portray the price of that grace. Simple in form, pure in its meaning, it is a greater gift than any Christmas wrapping could ever hold.

The Body in the Library

January 3

Fans of the genre of literature known as the English Murder Mystery will instantly recognize the cliché: the body in the library. The corpse is found in baffling circumstances. It's lying on the floor of Colonel Blimp's library, with all the doors and windows locked and bolted from the inside. The locale itself is unlikely enough; but there is no weapon and apparently no way out for the murderer. Interestingly enough, the corpse is rather tidy – no great mass of blood and gore, just a tidy bullet hole with enough blood for clues. Of course, all this tidiness is there so that we can focus our minds on the intellectual puzzle: just who did it?

The Crucifixion is, in a way, a genre of its own. The method of death was common enough; but this particular death is unique. It is the prelude to the Resurrection. But the circumstances are baffling, at least at first. Here is the man who committed no sin; his offense was to be light and salt to a corrupt religious system. Why, then, did God the Father allow such a thing to happen? It is indeed a murder; a murder done by the local authorities. There is no intellectual puzzle about who did it. Nor is it a tidy murder; on the contrary, it is quite gory. The mystery is not focused on "who did it?" The mystery is why?

The body in the library requires a great detective – a Sherlock Holmes, a Peter Wimsey or Hercule Poirot. Red herrings must be rounded up, sifted and discarded until the triumphal moment when the villain is revealed. But the "why" of the Crucifixion is open to any man. The purpose is plain. God's motive was his love for mankind. In the Crucifixion God's mercy satisfied God's righteousness.

Christ asked us to remember his murder as being of first importance. In the tidy cup of communion we see the gore of his shed blood; the bread, his body broken. By this symbolic meal we are to face again the central fact of the faith: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that we might live eternally.

Reverence

January 10

Wikipedia defines reverence as "to show extreme honor and respect for something or someone." That's the modern definition. Noah Webster, writing over a hundred years earlier had a different definition: "Fear mingled with respect and esteem."

Both definitions include the idea of respect. Certainly a Christian should respect Jesus Christ and the sacrifice he made. For this reason the Lord's Supper is served with appropriate ceremony, beginning with this meditation. But there are some changes which have been made. Perhaps we can examine these changes and see if something valuable has been left behind.

The modern definition begins with a verb: "to show." That's what it seems to be; a show. It is a formality, something which is polite. Polite – but not necessarily significant. Webster's definition excludes this idea. In his view, reverence is very significant. It is also based on a noun. It exists; it is not something we do once in awhile. It's not just a show, but a full time attitude.

The key to the difference is in the word "fear." If you meet the Queen of England you would observe the formalities required by protocol. But there is no sense of fear in that. Henry VIII might have gotten a different reception, given his habit of beheading his wives.

You might ask, "Why should I fear God? He is loving and compassionate." Indeed he is. But this is not incompatible with reasoning fear. It is as the Royal Navy used to say: Fear God, and dread naught. If you have the fear of God, then what other thing can frighten you? God is supreme in power. Moreover, he is willing to act. He promises judgment to the sinner, but mercy to the repentant. So much so that he has given you this reminder, so that you might examine yourself. Fear him; know his power – and accept his offer of mercy to the repentant.

Keeping Relationships

January 17

One pastor – who evidently didn't want to sound too dogmatic about things – told his congregation that "adultery might be harmful to your marriage relationship." One of the wives in the audience said he had that almost right; just a few substitutions would make that correct, namely:

- Replace "might be" with "will be."
- Replace "harmful" with "fatal."
- Replace "your marriage relationship" with "your body."

This makes things much clearer. But in addition to what you don't do, any relationship requires a certain amount of positive maintenance. You bring her flowers; you take her out to dinner – it keeps the relationship running smoothly.

In the church marriage is often used as a portrait of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. Adultery has its parallel in idolatry; but we also have parallels in maintaining the relationship. Marriage requires conversation; discipleship requires prayer. Marriage requires that you learn your mate's ways; discipleship requires study of the Scripture. Marriage requires that you share your memories; in discipleship we have the Lord's Supper.

In the Lord's Supper we remember what Christ did for us at the Cross – the very basis of our relationship with him. In so doing, we examine ourselves and remove anything which is harmful to our love for Christ. In return we receive the greatest balm which can be poured into any relationship: forgiveness. Communion is the time when we heal our relationship with Christ.

So I encourage you: remember what Christ has done for you at the Cross. Examine yourself in the light of the Cross; repent of anything which casts a shadow between you. Confess your sins and receive his forgiveness. His mercy is shown by his sacrifice; his love endures forever.

Unity

January 24

Perhaps you have not heard this, but it is true: Communion is necessary for unity. The word itself originally meant, "a sharing." From the root of this word we get words like "community" and "common." It is a term of togetherness.

It is first a source of personal unity – unity within the soul. In Communion we return to first principles, the essentials of the faith. We remember that our very definition as Christians – those saved by grace – comes from the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. That sacrifice is symbolized here; the cup his blood, the bread his body.

Unity within a person is usually called integrity – from the root word for integer, or oneness. As we reflect upon our souls, we enter a time in which we correct ourselves in self-examination. We turn from being inconsistent towards God to being one with God – the ultimate form of integrity.

There is also a unity which Communion provides within the church. You are what you eat – spiritually as well as physically. Your doctor prescribes a diet for your physical health; Christ prescribes a spiritual diet for your physical health. We are all on that same diet. Indeed, we are said to partake of one loaf because we are one body. Think of it this way: in a restaurant the meals are served individually. In a home they are served family style. When you eat family style, you are part of the family.

The unity within the church is also built by shared experience. This meal reminds us that each of us is a sinner; each of us heard the Word and accepted God's grace; each of us is growing in Christ. We are all on the same path.

Finally, there is a sense of unity which comes from the fact that you are either a Christian or you are not. Those who are Christians are told that they cannot be "of the world." They are in the world, but not of it. You are in, or you are out. If you are in, you share this spiritual meal.

But this spiritual meal does have something to say to the world. For by taking it, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again. Our unity is seen in this: in our most important rite, we tell the world the news of God's grace. We tell the world of God's love at the Cross. We tell the world Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead. We are one with him – and this meal shows it.

Denying Communion

January 31

On occasion the newspaper headlines will announce that some church body – often the Roman Catholic church – has denied communion to one of its members, usually a politician or other public figure. To many Evangelical Christians this seems very strange. Church discipline is rare in Evangelical churches, and the practice of "open communion" is frequent.

Open communion has its advantages. First, it is self-policing. You tell the congregation to examine themselves. Rarely is the possibility of refraining from communion mentioned, so it's assumed that practically everyone who considers himself a Christian will partake. This method also has the advantage that there is no administrative trivia involved. No committees must meet; no announcements are made. It's particularly appealing to Americans, for whom the concept of "individual responsibility" is practically an article of faith.

There are, however, advantages in closed communion too. The true believer, knowing that communion could be denied, is affirmed in a sense of approval and belonging. It's also a form of warning: knowing that communion could be denied serves notice on the backslider that it's time to repent. Indeed, telling the backslider that he might be denied communion can serve as a step on the way back to faith. The purpose of church discipline, after all, is the restoration of the sinner. God is not "tolerant."

It is not our purpose to settle a theological debate. Rather, it is to warn and prepare the Christian for the Lord's Supper. Please, therefore, consider:

- Communion is not a magic, empty ritual. Just because you partake does not mean you are right with God, any more than wearing a lab coat and stethoscope makes you a medical doctor.
- Communion is a time to examine your relationship with God – not whitewash it. There is no thought that you can "get away" with having communion.
- Indeed, it is the test of hypocrisy. To the hypocrite, communion certainly feels like an empty ritual. To the true Christian it is a spiritual experience.

Therefore, examine yourself. If the door to communion were watched, would the sentinels of Christ let you in?

Exact Image

February 7

On any number of occasions, for all kinds of reasons – or no reason at all – you may be asked to produce some form of identification. The usually preferred form is a driver's license, but almost always the request will be for a photo ID. You understand why. If you want to identify someone, you usually do it by looking at their face. Sometimes the photo is blurred – and as far as you know that could be any combination of chemicals on paper. Other times the photo is sufficient for you to say, "That's Joe." If the photo is evocative enough, however, you might say, "Now ***that's*** Joe." It's not just the likeness of looks, but the likeness of action that you look for.

Communion is just such an image of Jesus. We don't have any portrait dating to his lifetime, but we have an image. It is an image of his humanity:

- Communion is served in physical, material elements – which remind us that He has a body just like ours.
- It also reminds us that He is well acquainted with the sorrows of life – especially the betrayal by a friend.
- Pain, too, is shown in this. When you get up in the morning with arthritis in every joint, remember that He went through horrible pain – uncomplaining.

Communion is also a picture of Christ's sacrifice. He went willingly to the Cross for our sins. Communion paints us a picture of that:

- As any parent knows, the word "sacrifice" often enough means pain and tears. Pain is the present tense of the verb, "to sacrifice."
- There is a future tense as well – it is the anticipation of death. We are reminded that his death was not a swift one, but one which gave room for the agony of coming death.
- Most of all, it is a sacrifice of love – and God is love.

Communion is not a photograph of Christ. It's a much better picture than that.

Hands

February 14

Picture in your mind, please, Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting, *The Last Supper*. If your memory is vivid enough you will notice a lot of conversation in that picture. Conversation? The artist portrays the conversation in the disciples' hands. They are talking with their hands, as we would say.

Your hands do talk; they say a lot about you. For example:

- Is there dirt under your fingernails? Maybe that says you enjoy gardening; maybe it says you work with your hands.
- You might see scars on your hands – memories of the times you injured your hands.
- How about calluses? Sherlock Holmes could identify a tradesman by the calluses on his hand; what do yours say about your job?
- Look at the knuckles. Are they bent with arthritis, painful to move?
- Examine the skin. Some of us will have sunburned skin; perhaps even skin cancer. Many more will have the wrinkles that signify our age.
- And of course there is the unique identification of fingerprints. Your hands are yours, like no one else's.

Some of us have one other distinctive feature to our hands: a wedding ring. It says something about you too. It says there is someone you love. It speaks loudly of your devotion.

Christ's hands speak, too. You would see the dirt and calluses of a man who worked as a carpenter. The skin would likely be sunburned from three years as a traveling evangelist. He died a bit young to have arthritic knuckles – but scars? Scars he had, where his hands were nailed to the Cross. Like your wedding ring, those scars speak of love. Indeed, they are the scars of what Lincoln called, "the last full measure of devotion."

You now take the cup and bread – with your hands. As you do, remember the unique pair of hands that took the nails so that you might be forgiven, that you might have eternal life. Examine yourself. His devotion to you was complete; how is your devotion to him?

Partake

February 21

In every congregation there exists a small group of people for whom the right English expression is very different from the "almost right" English expression. They are the grammar police; they believe there really is a difference between "lightning" and "lightning bug." Should you encounter such, you may confirm the fact that the word, "partake," is something that cannot be done alone. It implies sharing.

That carries with it two implications. First, you must have enough to share. Second, you must have someone with whom to share it. (Never end a sentence with a preposition). Thus we partake of Communion.

Enough to share

We can rejoice in our Lord's generosity, for there is indeed enough to share:

- The sacrifice of Christ, once and for all, is sufficient for all mankind. It's not just for the first 144,000 applicants.
- Christ's sacrifice is intended for all – "whosoever will," as the Scripture assures us.
- More than that, it is sufficient for all our sins – no matter what you have done, as a repentant sinner you are welcome at his table.

Sharing with others

Sometimes it feels like we take Communion alone – in a crowd of people. But having those who share with us has its effects:

- In sharing we build the unity of the church. When you share a meal with someone it's hard to be angry with them. In an ordinary meal you pass the salt; in this one you pass the bread of life.
- The Scripture declares that by participating in one loaf we become one body. Somehow, in ways that we may not understand, we become one in Christ by being one in this supper.

Therefore, as we come together to share this meal, do not take of the bread and cup. Partake.

Where Are You?

February 28

The story is probably as old as boxing itself. A boxer is knocked down. The referee comes over to check for a possible concussion. He asks the fighter, "Do you know where you are?" "Yea, I'm flat on my back on the canvas getting the daylights beat out of me."

Let me ask you, then: Where are you this morning?

First, you are in the house of the Lord. In our time the concept of reverence has greatly declined in use, particularly reverence for a particular place. We have lost the sense of sanctity that used to attach to church buildings. The main meeting place of a church used to be called the sanctuary, not the auditorium. Nevertheless, you are in the sanctuary – the geography set aside by the church to be used for holy purposes. This is the house of God.

Next, you are in the presence of the family of God. Many churches have the habit of calling each other brother or sister. You see, each of us has been adopted by God into his family. If you are a Christian, you are a child of God – and therefore you are with family today. Indeed, Christ himself tells us that he is preparing a new place for the family of God, where all the ills of this world will exist no more.

Finally, you are in the presence of Christ. He tells us that where two or more are gathered in his name, he is there also. This may be why we are called the body of Christ – for any living body must have its Spirit. Indeed, in the very elements of Communion Christ is said to be present: this is my body, this is my blood. We may not understand this, but we understand that it is true.

Some of you may have taken the question differently. You may have thought, "Where am I emotionally, spiritually, or in some other sense?" It does not matter. You need not be in perfect mind and body to come to the Lord's Supper. Your hurts, wants, needs – and sins – are no barrier to him. Even if you are flat on your back on the canvas, you are in the right place. You are with Christ.

Bumblebees

March 7

One of the bits of humor which circulates in the aerospace industry concerns the common bumblebee. There is a formula which prescribes the minimum size of wing required for flight. This formula is largely based on the weight of the aircraft. It appears that the bumblebee's wing area is not sufficient, according to the formula. In other words, the bumblebee is too heavy to fly! The bumblebee, however, is completely ignorant of aeronautics and therefore flies anyway.

It is very useful to be able to believe what you don't understand. Indeed, as long as it's not very important to us, we are usually quite content with our ignorance. But if it is important, we want to understand. We are at the least curious; often enough we won't believe until we do understand.

But there are levels of understanding. For example, most of us think that an automobile is important to our lives. Some of us understand the car to the point of knowing when to get gas. There are others who understand piston rings, compression ratios and foot-pounds of torque. There might even be someone who understands the thermodynamics of the system. But just how much understanding do you need to believe that the car will get you to church?

You can believe what you don't fully understand. Most of us have no real comprehension of how the pills in a prescription work, but we take them anyway – and that might be a life and death matter. Communion is much the same. You can understand it on different levels. The lowest level is simply obedience: Christ commanded that you take Communion; this do in remembrance of me. So that you might understand it better, we are told that the cup represents his blood, the bread his body. He drew us a picture, if you will. If you pursue your understanding you will find that great minds have given us understandings of great power, depth and complexity. Even the not-so-great mind can understand it deeply. But never fully; it is of God, and therefore ultimately beyond man.

At whatever level you understand it, you can believe it. If you are a Christian, you are commanded to partake. Obedience is the key to faith; obedience is all you need.

Shame

March 14

Shame. Most of us are introduced to the idea at a very early age in life. The dictionary tells us three things about it:

- It is an emotion, a feeling. So it's not the same as guilt, which is a fact without emotion.
- It often involves others losing respect for you.
- It is a sense of unworthiness or disgrace.

Modern psychiatry evidently considers shame as something to be, well, ashamed of. It's a cliché that the psychiatrist's first question is, "Why do you feel guilty about that?" In short, shame itself is viewed as the problem. The solution, we are told, is counseling which will make you feel better about yourself.

This might be a good idea if you are ashamed of something absurd. But what if your shame is based in genuine guilt? "Feeling better about yourself" then really translates to self-justification and self-righteousness. It takes a clever – and expensive – psychiatrist to get you past this. Which is why most of us prefer hypocrisy instead; it's much cheaper.

Communion deals with guilt and shame differently.

- Communion reminds each of us that we are, individually, sinners. Each of us has something to be ashamed of.
- Communion reminds *all* of us that we are all sinners. No one has the clean hands required to point fingers at someone else. No one but Christ.
- Christ does not point fingers; rather, he atoned for our sins. Communion is the reminder that he made that sacrifice for us.

The choice is simple: by psychiatry or hypocrisy you can convince yourself of your own righteousness. Or you can accept the righteousness of Christ. Examine yourself; accept the forgiveness purchased at the Cross – and leave with a clean heart. The choice is yours.

Put It On Your Calendar

March 21

Most of us keep a calendar of some sort. For many of us it's on a computer, or our cell phone. Some keep a paper calendar. Many of us have more than one calendar which gives us the difficulty of making sure the calendars are properly synchronized.

Suppose, then, you were to place this Communion on your calendar; what would you need to know?

The first detail of an appointment is simply who it is with. In Communion your appointment is two fold:

- First, you are meeting with Christ. In some mystic way he is present, and your thoughts go first to him.
- But you are also meeting with the church. There is no sense in Scripture of Communion being a solo activity; we do it together.

The next detail is where? For most of us the answer is the church building – but it is clear that it could be any number of places. Summer camp, winter retreats, weekend seminars – all these could be such a place. Wherever two or three are gathered in his name, there he is also.

When? Well, obviously, that's now. The appointment doesn't last long though; only a few minutes. But note that the apostles made this a recurring appointment. It's not something you do "once in a while" or "when you feel like it." It's something you do regularly.

The most important question, of course, is why. This meeting has a subject: it is, "Remember," It is in this meeting with Christ that you remember his sacrifice on the Cross. You remember the agony which produced his body and blood as emblems for you. You remember the sacrifice he made. You remember the salvation that this sacrifice brought to you. You remember the grace of God.

It is as He said: "Do this in remembrance of me."

Windshield Wipers

March 28

For those who do not live in the American southwestern desert, this may sound a little strange. If you live where rain is frequent, you may have no idea of this problem. But if you live in the desert, it happens every year. It concerns the windshield wipers.

The primary source of dirt on the windshield in the desert is not mud. That requires water – and there is precious little of that. No, it's dust. Mud is pretty obvious on a car, but dust can build up very gradually. Each day the windshield looks about like it did before, so you just go on driving. Distances are long in the desert, so you just adapt to the dust. You're going to be in it for a long time.

Then comes that once in great while rain. The first rain of the season usually isn't much water – just enough to suddenly show that your wiper blades are streaking. They've deteriorated in the sunlight, and are hard from lack of use. This might not be so bad except that the dust is now mud. Not dirt, mud.

The solution is easy, of course: replace the blades regularly and keep the windshield clean.

If you've been neglecting Communion, you will find you have much the same sort of problems. The dust builds up slowly – the wear and tear of sin in this world – and soon your spiritual sight begins to deteriorate. But it goes slowly, so you don't really notice. Eventually your spiritual life is a mess – but it seems like it's always been that way. Then comes the storm! The spiritual storm shows you that your ability to keep yourself pure has gone, and now you're faced with the cleanup.

The solution is much the same as for the car. First, you need to replace the blades – the things that wipe away the dirt. In short, you need to repent! Go to your knees and ask forgiveness of Almighty God; get your act cleaned up.

Following that, you need to stay clean. That's what Communion is for. Each time you partake, you examine yourself and repent before things become serious. It's just like cleaning your windshield regularly.

So I ask you: how's the view out of your windshield? Time to clear the mud?

Anxiety

April 4

Anxiety: it's the worry about what *might* happen. You might lose your job; get smallpox; be hit by a meteorite (hey, it could happen); or for that matter be abducted by aliens. Have I given you enough to worry about? You're content, right?

So many of us are content only when we've worried about everything. But Christ tells us that we are to "take no thought for the morrow." Rather, we are to live trusting God for the future. So many of us, though, announce that we trust God – and worry about tomorrow anyway.

Permit me an instructive counterexample: Indiana Jones. Snakes, Nazis, giant boulders and who knows what else seem to be his constant problems. One particular instance might suffice. You might remember the scene: the crowd parts to reveal a menacing villain, face wrapped to the eyes, flashing a scimitar. Your first reaction is, "Indie's in trouble." Of course, Jones simply pulls out his pistol and shoots the man, but for a moment it looked grim. (I'm told that this was actually an ad-lib by Harrison Ford).

How is it that Harrison Ford gets through the day as Indiana Jones? Easy. He's read the script. He knows what happens next.

Communion, you may recall, celebrates Christ's death. If this were a movie, you'd think this was the last scene. But the script had been written before time began; we even have a partial copy in the words of the prophets of the Old Testament. Death looked invincible as well as horrible. But turn the page: there is the Resurrection. It's just as God wrote it.

So as you take the cup and bread this morning, remember. Remember the sacrifice that made Easter possible. Remember that this happened according to God's script. In short, remember just who's in charge of this universe. Do not fear death; the script says you rise too. Remember that.

Never Been Convicted

April 11

A friend of ours had been accused of a very serious crime. His first hearing was set, and we made it a point to be in court that morning. Unrelated to his charges we saw justice mingled with mercy that day. Here's how it happened:

A long line of men was placed against one of the courtroom walls. The deputy lined them up in alphabetic order. The judge called each man up to the bench in turn. He would examine the man's file – it soon became clear that the men had been charged and convicted of driving while drunk. If the man had completed certain training, and performed some number of hours of community service, the judge would dismiss the charges. As he did, he told each man, "you may now say that you have never been convicted of driving under the influence."

The first reaction is, "WHAT? The man was convicted; how can you say it never happened?" But then consider: would you hire a man with a DUI conviction on his record? Doing this made the man employable again. Justice was satisfied with the conviction; mercy with the remittance.

Sinners are in much the same situation with God. We will all face the judgment some day, and we know that God is a righteous God. We are, each and every one, sinners. Righteous judgment must be satisfied.

But just as our courts have found, there is a way to satisfy that judgment while being merciful to the defendant. That mercy is found at the Cross; whoever accepts that mercy pleads the sacrifice of Christ as covering his offenses. This mercy is by no means cheap; it cost the very life of Jesus Christ. The blood of the sinless man is the price of God's justice.

To obtain this mercy, you must follow the Judge's instructions. You must plead in the name of Christ. So that you will not forget the price or the mercy, He has established this Communion. Whenever you take it, remember that you are a sinner who has thrown himself on the mercy of the court, solely on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ. As you take the cup, remember the blood that paid for your sins. As you take the bread, remember the suffering his body endured. The price of your forgiveness is in your hands. Take it, remembering the one who gave his life for you.

Philemon

April 18

One of the shortest books of the New Testament is Paul's letter to Philemon. In it Paul makes his plea for a slave who has run away from Philemon. That was a serious crime with grievous consequences. But that slave, Onesimus, met Paul and became a Christian. He went from being useless to useful; it is a picture of what happens when any man receives the Lord.

Paul makes his argument in a way which parallels our Lord's own sacrifice at the Cross. Hear his words:

- *Charge it to me; I will pay it back.* Has the slave wronged you? I will take care of the matter, just as Christ paid the penalty for our sins. By his stripes we are healed.
- *You owe me your very self.* Even though we, as Christians, owe our very souls to Christ, he does not make his forgiveness part of a bargain. His forgiveness is a gift.
- *Any favor you do will not be forced.* The Christian life is not one of compulsion but of love. Christ loves you; he wants your response to imitate that love.
- *Prepare a guest room.* Christ asks for a guest room in the heart of the believer – and tells us that he will definitely come again.

That last is important. We are told that we celebrate Communion "until he comes again." For now, forgiveness is available because of the sacrifice of Christ. The day will come, however, when our Lord returns. This memorial will cease, as he will be with us. But then it will be too late to prepare.

So I urge you now to examine yourself. Are you prepared for his soon return? Have you forgiven? Have you been forgiven? Let a man examine himself – and so prepare a guest room for the Lord himself.

Bring Your Own Bucket

April 25

Let's begin with a stereotype: "the old oaken bucket." Can you see a picture in your mind of a well, probably with brick walls? There's a frame over the top, and a bucket hanging from a windlass. Can you picture that in your mind?

Sometimes our stereotypes get in the way of the truth. In John chapter 4 Jesus meets a woman at the well of Jacob. Our picture shows the bucket. But if you read the account carefully at verse 11, you will discover something: this well had no bucket. You had to bring your own. Our stereotype is wrong for this one.

We have a similar stereotype in our thinking about life. Americans are particularly fond of the metaphor of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. If we may translate that to this picture, we believe that the well is there – but you have to bring your own bucket to life. Sometimes we approach Communion like that. Oh, we're grateful, of course. We are thankful for the occasion; that's the proper attitude. But we go from gratitude to laying out before God just what we're going to do. If we feel guilty about something, we promise to fix it. If we feel that someone else should feel guilty, we pray for them too. We believe in the "do it yourself" method.

The reality is different:

- You must begin with self-examination. This is a time between you and your Lord, and he commands you to examine yourself – no one else.
- Having examined, you must then practice repentance. Sadly, for most of us, repentance is not done once, but practiced all too frequently.
- When the sin is confessed, then ask for help. You cannot fix yourself.

The well of grace is deep indeed, but you have no bucket. Mercifully, the living water of grace overflows to all who will follow Christ.

Drill and Ceremonies

May 2

Veterans of the US Army will recall – probably not nostalgically – the rigors of FM22-5, the Field Manual for Drill and Ceremonies. The Army has a manual for everything; this one touches every soldier. Why?

The uses of drill

Any soldier will tell you why you repeatedly practice drill: practice gets it right. That's important for the individual soldier, but as drill also touches the unit it is important to whatever unit you are in. You drill as a team, you perform as a team. This is important to armies of all times; chaos being a regular feature of military life. When chaos arrives you fall back on what you have been drilled to do – even though life has become illogical and there is no one around to tell you what to do.

More importantly, drill forms the habit of obedience. Without that obedience, no team can function correctly.

The uses of ceremony

Ceremony has its place, too. Ceremony unites the individuals performing it, much like the cast of a play. More than that, ceremony instills a sense of belonging on those who participate. If you're marching on parade, you are part of that unit.

Ceremony also focuses the mind on the purpose of the ceremony. If the ceremony is to honor someone with a medal, all those marching honor the recipient. The ceremony also declares that honor to the world at large, those viewing the ceremony.

Communion

The church is often described as the "army of God." If so, Communion is its drill and ceremony.

- By our repetition of Communion, we repeat our repentance – and therefore become proficient at repentance, a most necessary skill.
- Because we take Communion together, it unites the church. One Lord, one faith, one birth, and one holy meal – these show the oneness of the church.
- This ceremony honors Christ's sacrifice; we remember his death. Communion focuses our mind on the atonement.
- This ceremony also declares that atonement to all who see it, for we declare the Lord's death until He returns.

Many will tell you that ritual – drill and ceremony – is empty. But think back to the last time you heard "Taps" at a veteran's grave; or the last time you sang the "Star Spangled Banner." Remember the lump in your throat? Is that empty and meaningless? How much more meaningful, therefore, must the Lord's Supper be to all who believe?

A Sword Will Pierce

May 9

It is written in Luke's account of the nativity that Mary, the mother of Jesus, received a prophecy concerning her son: a sword would pierce her soul. This of course refers to Christ's death on the cross.

When we look at the Cross, we see it differently than Mary did. What do we see?

- We see the injustice of the sinless man crucified.
- We see the sacrifice of the unblemished Lamb of God.
- We see the atonement bringing our salvation.

But we see looking back at the Crucifixion. Mary saw it as it happened; her mind was looking forward. What did she see?

- She saw her child publicly disgraced. Crucifixion was the punishment for many crimes; it was intended to be humiliating as well as painful. It was intended to humiliate the criminal's family – a deterrent to crime.
- She saw her child suffering. The pain and agony of the Cross is something we tend to gloss over; she had that directly before her eyes.
- She saw the death of her hopes and dreams. This was the son who was to care for her in old age; this was the son who had achieved so much fame. Her hopes and dreams were great – then gone.

Consider it well: the road to our salvation ran through shame, suffering and sacrifice. Christ scorned the shame in order to do His Father's will. He endured the suffering because of His great love for us. He is the sacrifice which atoned for our sins; none other would do. We see our salvation.

We remember the destination, for this memorial celebrates not only the sacrifice but the result: salvation. We are commanded, however, to remember the road Christ traveled for us. From the ugliness of shame and suffering Christ brought forth the beauty of God's love. Look past the salvation Christ bought for us, and see the price he paid.

Key to the City

May 16

Recently, the mayor of New York presented a key to the city to one Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, the pilot who landed Flight 1549 safely on the Hudson River. Giving a key is a time tested custom. We present the key to the city to those who have shown some outstanding achievement. The origin of the custom goes back into the Middle Ages, when cities were walled and the key had the remnants of some practical significance.

The Scriptures speak of Christ holding some symbolic keys as well:

- He holds the key of David.[2] It is a symbol of his royal authority; indeed the Scripture tells us that what Christ opens no one can shut; what he shuts no one can open.
- He holds the key to Death itself.[3] He is the one who raised Lazarus from the grave. He is the one and only one to conquer his own death, and rise again.
- He holds the key to Hell[4] as well. Do not fear the man who can kill you; fear the man who can kill you and send you to Hell.

Keys are given for great accomplishment. Christ gave the keys to the kingdom of heaven to his church, for his church would continue his work. But he asks that his church remember the accomplishment for which his keys are given: the sacrifice on the Cross.

Awarding a key to the city is done in a ceremony, not via the mail. Christ asks that you participate in the ceremony of Communion so that you will remember the sacrifice he made – and honor the one who made it.

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[2] Isaiah 22:22, Revelation 3:7

[3] Revelation 1:18

[4] Your translation may read "Hades."

A Fireside Tale

May 23

It is well known to readers of the New Testament that John's Gospel was written well after the other three. There are some interesting differences in it, and it is not too far a stretch to say that John has been selective in his history. Consider the incident of Peter's denial of Christ.

First, we find out that Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest because John did him a favor. John was evidently known to the household; Peter was not. It was a cold night; there was a fire; but it was for "members only." John vouched for Peter – and at the gate Peter denied his Lord. We don't know if John felt somewhat responsible for that. But we do know this: John does not record the fact that Peter broke down and wept after the third denial. But he alone records Christ's restoration of Peter by the lake.

At the lake, after the Resurrection, it is John who recognizes Jesus first – and Peter who jumps in to go to him. Curiously, Jesus is standing by a fire. Is that just a coincidence? We do not know; but we know this: John's account of Peter is centered not on the denial but the restoration. The Apostle of Love sees the redemption as far more important than the sin.

So does the Lord of Love. Of all the events in his life, only his death is celebrated regularly. It is the supreme example of his love for his disciples. Note, then, that it is focused on our redemption, not our sin. We do not memorialize our sins but his sacrifice.

As you partake today, remember that He cares so much for you that even your guilt does not keep you from him. His love is greater than your sin. His love is worthy of our remembrance, for in it he washes our sins away. Remember the sacrifice; it alone cleans out our sin. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

Memorials

May 30

It may not have come to your attention, but the dominant change in the history books today comes not from new information but from something called "historical revisionism." The changes to the history books now come from the opinions of the historians. Let me give you a couple of examples:

- One state approved high school text on American history covers the Civil War *without mentioning Robert E. Lee.*
- We now are told in various periodicals that George Washington never prayed in the snows at Valley Forge. This is despite the records of the time. "Expert opinion" says he wouldn't have prayed at all.

Why such an emphasis, such a distortion? It's very simple: if I can change what you believe to be history, I can change what you will do. You rely on history to make many judgments. If I can make the "good guys" into the "bad guys," I can change your vote.

That's a fact: we depend on history to guide us. That's why we have events like Memorial Day – to remind us of the price of liberty. It's human nature to be guided by the past. So when Christ was ready to leave his disciples by death, he instituted his version of Memorial Day: the Lord's Supper. He asks you to remember one thing: his sacrifice which brought atonement to mankind. It is so important that he made it a ritual – repeated over and again so that you will not forget.

Like the history book, the Lord's Supper is designed to change what you do. It is as if Christ reminds us what he did for us so that we will consider what we should do for him. What does he ask?

- He asks us to examine ourselves. We are to see the sin in ourselves and ask forgiveness, applying the atonement in our lives.
- Then, being forgiven, he asks us to accept the discipline that comes with it.

No doubt the revisionists will have a different view. The followers of Christ for two thousand years have clung to the original version: Do this, in remembrance of Me.

D-Day

June 6

She floats forlornly at a pier in Philadelphia, the last of her kind. She is the USS Olympia, the flagship of Admiral Dewey's fleet at the battle of Manila Bay in 1898. Now just a tourist attraction, there is little money available to remedy the defects of a ship over a hundred years old. The Spanish-American war is now just so much history. There are no ceremonies to honor those who sacrificed their lives in that war.

Today is D-Day, the anniversary of the landing in Normandy. The troops who went ashore that day are now old men; most of them are dead. Just for that reason, memorials to their sacrifice are becoming fewer and fewer. While these men live, we will remember what grandpa went through. In time, as they die, D-Day will become just so much history. Once they are gone, we forget their sacrifice. The ceremonies cease.

But for two thousand years Christians have kept the memorial ceremony for the sacrifice Christ made at the Cross. That alone should tell you the truth: Jesus lives! He is the one who has conquered death and the grave. The memory of that sacrifice does not fade, for Christ is eternal. So it is that we remember by joining in Communion.

What do we remember?

- First, we remember the sacrifice Christ made – his very life – for us.
- We also remember our own sins, so that we might repent and receive God's forgiveness.
- Then we remember the result of that sacrifice: we have eternal life.

So, until he comes again, we remember. As you partake, remember that he lives – and therefore you will live too.

Prisoner

June 13

She is normally a talkative woman. But on this occasion her husband noted a silence expressed by the grim compression on her face. They were leaving the prison after having visited a friend there. One by one the prison gates clanged ominously behind them. Each gate had its guard, who looked at them with an air that said, "You're just like them – only we haven't caught you yet." The last gate locked, she was still silent. Out through the reception area doors, in the parking lot – she made no sound. Not until the car was off the prison grounds on the main highway did she speak.

What did she say? "I want to go back to the motel, take off all my clothes and burn them. Then I want to take a shower with naphtha soap and a scrub brush."

Sometimes we see sin in its fullness. Think what kind of people are behind those bars: the man they went to visit was convicted of kidnapping, rape and attempted murder – twice. How did they come to know such a man? He was a member of her husband's Sunday School class. Perhaps we may take that as a reminder that we are all sinners at heart – and some of us have done such things in our minds, if not our bodies. Sin like this is naturally repulsive. It is also something which is natural to the human condition.

This is the measure of Christ's love: he died for all. His grace is not restricted to the "good sinners" – if there could be such a thing. He who spoke and the worlds began came to us in the flesh, and died for all. Therefore his love and grace extend to the worst of us – and the best, too. So it is that we are all commanded to take the Lord's Supper. It proclaims our unity as a church – a unity that extends even to the worst of prison inmates. As you partake, then, remember that we are sinners all – saved by grace.

Do Not Provoke

June 20

The Scripture admonishes fathers not to provoke their children. I wonder if this includes teaching them not to provoke others. The American automobile gives us a fine set of examples of how to provoke others:

- One of the all time favorites: watch as the car approaches, wait until there is just barely room for it to stop, and then pull right out in front of them.
- Another favorite is the fellow who doesn't know his right from his left. That's why he makes his right turn from the left hand lane.
- Another real favorite: the elderly gentleman who stops to read a sign. A freeway sign. In the number one lane of the freeway.

Now you have a good working definition of the word "provoke."

Fathers are told that they are not to provoke their children. The main reason for this is so that they will not become discouraged (Colossians 3:21). Often enough for a father there is a choice between satisfying your anger and teaching your children the right thing to do. There should be no doubt what to do, fathers. Your task is to bring them up in the Lord's way. (Ephesians 6:4).

Our Father in heaven has much the same choice. Does he want us to feel his wrath, or learn his ways? Communion leaves us in no doubt about this:

- He tells us to do this "in remembrance." In short, this is a form of training and instruction for the Christian.
- The focus is not on his wrath but Christ's sacrifice. Our sins are a given, but the Cross is what the instruction is about.

The test of a teacher is this: does he produce students to pass an exam, or disciples who will follow his ways for life? Our heavenly Father makes it clear. The Lord's Supper is training for the live of forgiveness – trained by being forgiven.

I Believe

June 27

Have you ever considered that by taking Communion you state in symbolic form the things you believe? Such as these things:

- You believe that Jesus of Nazareth is God in the flesh. He is fully human, born of Mary. He is fully God, born of the Holy Spirit. No one else could bridge the gap between man and God.
- You believe that Jesus was crucified; he died and was buried – thus atoning for our sins.
- You believe that He was then raised to life again by the power of the Holy Spirit – showing us who holds the keys of Death and Hell.
- You believe that He ascended into heaven – where he sits at the right hand of the Father, pleading as our advocate.
- You believe that because of his sacrifice, we have the forgiveness of our sins.
- You believe that because we share the same symbolic meal, we proclaim the mystic unity of the church. One Lord, one faith, one birth.
- You believe that we do this "until he comes again." In so doing we proclaim his imminent return – and thus the coming Judgment.
- You believe that when that Judgment occurs, the world will see that those who are truly his disciples have eternal life.

Perhaps you think of yourself as someone who could never speak in public. No matter; all of us know that actions speak louder than words. As you partake of this symbolic meal, your actions proclaim who you are and what you believe. Do this, then, in remembrance of the one in whom you believe.

Self Evident

July 4

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal …" These words are prized by all free men, but most particularly by Americans. They come from the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. They reflect the fact that the great majority of those who signed that declaration were Christians. The concepts stated come from the center of Christianity.

"All men are created equal" – and every last one of them is a sinner. It's the reason we have a balance of powers in our government. No man can be trusted absolutely. For that same reason Christ died for all – not a select few. There is no sense that Christ died only for "worthy sinners". Indeed, the concept is not found in the Bible.

"All men are created equal" – and for that reason the Scripture tells us that "whosoever will" can be saved. Christ knows that we are incapable of our own salvation. By his great love the sacrifice of the Cross is provided to all. It is a measure of Christ's love; it is also a measure of his justice. The equality of man is exemplified in the Cross.

"All men are created equal" – and all of us struggle with sin in our lives. We need a time to repent of our sins and accept once again the grace of our Lord and Savior. So it is that the Lord's Supper is open to all who believe, not just a select few.

"All men are created equal" – and we often need to be reminded of that. For this reason Americans celebrate the 4th of July. It's not just for the fireworks; it is to remember the heritage we have been given – and to be moved to keep that heritage intact. We remember the "rocket's red glare" so that we will remember the sacrifices of brave men which gave us this freedom. So it is with the Lord's Supper: it reminds us of the grace and mercy we have been given, and the price paid for that grace. In it we remember the one who paid that price in pain, suffering and death.

Consider, then, that you are no better than all the others gathered together; you are a sinner. Your hope is in Christ, who died for you. It is easy to remember the victory of the resurrection; we need to be reminded of the suffering which preceded it. Consider carefully, then, the ways of your life. Examine yourself; then remember the one who gave you freedom from the bondage of sin.

The Hope Diamond

July 11

Visitors to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. almost always make a stop in its collection of minerals and gems. One of the featured attractions is a blue diamond, one of the largest in the world, known as the Hope Diamond. Prosaically, the stone was not named for any hope it might provide, but for the name of a diamond dealer. The public is fascinated by this stone. One reason for this is the mass of legend which has grown up around the stone, including a supposed Hindu curse upon it. The truth is far duller. Its history is really rather uninteresting, but the legend draws the crowd.

And what does the crowd see? A diamond, to be sure – and that's about it. The Hope Diamond is a show; nothing more. Seeing it does not curse you, nor does it bless you. It simply satisfies your curiosity. There is really no "hope" in it; it is only "hype."

Not so with the hope of the Christian. The Scriptures make it clear that the hope of the Christian is in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the Ascension the angels told us he would return in a similar fashion. This event is associated with the general resurrection from the dead for the church. You and I are destined to be raised from the grave; our hope is eternal life through Jesus Christ. This is not legend, but prophecy. The One who prophesied his own resurrection has prophesied yours. He delivered on the first; He will deliver yours too.

You might then ask what we are supposed to do in the meanwhile. The Scripture gives us at least three things:

- We are to be ready to give a reason for our hope[5] - a defense of the faith we have. It's neither secret nor private, but something to share.
- If you have that hope, you are to purify yourself.[6] You do this at Communion when you examine yourself and repent of your sins.
- Finally, you are commanded to be joyful in your hope.[7] Those who are to be raised from the dead have reason to rejoice in this life.

We are taught that we are to proclaim his death "until he comes."[8] Communion is a statement that by his death and resurrection we know we too shall be raised from the dead. Examine yourself, repent – then join in this Communion which gives the church such overwhelming joy.

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[5] 1st Peter 3:15
[6] 1st John 3:3
[7] Romans 12:12
[8] 1st Corinthians 11:26

Keep Going

July 18

Most advertising campaigns are eminently forgettable. We are flooded with commercials and advertisements to the extent that they tend to blur. But once in a while a campaign touches a resonance in the human heart, and we remember it. Usually the advertisement has something visual that's hard to forget. One such campaign has as its motto, "Keep Going." Of course you know which campaign that is: the Energizer Bunny. For twenty years we've been hit with the sight of the pink bunny with the drum. It is so well known that the company that makes the product also sells slippers – pink bunny slippers with the trademark sunglasses on them.

Keep Going – it strikes a chord with us because it is so hard to do in life. The Christian life runs into that as well. It's hard to keep going as a Christian:

- We run into discouragement in our lives. The trials of life tend to grind us down, especially if we thought that becoming a Christian was the end of our troubles. But "in this world you will have trouble," said our Lord. Often enough trouble comes with discouragement attached.
- We run into distraction in our lives. The calm spiritual life is greatly valued – and often out of reach when the baby throws up, the car breaks down, your back goes out and temptation sets in.
- We run into the distemper in our lives – the sense that things are just not going the way we want them to, and it's got to be someone else's fault. We just don't know who.

For such things Christ has provided us a reminder that in the ultimate struggles of life the victory has already been won. It is the Lord's Supper; it reminds us that ultimately the struggle with death has been won. Christ has triumphed over the grave. What we see as the ultimate defeat is really the path to victory.

How are we encouraged to keep going?

- First, Communion is a reminder: we're on the winning side. Ultimate victory has been won at the Cross.
- Second, we are provided a chance to confess our sins and repent, restoring our relationship with God.
- And finally, it's a chance to bring the discouragement, distraction and distemper to God – and leave these things with Him.

Communion is God's way of telling us to keep going – until he comes again.

Mirror of the Soul

July 25

Most of us have a mirror in our homes. We accept it as a normal part of our household; we use it to look at ourselves – but then what? Do you look and say, "I can't be that fat?" Or do you say, "I've got to start dieting some day?" Some of us get to say, "The diet is working!" Others say, "The Rogaine is not."

Communion is a mirror of the soul. You are to examine yourself, look in the spiritual mirror. Do you look at yourself at all? It's not easy:

- Most of us want to "let sleeping worms lie," as C. S. Lewis put it. We'd just as soon skip the self examination part – because we don't like what we know we'll find.
- To avoid this, some of us will repent – of other people's sins. We can safely repent of the way American Indians were treated in the 19th Century, for example. We feel truly sorry, really we do.
- Of course, if you prefer contemporary sins, you can certainly spend the time examining other people's sins and deciding for them that they should repent.

All these are simply ways of refusing to look in the mirror. But suppose you do look, what do you see?

- Do you see someone who says, "I can fix this myself?" All you need to do is launch yet another self-help campaign, and surely things will be just fine – later.
- Perhaps you see something else: someone who knows that it's hopeless. It doesn't matter if you repent, you think; the sin will return. So why bother?
- Perhaps it's just procrastination: you acknowledge to God that someday, perhaps even soon, you will repent. Just not now.

Just what should you be doing? The steps are simple: look in the mirror and,

- Admit that there is a problem – with you. You are a sinner; the only real question is what particular sort.
- Ask forgiveness. All sin offends God, the Innocent One. He is gracious to forgive, but you must ask.
- Ask for help. He loves his children, and wants them to turn to him for help.
- Commit to action. Saying that you need to go to the gym regularly is not a substitute for exercise. This is not an academic exercise.

The mirror may be denied or ignored; it may give rise to self-deception. Or it may show us what needs to be done – and move us to do it.

In the Wilderness

August 1

It's a funny thing: Christians speak fondly of the "mountain top experience," but rarely do you hear of the "desert experience." Sometimes we have these, but we don't like to talk about them. Christ was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit; we just want to find the shortest way out.

Why the desert? Well, the air is clear and clean; you can see things at a great distance. The colors are subtle; if you look, you will find that "red" is not a color but a palette. Night brings its own beauty; stars. In the creation you can see the Creator. Perhaps this crisp, stark beauty explains it. Christ spent forty days there before the devil came to tempt him.

We, on the other hand, hurry through the desert – and the desert experience. When we're through, we don't want to talk about it. Why?

- The desert experience separates you from the blur of human life. To be with people is often to be apart from God, and we like being hidden in a crowd.
- In the desert you can navigate by God's lights. There are no billboards to tell you what to wear, what to eat, where to go and what to think.
- The desert experience lets you see a long way – even to death. For some, you can see beyond death to eternity. A lot of us don't want to see what eternity might bring.

Communion is a short version of the desert experience. It lets you see clearly – and you see that the sacrifice of Christ is far more important than your troubles, and his forgiveness far greater than your sins. It lets you see far ahead – beyond this life to Christ's return; beyond that to all of eternity. If you allow it, you will see God's beacons – the guiding stars of your life – clearly and in perspective.

Most of all, though, the desert is where you are alone with God. Take that time now, examine yourself – just you and God – and see not only what you are, but what he wants you to become. It is time for you to be with God – alone together.

Ambulance Ride

August 8

Imagine yourself alone in a hotel room, in a city in which you know no one, and you're suffering from chest pain. A lot of chest pain.

- First there's the denial. Take an antacid, maybe it will go away. You know better, but you don't *want* it to be heart trouble. That's serious. But maybe the pain will go away.
- It doesn't go away. It gets worse. You have to make a decision: risk your life, or put up with the inconvenience of a hospital trip. Maybe you could just drive?
- Finally, you call the hotel clerk – somebody has to tell the paramedics where your room is. The hotel staff responds; in the distance you hear sirens and know that this time the sirens are for you.

They place you in the ambulance. You quickly note that everyone – except the hotel clerk, who is not a medical professional – is very reassuring. Everything will be fine. This, of course, is the best indicator that things are very serious. You spend the next few minutes staring up at the roof of the ambulance, thinking, "Why don't they put a sun roof in these things? I'm supposed to be able to see where I'm going." You arrive at the hospital and enter the air of medicine: people and paraphernalia that are unique to the world of the hospital.

Up until now you've had activity to occupy your mind. Now, you wait. You'd really like to be bored waiting, thinking that meant it's not really serious. But the doctor is prompt; matters are severe; a surgical suite is prepared for you.

Sin is rather like that. We don't want to admit it; we'll try our own remedy for a while. Things get worse until you finally appeal for help. The help comes in the form of people who don't want to alarm you, of course, but … it is serious. It's not a matter of life and death – it's more serious than that. It's heaven and hell. So your friends carry you to the one person who can help; the Great Physician who alone holds the keys to heaven and hell.

He has done what needs to be done; it simply needs to be applied to you. He is the one who made the sacrifice at Calvary which atones for your sin. Communion is the reminder of that fact. It is also the continuing treatment of sin. Therefore, examine yourself. Do not stay in denial; seek help. You may not see where you are going with this, but Christ does. Enter into fellowship with Christ and receive his healing. Remember how serious you discovered sin to be; remember how great a salvation you received.

No Shoes

August 15

Casual dress having taken over much of our lives, we do not see it as often these days: a sign saying, "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service." It still exists; there are limits to casual attire. If the waiter is wearing a tuxedo, and you're wearing an Aloha shirt and flip-flops, you're in the wrong restaurant.

Why do restaurants maintain the "right to refuse service to anyone?" After all, biker bars don't mandate leather jackets – but upscale places often mandate coat and tie. It's said to maintain the atmosphere of the place. But do you not see that it's the "high class" restaurant with the restrictions; a burger joint is not nearly so fussy. It should be no surprise, then, that the most sacred of meals, Communion, has its requirements as well.

To join in Communion you must first be a real Christian. If there are any here who are not Christians, please refrain. This is a symbolic meal for believers only. Indeed, so seriously is this requirement maintained that many churches require that those who partake be members of that local church. It is a way of making sure that fools don't rush in.

Added to that is the requirement for self-examination. Communion is not to be taken mindlessly. Rather, it should be taken in full contemplation of the soul, honoring the sacrifice which made it possible – and the sin which made it necessary. Our sin.

Do we take it in a worthy manner? Or are we like the lady who came to the opera in hair curlers – justifying it by saying she had somewhere to go afterwards? Some of us just mumble a prayer of no real repentance. Others cheerily go on telling the Almighty what all the others need to repent for. Communion is a time for self-judgment, not Judgmentalism.

The true path is this: begin with your own confession of sins, and repentance. Then ask God for forgiveness of your sins. A word of warning: that will require you to forgive others. Then, with clean heart and clear conscience, eat the meal which symbolizes your forgiveness – and the price Christ paid for it.

Hands

August 22

Have you ever considered the hands of those who prepare this Communion meal?

- Often enough, those hands belong to those who are not public figures in the church. They'd be sorely tried to speak in public.
- Frequently they are the hands of those who are old in years. It feels right that even in old age your hands can help.
- Certainly, they are the hands of those who arrive early – they must finish before you can begin.
- Above all, they are the hands of people who know that quiet, unnoticed service to Christ is still just that: service to Christ.

Think, then, of Christ's hands:

- They were hardened by work, strong enough to drive the traders from the Temple.
- They were soft enough to reach to the lowest and least. His hands dealt with lepers, prostitutes and infants.
- Most important of all, they were pierced for you. They were nailed to a cross so that you might live.

Now we may consider your hands:

- They will hold Christ's body today – broken and bruised for you, dying in your place.
- They will hold Christ's blood today – shed freely for you, that you might have forgiveness.

In the most spiritual sense, you will feed on Christ today. In so doing you should become more like him – a little Christ, a Christian. So it is that your hands become his hands, his work becomes your work – even if it's behind the scenes, even if it's the little you can do. As you partake, remember the Christian you are to become.

Unlocking and Releasing

August 29

It is a time honored practice. No matter what his catalog of crime, the felon in our prisons is not really released. He is unlocked. The guard unlocks the cell, the shackles, and the doors – and puts the prisoner on a van to be taken to the bus station. There he is given a voucher for travel to his home town – and the phone number of his parole agent. One has to ask: is this really a good way to help a sinner maintain his repentance? The answer comes back: the "memory of his punishment will do that." Somehow, it doesn't seem to work as advertized.

How different it is for the children of Christ! The price of our sins was not paid by our imprisonment but his pain and suffering at the Cross. We are not cast off and cast out; we are welcomed into the church, the family of God. Nor are we left to find our own way; we are strengthened by those around us and guided by God's Word.

But the prison system has taught us one thing: "the memory of his punishment." We need to be reminded of what it cost the sinless Son of God to provide for us. We didn't suffer; He did. Often enough that keeps the suffering from our mind. So God has provided a memorial to that punishment. One reason we take Communion is so that we will remember the pain and suffering of our Lord – pain and suffering which we rightly deserve. By his stripes we are healed; by his sacrifice we are saved from Hell.

It goes beyond that. The prisoner often sees his life as needing no change – other than being smarter next time, so as to not get caught. The Christian sees a life that needs to change – to become more like Christ. As we do this, we discover that fear gives way to love and joy.

Prisoners are unlocked. Saints are set free.

Labor Day

September 5

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a peculiar institution. To celebrate Washington's Birthday we eat cherry pie –there's some connection, at least mythically. On the Fourth of July we shoot off fireworks – again, you can see the connection. On Memorial Day we have parades – reasonable enough. On Labor Day we don't work.

The Scripture tells us that man is to earn his daily bread by labor, by the sweat of his brow. It seems that this is a consequence of sin, but the truth is that man needs to labor. Even as sinless in the Garden of Eden, God gave man work to do; he was to tend the garden. It is not that God needed a gardener; it's that man needs to work. One reason for this is that human beings are designed to be pleased (and tempted to pride) when they accomplish something important. We like the feeling of accomplishment.

It's one of the great difficulties of Christianity. We want to feel that we have earned our way into God's graces; we want him to "owe us one." The problem, of course, is that salvation is by grace. It's a work, all right – a work of God. But God did not fail to provide for us in this; faith without works is dead, says James. So it appears that God has provided us a way to accomplish great things despite the fact that this is not the cause of our salvation.

One cheery fact about our ever-present work is that it reminds us of our accomplishments. We know what we have done because it is right in front of us. We don't need to be reminded of our own work. But we do need to be reminded of God's work, for it is not our own. So it is that God has provided us with this memorial feast. Each time we drink the cup and eat the bread we are reminded that our own works don't compare to his. We are also reminded that we should be grateful for that, no matter how great our works might be. So as you take this meal, remember that Christ labored and died for you – and give thanks.

Scotch Cap Lighthouse

September 12

On April 1, 1946 the crew of the Scotch Cap Lighthouse experienced the power of the sea. A magnitude 7.6 earthquake had created a tsunami in the area. The lighthouse on Unimak Island, Alaska was forty feet above sea level; it was over sixty feet high. The tsunami erased it from the island. It is estimated that the wave had to be over a hundred feet high. Three men died there; the same tsunami went on to kill over a hundred people in Hawaii.

So it is with the lighthouses built by men. They disappear in the waves; they crumble of old age or are simply abandoned. The ideas of men receive much the same treatment.

But one lighthouse remains: Christ, the light of the world. Heaven and earth may pass away, but the words of Christ will remain forever. The powers of this world have tried everything available to wipe out this light. They have persecuted his church in the most painful and gruesome ways. They have heaped scorn on those who believe. Perhaps most insidious of all is this: the government of the day comes to "help" the church. Just to fix all those wrong-headed ideas about right and wrong, of course.

Christ tells us that we, too, are the light of the world. We are "lower lights," to be sure, but lights nonetheless. He shines to the entire world; we must shine to as many as we can. Surely, however, we can take a lesson from the lighthouse – the lens of the light must be clean so that the beam may be clear. It is the same spiritually. We are commanded to examine ourselves before communion. In this way we clean the spiritual lens, repenting of our sins, asking forgiveness. So as you take this spiritual meal today, take the time to reflect upon yourself. Bring your sins to the light so that they may be examined – and removed. Then take, remembering the sacrifice which now makes you clean.

Following Instructions

September 19

Those who grew up before the era of ubiquitous handheld video games will remember such childhood delights as Mother May I, Red Light/Green Light and Simon Says. It's worth noting that no one can play these games perfectly – and in fact the games depend upon that. Children can follow most instructions, but often enough they will miss the command completely. It's so absurd, it's humorous. Some children are better at this than others, of course, but it's clear that no one is perfect – even when Simon Says the instructions are clear.

It's a basic fact of life: we're all sinners. It's also a fact that we don't like that; we get frustrated with ourselves because we can't be 100% perfect. Often enough we seek to distract our own thought from this.

- Sometimes our self-distraction is this: "it's not my fault." My parents didn't raise me right; I didn't get the right body, character or wallet; it's just the environment I'm in.
- Another self-distraction is this: "I'm better than so-and-so." (You pick the so-and-so.)

The truth is that it is your fault; after all, you did it. And it doesn't matter who you are better than, you still did it. You, like all the rest of us, are a sinner. And you want to do something about it.

Christ already has. By his sacrifice at the Cross he has paid the penalty due for your sins; you are forgiven. He asks you to accept that fact and in accepting it follow him. But just as sin is persistent, so is Christ's reminder that you are forgiven. You take Communion regularly to remind yourself that you have been forgiven – at a price. Remember that price as you examine yourself today, then take and eat. You are not perfect – but Christ is, and he has you covered.

Back to School

September 26

Autumn has officially started. The word itself brings memories in the air; the color of the leaves, the crispness of the air, football – and that magic and dreaded phrase, "back to school."

For the student it means that summer has gone by too quickly again. The word "back" seems to say it all: going backwards. But we might encourage our students with the thought that they are going back – to learn more. After all, the idea is that this process will help turn our youngsters into adults some day. So the cycle of the year begins again. But most teachers know that "back to school" is not just a time to learn new things; rather, learning new things starts with a reminder of what was taught last year. This is most necessary; how many of you really remember how to solve a quadratic equation by completing the square?

Communion serves these two functions as well. It is an experience where you learn more:

- You learn more about yourself. As the Spirit gives you insight, you discover that the "you" of your own vision and the sinner God sees are coming closer together. Your sins stand out more; you discover that you're not nearly as perfect as you thought you were.
- But you also learn more about God's grace. When the light of God shines on your sins, it is the light of grace. As you know yourself more painfully, you discover the greater glory of God's grace in forgiveness.

You also need a review. Each time you partake, you review the reason Jesus came: to seek and save the lost. It is a time to contemplate the great love of Christ, reviewing again what He has done for you. It is also a time to remember the Cross, and the pain and sin he bore on your behalf. As you partake of Communion, review the past – learn for the future.

I'll Sue!

October 3

It happens frequently: a man is outraged by what is done to him. He screams in reply, "I'll sue!" Then reality sets in. He hires an attorney. If the attorney is a good one, he informs his new client of the realities of the justice system. First, this is going to cost money – lots of money. Second, it's going to take a long time to work its way through the system. Third, the result very may well be another outrage. Usually, the man with the lawsuit continues. Usually, the lawyer is right about money, time and results.

It's the same thing with the criminal justice system. Who among us has not been outraged by some insane decision? When the obviously guilty are acquitted we want someone to fix the system. Indeed, it's even worse when the mercy of the state, the parole board, releases some monster upon the public.

How much better it would be if we could take our lawsuit in front of God! Here's how Job put it:

Job 23:3-7 NIV If only I knew where to find him;
if only I could go to his dwelling! (4) I would state my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments. (5) I would find out what he would answer me,
and consider what he would say. (6) Would he oppose me with great power?
No, he would not press charges against me. (7) There an upright man could present his case before him,
and I would be delivered forever from my judge.

Whatever man does is flawed. How much better it would be to seek justice from the righteous God! His hands are clean; he is utterly fair; and the verdict would be swift. His justice is greatly superior to ours.But even as his justice is greater than ours, so is his mercy. When we release a convict he is stigmatized. It's hard for him to find a job; his family and friends may pretend he doesn't exist. He is second class, out of favor, and still being punished.

How much more is God's mercy! We release a convict; he welcomes the prodigal son home. We insist that the convict continue to pay for his crimes; our God pays for our sins at the Cross. The difference is enormous. As God told Isaiah,

Isaiah 55:9 NIV "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

The difference is also something we remember; we celebrate. The mercy granted at the Cross is shown in the cup and the bread, symbols of Christ's body and blood. As you partake, consider how low is the justice of man – and how high is the mercy of God.

A New City

October 10

In the great faith chapter, Hebrews 11, Abraham is described as seeking a new city (verse 10). Suppose your employer transferred you to a new location; you now need to locate a city in which to live. What would be your criteria for selecting a city? Each of us would answer that question slightly differently. Abraham had the same problem – only spiritually. What did he seek?

"… *a city with foundations*." American music says the city should be built on "rock and roll"; most of us would like a foundation a little more solid than that. People in earthquake country (think California) will tell you that rock and roll is not what you want your city to be doing. But what should you choose? Spiritually, the Christian seeks that city whose foundations are in God. The church is built on the rock of Christ; the rest of the world builds on transient and temporary things. Consider well the things that last. Nothing moves God; He's earthquake proof.

"…*whose architect … is God*." Some communities are planned; others just grow. Think of your own spiritual life this way; do you just "let it happen" or do you follow your Maker's instructions? One of those instructions is that you are to remember Christ's sacrifice on the Cross regularly. It's a command to focus on the fundamentals of the faith.

"*whose … builder is God*." All the plans in the world are meaningless unless you get a builder who can fulfill them. We can look to the past to see what has been built and what lasts. The only builder who can erect that which is eternal is God. Everyone else builds temporary structure.

God's great work of architecture is the church; its foundation is Jesus Christ. In communion we are asked to remember this; but we are also told to do so, "until He comes." We look forward to His return and our eternal home; we look back to see the sacrifice which made that possible. As you partake, consider well: just what foundation is your life resting on?

Identification

October 17

It is a familiar sight in the fall. Hordes of fans, each dressed in the school colors, stream into the stadium. The more extreme fans where the school colors on their faces, like warpaint. Television cameras seek out the most extreme paint jobs for display of what it's like to go a football game on afternoon in the fall.

One thing the sure: it is the true fan who wears the colors. Football being what it is, sometimes those colors look a little strange on various people. But fans wear them because they know this identifies them as being a fan of their particular team. Color matters. In this simple way the fan *identifies* with his team.

A similar phenomenon happens in Christianity. It is not simply a matter of proclaiming that you were Christian, rather it is you proclaiming that you understand what Christ did for you. That's communion. It is a way of saying not only that you are a Christian, but you reflect on and appreciate the suffering of Christ at the Cross. Indeed, in taking communion you proclaim your willingness to suffer with Christ. Modern American Christians don't think very much about suffering for their faith. It seems almost incomprehensible to them that any form of pain or even embarrassment could possibly come their way just for being a Christian. But each time you take communion, you proclaim your willingness to suffer along with your Lord. You are showing your colors, as it were.

Real fans will tell you: the colors don't make the fan. Just because you have the purple sweater doesn't mean you're a real fan. Real fans have entire rooms in their houses decorated in their team colors. (This can be a decorator's nightmare.) Real Christians tell you the same thing about those who take communion. If you genuinely believe, if you are genuinely willing to suffer for Christ, if you are genuinely walking the talk, then you are a genuine Christian. If you are a genuine Christian, communion is deeply meaningful. If you're a fraud, it is an empty ritual. So perhaps you can measure your faith by what communion means to you: is it your identification with your Lord Jesus Christ, or is it something to be gotten out of the way each week? It's hard to tell from the outside, but you know. So does Jesus.

Up From The Grave

October 24

Good news is hard to find in our mainstream media today; but recently events in Chile crowded the evil Republicans off the front page. While the world watched, thirty-three miners were lifted to the surface, one by one, from two thousand feet below. They had been trapped in that mine for over two months. When the last man surfaced the celebrations exploded, as you can imagine.

Something about their plight touched heartstrings around the world. Imagine being trapped, alive, underground. Most of us are not miners; but we've been afraid of the dark. In a psychological sense, this was a near-death experience – for all of us.

Put your imagination to work. Imagine the sensation of watching the rescue capsule come down for the *second* man. Think what that did to their spirit – that aluminum tube thing works! We can get out of here! Rescue is real!

That's how a Christian should feel about the resurrection. Our Lord was dead; but by the power of the Holy Spirit God raised him up from that grave. He is the "first fruits" of the resurrection. He has promised those who follow him that they too will rise from the grave.

This did not come without a price. Jesus is fully human; his death was as fully human as any of ours. So it is that we take Communion to remember his death – so that we will appreciate the enormous cost. His was a painful death, a shameful death, a betrayed death.

Consider this well: the men in that mine have no really good way to repay those who drilled the hole and sent down the capsule. But that doesn't mean they are ungrateful. We have no way to repay Christ, either. We can remember the sacrifice; we can see the rescue coming – and rejoice.

From the Czar

October 31

It was a church full of immigrants. Most of them had come from Eastern Europe, and many of them were quite elderly. My friend was the treasurer of this church and he told me of an unusual happening. It seems that for many years one of the parishioners was in the habit of putting into the offering plate a single gold coin. The coin was originally from Russia, and dated to the time of the czars. He would collect these every now and then, and take them to a coin dealer to sell. It was a puzzle to him just who would do such a thing.

The puzzle became clear one day. The priest at the church received a phone call from an apartment manager. It seems that one of the parishioners of the church, who lived in that apartment, had been discovered dead of natural causes. The apartment manager asked the church if they would be kind enough to clean up the apartment, and of course use anything of value within it for the purposes of the church. One of the staff supervised the effort — and that's when my friend got his phone call. They were a little vague, but they were quite certain they needed him to assist.

The reason was simple enough: they had found the man with the gold coins. Lots of gold coins. bags and bags of gold coins. Pounds and pounds of gold coins. His little bed was completely stuffed underneath with bags of gold, Russian coins. He was in fact a wealthy man. You'd never have known it looking at his apartment.

The question, of course, was why he lived like that when he had so much in the way of gold? The answer it seems was rather simple: he apparently believed the coins were worthless because the Communists had taken over in Russia; the czars were gone. To him, this would be like so much Confederate money. It never occurred to him that the coins would have value because they were gold or because they were rare. He did not know how rich he was — and died in that ignorance.

Some Christians have the same ignorance. They come to communion each week thinking themselves the victims of spiritual poverty. They see themselves as just another face in the crowd, just another person looking for the solution to life. Communion to them is just a ritual; something you do because you belong to a particular church. But consider: in your hands today you will hold the body and blood of Jesus Christ, which is the greatest gift ever given to man. It is the gift of salvation and eternal life. It comes from the greatest giver, God Almighty himself. There is nothing of poverty about it.

Many of us wish we had a rich uncle to inherit from. What we have is even better; we have a Father who loves us. He has blessed us with the greatest gift that any human being could receive — the life of his Son to pay for our sins. He asks that we remember this gift.

Election Soup

November 7

Elections are a constant theme in America. They might well be compared to the making of soup: largely a matter of throwing in the next ingredient so that the broth will become palatable to the customer. The political message from any candidate boils down to this:

- I'm so wonderful I'm sliced bread. How any intelligent, thinking person could vote for anyone but me is beyond comprehension.
- My opponent may not be the Antichrist; but the letters in his name do add up to 665 — so you can see that he's pretty close.
- Therefore, if you vote for me things will be completely wonderful.

The Christian should remember that the system of politics in this world belongs to Satan. If you want to see how well this works think about the individual who volunteers to support a candidate. Suppose that’s you. You work for the candidate; not the other way around. You contribute time and money to him, in the hopes of some vague future benefit. Indeed, many a volunteer has left the campaign after the election wondering just whether or not any good was achieved.

The system of Jesus Christ works completely differently. The politician’s words are usually hot air; the words of Christ are life. His sacrifice gives life; indeed, he came that we might have life more abundantly. Politics, compared to the living Word, is nothing. The proof is at the Cross; it's a destination at which you usually don't see any politicians.

Politicians do have one problem in common with Jesus Christ, however. They want you to remember what they have done for you. So they send you flyers, newsletters, campaign cards and all sorts of other trivia. Christ too asks that you remember him. His method is much higher, for he asks you to bring your own experience and thought to the table of remembrance. So as you eat and drink, remember just what Jesus did for you. The politician lasts for one or more terms; the blessings of Christ are eternal.

Be True

November 14

You need not say, "I am true." Be true. - C. H. Spurgeon.

Many Christians are convinced that there is no sense in attempting to witness to others. Street evangelism is beyond them; preaching to a crowd is something they cannot even think of. But each of us does have the privilege of proclaiming the life of Christ — in our own lives. Think of it this way:

- What about your speech? Has it changed since you become a Christian? Do people know that you are a man of faith because of the way you speak? You may have noticed that certain Christians seem to quiet the wave of obscenities whenever they enter the room. It is the tribute that vice pays to virtue; it is the evidence of a life in Christ.
- Consider too your honesty — the fundamental integrity of a human being. Do people "just know" that you are trustworthy? Is your word your bond? This is particularly noteworthy in the small things of life. Nothing so impresses the waitress as when you hand back the change she should not have given you. It may only be a few nickels, but the testimony is golden.
- There is also the matter of kindness. Most of us are sure that if we were confronted with a major test of kindness, we would glow with Christian charity. Most of us never get such a test. It is the kindness in every day living, the care for those whose claim on our kindness is so small, that marks the Christian witness. You may not even remember the act of kindness that bears witness to Christ upon someone else.

Your life proclaims Christ, if you are a Christian. You also proclaim him at communion. Do you not see it? Why would you take communion, unless Christ had made such a sacrifice for us? More than that, you wouldn't do this unless you believed that sacrifice was effective in cleansing you of your sins.

An honest man cannot be deceived. When you take communion, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again — which means you believe he is coming again. Let the integrity of your life be the witness that says this communion is effective, and our Lord shall soon return.

Clean As You Go

November 21

Military veterans will recall the constant instruction: "clean as you go." It is always tempting to put off cleaning chores until tomorrow, or later, but drill instructors and mess sergeants know the cleaning must be done as you go. Doing it later just does not produce the same results. In the meanwhile, the mess hall will not pass inspection.

The method works as well in spiritual things. Most of us like to let sleeping dogs lie, and not face the sin in our life. Taking care of these problems as they arise is a much better method. For example:

- This method prevents the small things from growing large silently. How often have you heard that a particular sin just crept up on someone?
- It also denies the wages of sin. Sometimes sin just looks for a tiny crack to get in. If we are conscious of that, it's easy to clean up the problem at the beginning. We can take the problem to the Lord, and ask us to "lead us not into temptation."
- Perhaps most important, it helps us deal with besetting sin. It's discouraging to deal with such; the feeling that each week you come back and try again with the same problem. But that's much better than giving up entirely.

So then: at communion, examine yourself. See if the small things are creeping up on you; examine the new temptations which seem so small at first. If you need to, repent again of that problem sin. Repent - and start again. The sacrifice of the Cross is effective for all of these -- it remains our task to apply it each week.

Thanksgiving

November 28

"He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; And to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God."

(Psalms 50:23 NASB)

Grandparents can tell you: little children have more than one way to say "thank you." Sometimes it sincere; sometimes it's because their parents prompt them. It would seem that thankfulness is something that must be taught — because kids don't learn it on their own.

There is something of that in this passage. The psalmist is trying to convey the idea that offering thanks to God is a good thing; making your ways right is a better thing. Just coming to God with the sacrifice of thanksgiving — perhaps in song – is a good start. But like the sincerity of the thanks of a three-year-old, God knows the difference between those who are just mouthing the words and those who are living the life. The good news is that those who are living the life find that God accepts the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving and right living are connected.

It's an interesting way to say it: "sacrifice of thanksgiving." It's as if we are reluctant to thank God for what he has done; somehow it's a sacrifice. In little children, we know what causes this — selfishness. It's a little bit more difficult in adults. But we need to look, because of we are not willing to make the sacrifice of thanksgiving then something is wrong with our Christian life.

Therefore, we should examine ourselves before communion. Look into your heart and see if there is something that prevents you from thinking God for the greatest gift ever given. Ask him to clean it out of the way if it is there. Then approach communion with clean hands and a clean heart, making the sacrifice of thanksgiving that honors God.

Passport

December 5

Those of you who have traveled abroad will certainly recognize the requirement to have a passport. This little blue book, with your name and your vital information in it, is necessary to pass international borders. Losing your passport can leave you stranded at the airport, waiting for the next flight. It's a small item, but a necessary one. Interestingly enough, the passport is categorized by the country that issues it. It doesn't matter where you're going; it matters where you call home.

In some senses communion is like a passport. It is a small thing; it takes very little time. Indeed, the elements we take are physically small and of themselves. Like the passport, it is also a necessary thing for the Christian. In a sense, it marks the fact that you have crossed a border — the border between the worldly life and its lack of hope, and the Christian life full of hope. Communion tells the world where you call home. By taking communion, you declare to the world that this world is not your home, you are just passing through.

As any business traveler can tell you, the world's favorite destination is home. Some frequent fliers like to brag about how many countries they visited in how little time. But eventually bone weariness sets in, and you long for home. Perhaps you hadn't looked at it this way, but your passport is your guarantee that you will be allowed to go back home. If you lose your passport in some foreign country, we might just not let you come back. Communion proclaims that you are one of us, and headed home to the same destination.

So take heart, traveler, your passport was issued by your heavenly country. By the power of the cross your Lord will welcome you home. Each time you take communion, you celebrate this fact.

Fractals

December 12

The local newspapers recently announced the death of one Benoit Mandelbrodt, a mathematician of great renown. He is the discoverer of the mathematical concept of fractals. Defining fractals is well beyond the capability of those who have high school mathematics, but one particular example might show you the concept.

Let's suppose you go outside after a brief rain. You look down into the puddles and you see that there is a trail of mud which splits into tiny little streams. Interestingly enough, this picture is almost indistinguishable from a picture of the Mississippi Delta taken from an aircraft overhead. Even though the Delta is much larger, the pattern is the same. Moreover, if you look into the Delta you will see that this pattern is repeated in smaller and smaller sizes, even down to the size of that puddle. This idea of a repeating pattern has been put to great use in the last 40 years.

It is a characteristic of the universe that such patterns repeat. God, in his infinite wisdom, ordained it so. There is an interesting parallel in communion. The large, or Delta size, pattern is the crucifixion. The puddle size pattern is our partaking of communion. The pattern is the same. The cup represents the blood of Christ; the bread is the parallel of the body of Christ. We are a small representation, therefore, and we should see ourselves as such.

So I ask you today to examine yourself. Are you indeed the small representation of Christ? Do you resemble his pattern? You proclaim that you do when you take communion; your life should proclaim that you are indeed patterned after Christ.

Not To Believe

December 19

“The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is not to believe that he loves you.” - John Owens.

Did it ever occur to you that you can lay sorrow and burden upon God the Father? Indeed you can.

Consider first sorrow. If you will recall all that God has done for you before you ever knew him, you would be able to see the source of sorrow. He has sent his Son – his very life — to this planet for the specific purpose of dying for you. That is the greatest sacrifice one person can make for another. He did this out of love, not out of compulsion. Can you imagine then the heartbreak that comes when someone rejects so great a gift?

It is also a burden. Look at it this way: he has already done the maximum that can be done. If you reject this, then out of love he must look for something else to turn your heart towards him. This is intrinsically extremely difficult.

Yes, this is the greatest unkindness that can be known. You know this instinctively. Why else do you teach your children to say, "thank you?" You don't want them to appear to be ungrateful. You yourself have received unwanted gifts before, but you know that civilized adults say thanks anyway. What if the gift is indeed very precious?

You might think this has nothing to do with Communion. But it is not so; taking communion lightly is just another form of this. If this is nothing but empty ritual, or you're doing it because everyone else is doing it, then you are telling God that you don't believe he loves you. Consider well your thoughts; God knows them, and knows the burdens they can bring.

The Morning After Christmas

December 26

It is the very definition of quiet chaos. You get up on the morning after Christmas, dressed for church, and walk through the living room. Wrapping paper is everywhere. Over in the corner is that little tin windup toy Santa, the one with the drum on the back of the tricycle. Everyone likes to wind up watching go across the floor, making an incredibly raucous noise designed to split the eardrums and fracture the nerves of the parents.

There are regrets. There are the things you did not get for Christmas. How your wife was supposed to know that you really wanted a hydraulic ramjet peanut butter spreader is some what beyond comprehension. But that doesn't lessen your disappointment.

Perhaps you also regret that you did not tell the story. I know that everyone's heard it; and they put it more than once. But as you look back on Christmas Day you think to yourself, perhaps I should've told the story. Perhaps I should have mentioned what Christmas is all about.

It's important. For the birth of Christ, the Incarnation, is the basic miracle of Christianity. Without the babe in the manger there would be no Christ on the Cross. If there is no cross, there is no resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then death triumphs.

But there is a manger with a babe in it. He grew to go to the cross; he went to the grave. That is what we remember here at Communion. It is the triumph over death that is the basis of our faith. At Christmas you should remember to tell the story. At Communion you tell the story each time.

How Do I Know?

January 2

Have you ever asked yourself, "how do I know that I'm saved?" It's a question that eventually occurs to every Christian. Satan loves to torment the Christian with the thought that perhaps he's not really saved. But there is a valid test.

How do I know that I'm saved? Because I have the Holy Spirit within me. This, of course, brings up the second question, "how do we know I have the Holy Spirit within me?" The answer to that is relatively simple too. As the apostle John tells us, we know we are his disciples because we love one another.

Well, that brings up another question — just what makes that the test? The answer to that is relatively complicated, but we may boil it down this way. God is love, the Scripture assures us. If God is within us in the form of the Holy Spirit, the obvious sign of that is that we become like God, who is love. Therefore, we love one another. Now you know.

God is love; therefore he loves us. It is intrinsic to his nature; in a sense, he can't help it. But it is still true that God is warmhearted but hardheaded. He knows we are sinners. He also knows we need to be convinced. Just telling the human being that God is love produces warm fluffy thoughts. The cross demonstrates that God is love, and there is nothing warm or fluffy about the cross. He sent his son to die for our sins; no greater proof could possibly be provided.

That's what we remember at communion. We remember the sacrifice, we remember the suffering, we remember the injustice of it all, but most of all we remember the love that God is. We do so in a simple ceremony. The cup represents the blood of Christ; the bread, the body of Christ. The cross is necessary for your salvation; communion reminds you of the love which produced it. Take it therefore, in a worthy manner; you are handling the body and blood of Jesus Christ, given for you out of God's great love.

The Neck Tie

January 9

Consider, if you will, the ordinary neck tie. As an item of clothing to keep you warm it is approximately useless. Its major use for the businessman seems to be cutting off the circulation to the brain.

But considered as a symbol, the ordinary necktie takes on quite a significance:

- There are ties which show authority. This is often connected with the show of power, wealth or position. Those who are very astute about men's clothing can often tell who's in charge by the tie.
- There are ties which show affinity. Often these ties are specially made for the person, such as a tie which commemorates military service in a particular unit.
- Then there are ties which are worn simply for the pure joy of wearing them. The author of these meditations wears an eye patch over his right eye; of course, he has a tie patterned in skull and crossbones.

Communion, as a symbol, carries much of the same significance. For example, this meal shows authority — the authority of Christ over sin. It shows his power — his power over death. It shows his position as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Similarly, are taking this meal shows are affinity with Christ. The meal was specially made just for us. It proclaims to the world that we are Christians, that we have accepted the salvation that God has offered.

Finally this is a meal that leads to joy. We have the joy of salvation, and the joy of eternal life — and this meal symbolizes them both. It may seem to you to be nothing but a ritual; it may seem boring and repetitive. But the reality is that is full of significance and power. Treat it with care; you are handling things eternal.

Onesimus

January 23

Towards the back of the New Testament you will find the very short book of Philemon. It takes little time to read this book. In this book we meet Onesimus, a runaway slave. It is hard for us to imagine the gravity of this offense as it would be viewed in Roman times, but here's how they would have seen it:

- First, Onesimus would've been viewed as a thief and a traitor — a man who had betrayed his master and stolen from him as well.
- His punishment when caught would probably have included being branded on the forehead, to mark him as a runaway, and castration.

Paul meets Onesimus in Rome, and brings him to Christ. He sends Onesimus back with this letter, asking Philemon to take Onesimus back. Philemon is a rich man, and could probably afford to cover whatever theft Onesimus had made. He could have absorbed the cost. But Paul does not ask him to do that.

What does Paul ask? He asks Philemon to take Onesimus back, and as to the matter of whatever Onesimus might owe Philemon he takes a different tack. He tells Philemon to charge it to Paul. Onesimus is now his Christian brother, and he could have appealed to Philemon on the basis of that to be forgiving. Instead, he tells him to put it on Paul's credit card, so to speak. In so doing, Paul is showing us the imitation of Christ. He is doing what his Master has done.

This is just what Christ did for us: he said, "charge it to me." He did this at Calvary, where he paid for our sins. We meet around the communion table to remember that event. In so doing we should bless his name for what he has done for us; thank him for the great gift he has given us. But more than that; in response to his love we should, like Paul, go and do likewise.

So I encourage you today to examine yourself. Is there someone in your life who cannot repay what you have done? Is there someone in your life who cannot make amends for what they have done? If so, imitate your Lord and say, "charge it to me." You will be forgiving little on behalf of the One who forgave much.

Two Dollar Bill

January 23

Quick! Tell me the name of the person on the two dollar bill. If you guessed Thomas Jefferson, you were right. His picture — and a rather formal and sour picture it is — is on the two dollar bill.

It's a rather odd bit the currency. In fact, many people don't believe that such a bill exists. In at least one instance, a lady was arrested for passing what the sheriff thought were phony bills. She spent the night in jail, waiting for a Secret Service agent to show up the next day to advise the sheriff that the United States does indeed print these things.

Of course, the two dollar bill has one major drawback: the cash register drawers in most stores don't have a place for them. So the clerk has to find some place to put them, which is a nuisance. It seems that Thomas Jefferson just doesn't fit in with all the other presidents.

There is a parallel to this in communion. Some people come to church and find communion to be simply an empty ritual, with no real value. They go through the motions but leave the building unchanged. More commonly, communion is rather awkward for some people. Those who deliver communion meditations are constantly encouraging the Christian to examine himself. We don't like to do that; we'd rather let sleeping dogs lie. But something in the back of the head says, "this is the real thing; it's genuine." But what should we do about it?

The reason for self-examination is to bring to God those things which are sinful in your life, ask his forgiveness and his assistance in our repentance. Like the two dollar bill, we find this a bit awkward. I cannot deny that it is. But we should recognize that awkward or not, it is necessary. Therefore, examine yourself, repent and bring to God your troubles. He has paid the price of your sins and you need to be reminded of that.

Commemoratives

January 30

Unless you are an avid collector, you are probably unaware of the number of commemorative coins issued by the United States Mint. It seems that Congress regularly authorizes the issue of such coins to honor various people, events, and places. That list of places includes some familiar ones, such as Mount Rushmore and Yellowstone National Park. Others are less known, such as the National Visitors Center in Washington DC. Some of the events are quite famous, such as various Civil War commemoratives. But did you know that we have a coin that commemorates the National Botanic Gardens? People range from the famous (such as Abraham Lincoln) to various anonymous groups, such as women who have served in the Armed Forces. You can get these coins in a variety of materials, including silver and gold.

Human beings, it seems, need something to symbolize their memories. Even the earliest of cultures had something resembling a gravestone. Often enough, the Memorial item is in and of itself a rather expensive thing — gold is running over $1000 an ounce as of this writing, and we are issuing gold coins as commemoratives. It is as if we were saying to ourselves, "don't forget this."

Communion likewise is a commemorative. The place it commemorates is rather a dusty one; it's a small hill just outside the old city of Jerusalem. Yet we have many hymns that speak of Calvary; we remember. The event that we are remembering was a common form of criminal execution of the time; the locals would have seen it as ordinary. We see it for what it is: the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Most important of all, we commemorate the person of this event: Jesus, the Christ.

Commemorative coins exist to bring your memory back to the surface; when you see them, you remember. Communion does the same thing for the Christian, so that we might remember the sacrifice of our Lord that brought us salvation.

One Qualification

February 6

Most people have never really thought of it this way, but did you know that there is one qualification you must meet before you can become a Christian? What is that? Easy. You have to be a sinner first. Some of us are exceedingly well qualified in that regard.

The fact of the matter is simple: you are a sinner. Sinners come in a wide variety of types. Some of us commit only "respectable" sins, and therefore think it doesn't matter. Those who commit disreputable sins are easier to convince of the need for repentance – but either way, you're a sinner. We tend to hide this fact. That's one reason God gave us the Holy Spirit. It is the function of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin and judgment to come – and that includes you, too.

Most of us would be very content to ignore the Spirit. We want to let sleeping worms lie. God knows better, and if you listen, so will you.

What does the Spirit ask of you? In a word, repentance – the spiritual equivalent of a U-turn. It's a painful process at times. You have to admit your sins and accept the fact that you, by yourself, can do nothing about them. If it were up to you in your own strength, you'd be helpless. But the Scripture is clear; repent, and God forgives you. Even if you have to repent over and over again.

You might well ask: how do I know that this really works? Communion is given to you as an answer to that. Every time you take communion, you remind yourself that Christ's body was nailed to the Cross; his blood was shed for the forgiveness of your sins. Communion is the reminder of that sacrifice on your behalf. So, as you partake, remember that you are a qualified sinner – and He is the only qualified savior.

The Cheesehead

February 13

Consider, if you will, that arcane bit of Americana known as the Wisconsin cheesehead. If you are a Green Bay Packers fan, it seems absolutely necessary to own one to take to the game. It serves two purposes:

- First, it separates "us" from "them." A Minnesota Vikings fan just wouldn't wear one, no matter how cold it got.
- It also separates the true Packers fan from the occasional one. You have to be a serious fan to sport this headgear.

There is something of a parallel to that in communion. We are all sinners, God knows. We can be easily divided into those who have done something about it, and those who have not. This is really the only distinction that matters; anything else is just comparing our lists of sins committed. You will notice that this is not a particularly common pastime. Most of us are unspectacular at sin; our sin lists are boring. But God remains interested in us, despite that.

One of the great dividing signs is communion. In communion, you make three assertions to the world:

- First, you assert that you are a sinner. What specific type is left unsaid. As I said, your sin list is boring. You're just admitting that you have one.
- Second, you assert that you can't fix the problem yourself; you need a Savior. You don't have the tools to deal with sin.
- Third, you assert that Jesus Christ is exactly what you need: a Savior.

When you partake of communion, you are telling all who see that you have found the answer to sin. You proclaim that it took his death on the Cross to atone for that sin, and that you have accepted that sacrifice. Communion says to the world that this particular community of believers has renounced self-righteousness and accepted grace. Since it is grace – our forgiveness – we convey that message to one and all. It is not judgment of others we proclaim; it is God's forgiveness we offer to the world.

Confession

February 20

It's hard for us to accept at times, but the Scripture is clear: we must confess our sins to each other.

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.

(James 5:16 NIV)

Why do we need to confess our sins?

- Well, it certainly isn't necessary to inform God, the omniscient one. He already knows. But many of us are in denial about this. Like a good physician, he wants us to face up to the disease we have. The longer in denial, the later the cure.
- One good reason: so that others – especially beginners – don't think that they are the only ones with this problem. Even the most mature of Christians still must confess.
- Another good reason: by confession you seek help. The help you need in dealing with sin is found in the church and nowhere else. But how can you get help if you won't ask?
- Sometimes the good of the church may require a public confession. Dirt swept under the rug is – dirt.

By taking communion, you proclaim your sinful nature for all to see. If you are to take it with clean hands, confession should come first. Let this communion be a reminder to you. Christ sacrificed his life that you might have forgiveness. He established communion so that you might remember that. The price of forgiveness has been paid; follow his instructions to obtain it.

Remember: if Christ can forgive you (and he does) then you can forgive others. Let this communion spur you to reconcile with your fellow Christians by confessing and seeking forgiveness, just as Christ has forgiven you.

Comparison Shopping

February 27

Most of us don't think of it this way, but we greatly rely upon an unknown set of inspectors who verify that the scales at the supermarket are measuring things correctly. If you put 2 pounds produce into the scales it should read 2 pounds. Without an accurate scale it's impossible to get exactly 2 pounds. Everything we measure in our personal lives works on the same principle. We have a standard, and we compare things to it. If you travel outside the United States you will find that the standards of weight and measurement are metric — but the scale still has to be honest.

It's not just shopping that works this way. Given the chance, most Christians choose to measure themselves against other people, not the holiness of God. Consider the paragon of the Old Testament, Job. For several chapters his friends accuse him of being a secret sinner. Job wise, citing his righteousness and the good deeds he has done. But at the end of the book God appears. He makes it clear that the standard of righteousness is not that of Job comparing himself to other people, but comparing himself with God. Job's reaction is quite interesting:

"I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes."

(Job 42:5-6 NASB)

Job goes from justifying himself based on his good deeds — things we would be proud of — to understanding that compared with the holiness of God he is nothing. By man's measure, Job is holy. By God's measure, Job is Job.

It would seem therefore the God has a different measuring rod than we do. We tend to think our good deeds make us holy. To understand God's measurement of this, we need only to look at the Cross. That is the measure of God's sacrifice for us, and the measure of his love for us. He made that sacrifice before any of us ever were born; he made that sacrifice for people who were sneering at him as he died on the Cross. He forgave before they repented.

To remember that great sacrifice, we have communion. Communion shows us God's measurement of sacrifice. It reminds us not only of what he has done, but to what standard he measures. It is as if God were saying to us, "this is the sacrifice that I consider holy." It is clear that as human beings we cannot measure up to God's standard. It is also clear that we do not need to; Christ has done for us. Therefore, as you take communion today remember his standard of holiness — and the length to which he went to enable us to meet that standard.

How You Look At It

March 6

In the British Museum, in London, England, there is a unique piece of glassware known as the Lycurgus Cup. The cup itself is said to date to the fourth century A.D., which makes it rare enough. But it has a most amazing property: its color depends on how you look at it. If you look at the cup in reflected light, such as is common with flash photography, the cup appears to be green. If you shine light from behind the cup appears to be red. In short, how it appears to you depends on how you light it. The phenomenon has only recently been explained, as a part of the field of physics known as nanoplasmonics.

His sense, communion shares the same phenomenon. What communion is depends very much on how you light it.

- If you see it in the sense of covenant, it becomes the symbol of the relationship God has established with man — so that man might be blessed.
- If you see it in the light of sacrifice, is a measure of the greatness of the man known as Jesus of Nazareth.
- You may also see it as a remembrance — a time of remembering. It is simple; it is profound, it is impossible to forget.
- It can also be seen in the light of proclamation — the simple event in your life which proclaims to all around you that you are a Christian; you have accepted the sacrifice of your Lord Jesus Christ.
- It can also be seen in the light of love. The greatest display of love which can possibly be made is the sacrifice of your life. The more righteous the life, the greater the sacrifice — and therefore this is the greatest possible demonstration of love.

But there is one other light which must be shined on communion. It is the light of judgment. If your life does not match the proclamation of love you are making, God will not hold you innocent for it. Examine yourself carefully; repent of what you need to; and *then* partake.

Census

March 13

Every ten years the United States conducts a census. This is required by the Constitution, and has been done every 10 years since the founding of this nation. It's rather an important exercise, because many federal programs are funded at the state level — and the funding depends upon the population that the census finds. The more people you have, the greater your funding. So you can see that this is something that would be important to politicians. This is why, for the first time in our history, President Obama has moved the Census Bureau to the direct control of the White House – for their "guidance."

You might ask, "what's to guide? Just count them." The difficulty is in counting immigrants, particularly illegal immigrants from countries where government agents are always suspected of corruption. Getting an immigrant's cooperation when he thinks you're about to evict him from the country is not particularly easy. Counting noses is one thing; knowing whether or not the nose belongs to a citizen, legal immigrant, or illegal alien is another. The census has no real direct method of doing this; they are obliged to make an estimate of this number section by section. Hence the "guidance."

We don't have a census in the church. But we do have something which is used to determine whether or not someone is a Christian: public communion. When a person takes communion, he is proclaiming that he is indeed a follower of Jesus Christ. Of course, anyone can take communion. But the apostle Paul assures us that those who take it falsely — whether because they are not really Christians or whether they are Christians who are not practicing— will suffer for it. Paul solemnly warns the church not to take communion if you are not a practicing follower of Christ.

So when you take communion this morning consider your sins, and repent of them. Come to him with a clean heart. He knows you are a sinner, but repentant sinners are always welcome at the table of the Lord. It was for such sinners that he died. And that is what we remember; his death.

Silence

March 20

Lately it has become fashionable for the Lord's Supper to be set to music, so to speak. The band must play, the speaker must speak. At all costs the Christian must not be left alone with his thoughts. Thinking is dangerous.

Those of an older generation, however, will remember silence at Communion. In more formal times it seemed fitting to do so. Perhaps we can see what might be behind that old fashioned procedure. Just what are the uses of silence?

Disciplining the immature. Kindergarten teachers will recognize the technique. If little children are hushed into silence first they are more amenable to listening to discipline. A kindergarten teacher should always maintain a cool self-control – which is not particularly easy. "Shushing" the children makes it easier at times. God does much the same thing. Though it is fashionable to preach the Word at high decibels, most Christians know the still, small voice of the mind as their instructor, too.

Preparing to hear. You've heard it at sporting events, business meetings and many other places. Someone stands up and yells, "OK everybody, be quiet, Mr. Bigshot has something to tell us." It's hard to make yourself understood, let alone persuade, when the audience is whispering in private conversation. The preachers will tell you: they'd much rather have you listen to a poor sermon in silence than sit there and critique a good sermon aloud. Silence prepares you to hear instruction.

Showing respect. In Great Britain, every year on November 11th (Armistice Day) at 11:00 AM the nation observes a two minute silence. This is to show respect to those who died in Britain's wars. The original reason for this was to respect those who died in World War I, which was a deadly experience. Among British men of all ages, one in sixteen died in that war – a horrific sacrifice by the nation. You can see something of the same effect when someone says, "Let us pray…"

Put away the clamor of life this morning, then, and come to the Lord's table in silence. If you are new to Christ, come in silence so that you might accept the discipline of joy in new life. Come prepared to hear whatever the Lord might have to say to you, however he might say it. Come in silent respect, knowing that it was his sacrifice of his sinless life that has purchased eternal life for you.

Sharing a Meal

March 27

The young lady's name was Caroline. Her mother tells the story of their visit to her grandparents' church. Caroline was evidently in her mid teens, a time when being socially accepted is extremely important. She was not looking forward to going to church, because she didn't know anyone there. But by God's good grace when she arrived there was someone there who took her under her wing. She sat with her, made sure she was welcome and ultimately wound up sharing a meal with Caroline and her family. It's a funny thing about sharing a meal; it cements personal relationships in a very friendly way. It's hard to be shy and ask someone to pass the salt at the same time.

Did you ever think of communion as sharing a meal? We often use the phrase, "share communion" in inviting others to come to the table of the Lord. Have you considered just with whom we are sharing?

- Of course, we are sharing communion with those around us, our fellow members of the church.
- We are also sharing communion with all the other Christians around the world — for we are part of the church universal.
- Perhaps you hadn't thought of this, but we are also sharing this meal with all Christians of all time. Remember, time is in the hands of God just as space is.

See the wisdom of our Lord in making his central ritual out of a shared meal! Why did he do that? First, so that you might feel welcome in this church. We need to feel that sense of community that exists in the word communion. When you partake of communion, you are one of us.

Communion is more than that: it is designed so that you might know the power of God's mercy. We are to examine ourselves, and seek our Lord's forgiveness for our sins. His communion is a visible way of knowing that we have this, for it commemorates his sacrifice on the cross — by which our sins are forgiven.

Finally, communion makes you one with the church universal — all Christians in all places of all times. This church has never gathered with all its members. But at the return of our Lord we will meet them all. In the meantime, we do this in remembrance of Christ.

That's communion: a shared meal which welcomes the Christian in a time of fellowship with his Lord Jesus Christ.

Peregrine

April 3

Many of us have seen the Peregrine falcon in-flight. We are told that it is the fastest creature on God's earth, achieving a speed of over 200 mi./h in a dive. It is also the most widespread of aerial predators; the only major landmass which doesn't have Peregrine falcons is New Zealand.

But did you know that the word Peregrine itself has a corresponding word in the English language? Peregrine is Latin; the corresponding English word is Pilgrim. As you should know, every Christian is a Pilgrim. How so? The original word Peregrine means "one from abroad." In other words it means one who is a traveler through the land, not a native or resident of the land. The Christian understands this clearly, for this world is not our home. Indeed the Scripture tells us that friendship with this world is enmity towards God. We are "just passing through."

Our real home is in the kingdom of God. We are the children of God, and therefore belong in his kingdom. On this mortal world, that kingdom is the church. But the day is coming when the kingdom will be established both in heaven and on earth.

Communion is the sign that a person is in the kingdom of God. By taking communion, you recall the price that was paid to establish the kingdom of God. That price, the death on the cross, was paid once and for all by our Lord and Savior. When you accept that, and partake of communion you are proclaiming your pilgrimage here on Earth. But you also proclaim your belief that Christ will someday return to judge the living and the dead. His return will be in triumph, and he will welcome the good and faithful servants who have been the mainstays of the kingdom since he left.

There is the test: good and faithful servant. When you take communion, you are reminded of what you should be — the good and faithful servant. Examine yourself then, repent of your sins, asking his mercy. Then take his communion just as you would if the world knew always that you were a child of God.

War Memorial

April 10

One of the many pleasures of being a grandparent is taking her grandchildren to the park. The parks in our area often contain swings, playgrounds, fields to run on, and many other opportunities for children to play. In some of these parks you will find a series of paths; you can tell from the construction that they were built during the 1930s in that particular style that says, "Great Depression". Often enough, the paths will take you entirely around the park. It's fun to take your grandchildren to explore these paths.

If you do, it's likely enough that you will encounter — in a rather out-of-the-way spot — a war Memorial. There seems to be a certain style to these things:

- They point out the sacrifices of those who died in the war, whichever war that might be. Often enough, there will be a cannon dragged out of who knows what armory rusting in the sun.
- The design of the Memorial is intended to produce contemplation. You are supposed to remember those who died; you are supposed to remember what they sacrificed for. Perhaps, even, you are to contemplate whether or not the current war is worth the sacrifice.
- The Memorial is designed to last — usually, there is a plaque of bronze listing the names of those who fell. It's usually mounted on a stone monument. Those who built it want you to remember.

Communion is a Memorial too. It has much the same characteristics as the war Memorial in the park:

- It points out the sacrifice that Christ made on the cross, so that you might have salvation from sin. In the elements of communion we see that sacrifice; the bread, his body and the fruit of the vine, his blood.
- It is designed to cause contemplation. We are told to examine ourselves and repent. We are also to contemplate his sacrifice, and the great love it shows to us.
- By his command, we are to do this until he comes again — a lasting memorial until the end of time.

If you go to the park it is just possible you may see a veteran at that Memorial. It's usually a very quiet scene; you may detect tears in his eyes. Some of the names on the bronze are his friends; indeed, they might even be those who died beside him. Don't look around at your neighbors; some of them have tears in their eyes this morning. They are examining themselves, repenting – and remembering.

Roadside

April 17

Should you ever be inclined to visit the town of Boron, California, it is likely that you will be traveling on state Route 58. Interestingly, this is one of very few highways which are labeled as, "Blue Star Memorial Highway." It is also a highly which contains one of the greatest number of informal, unauthorized roadside memorials.

For reasons known only to the designers of this road, at one point on the way to Boron the road, which has been running along the south side of a set of railroad tracks, crosses over to the north side. It is light, smooth jog. It comes after several miles of laser straight roadway on either side. It is likely the most deadly railroad crossing in the world. No sign announces this; but it's easy to tell from the number of roadside crosses on either side of the road. The state of California frowns upon the practice and regularly collects these and removes them. But the accidents keep happening, and the crosses keep arriving. They are usually adorned with fresh flowers in the name of someone — of someone his mother loved.

These crosses are evidence of the human instinct — we want something tangible to remember our loved ones.

- We want to remember those we love. It is love that is the driving force of the memory.
- We want to honor those we love; we want to say to the world this was a good person.
- We want to grieve over their deaths, and have it be seen by the world.

Communion is a similar sort of tangible memory. It is not sufficient to the human being that memory should be in the mind alone; we need something to touch and feel.

- We remember the one that we love, who first loved us. Love is the driving force of communion.
- We honor him, and we honor the sacrifice he made for us.
- We grieve over his death, for it is our sinfulness that made it necessary. He went to the cross because of us.

The roadside crosses are made of wood and flowers; communion seems to be but bread and wine. But in both instances we know: there's a difference between what a thing is made of, and what it is. In the bread and wine receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We are travelers, just passing through this world – and along the side of the road of life there is this memorial to the one who first loved us.

Solitude

April 24

There is a trend in contemporary thought that holds that religion, and in particular Christianity, is "what a man does with his solitude." The idea is that the ideal Christian should be someone who is completely indistinguishable from the rest of the population; this Christianity applies only when he is alone.

From the earliest days of the church we can see that this is false.

- From the founding of the church at Pentecost, we have been one body. The church has always been defined as the body of Christ; an organized collection of saints.
- Not only is this body organized, it is public. The world around the church was quite aware of its existence — and for the first 300 years or so attempted to stamp it out as vigorously as possible.
- One key characteristic of this body is that it is made with the decision: you are either in the church or out, you are either a Christian or you are not.

Communion reflects this. We see the same characteristics in the Lord's Supper that we do in the church as a whole.

- We take Communion together. It is not something that we go into a dark room and take by ourselves. There is no sense to solitary Communion.
- We take Communion publicly. Anyone who walked into the building would see what was going on. Any visitor to the church would know that this was happening.
- Communion is a sign that we are in the church; we are not on the fence.

We need to examine ourselves in this. Before you partake of Communion today, ask yourselves some questions:

- Does your lifestyle identify you as a Christian? Can the rest of the world see from the way you act that you are indeed a member of the church?
- Do your words show that you are a Christian? Is your speech seasoned with salt, or is it just like the rest of the world's?

In short, does the world know that you are “in?” And do you?

The Day Before the Apocalypse

May 1

You do not have to be in the church very long to know that the return of Christ is a topic of great interest. Most of us don't have a particular opinion of this, but those who do have no hesitation about enlightening the rest of us. In this we may see certain characteristics:

- Every one of them is absolutely certain they have it exactly right.
- They don't agree with each other.
- If you wait long enough, the dates they are so sure of often become past tense.

Those of us who are not real enthusiasts for one particular theory or other admit that we really don't know what the last day before the Apocalypse will look like. Indeed, our Lord tells us that it will be like in the last days of Noah. People went about their business, people got married, and people did the things that people always do. So perhaps the last day before the Apocalypse will look just like any other day. But who can say for sure?

But there will be a last day. That being the case, there will be a last communion as well. We should therefore consider the nature of communion:

- We celebrate the central event of human history. The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ outshine all other events.
- It's not a military event, nor a political one. It's not an economic movement — but it is eternal. That's why it's central; everything else is temporary.
- We do this "until He comes again." He will come again; therefore there will be a last communion.

What will that last communion be like? It will probably seem like all the other communions we've ever taken. We are told that we will not know when he comes, so we won't know which one is the last one. Therefore, we should take every communion as if it were the last one ever. How do we do that?

- May I suggest that we begin with reverence? It is easy to fall into the habit of getting through communion as fast as possible. But consider that you are told that this is the body and blood of Christ; is that a reason to hurry?
- Take this communion with remembrance as well. It is to remind you of what Christ did on the Cross. Consider his wounds; he took them for you.
- Take this communion with hope. For those who believe, the last communion is not a terror but a joy. For we celebrate until he comes again; we celebrate in the hope of his return.

Hollow Man

May 8

Have you ever noticed that the military likes to recruit using slogans which ask if you have what it takes? American business is much the same way. They're always looking for people who have what it takes to become a high-ranking executive, a dynamic manager and leader of people. Most major corporations have programs which specifically look for such individuals. Have you ever seriously looked at one of these people? It's a disturbing life:

- Such a man is always "on." He is an actor, constantly on stage.
- In the saddest sense, he is a "company man." The company owns him.
- The longer he is such a man, the more he becomes what we call an "empty suit." He is hollow.

How does a man get that way? It's not something that happens instantly. But it is something that happens from the inside out. To rise up the corporate ladder, he accepts the values and ethics of his corporation. The Christian knows what those are. Those values hold things like money is the most important thing; power is extremely important; and prestige is more important than life itself. It's like a diet. If you want to lose weight, you have to change what you eat. If you want to become the corporate man, you have to change what you eat — spiritually.

Perhaps that is why Christ, introducing us to the Lord's Supper, said that this is his body, this is his blood. Various Christian denominations dispute what this means in the physical sense, and dispute it vigorously. But there is little difference in the views of what it means spiritually. Spiritually, you take in Christ. That may seem hard to understand; but let's look at it in the light of one of the other things he said: "I am the way, the truth and the life."

- He is the way. To accept this means that you follow him and his teachings, studying his words and making them your own. It means you put them into practice.
- He is the truth. In our day, when truth seems to have become as firm as gelatin, he is still the rock. What he tells us is true, and we should live by it.
- He is the life. Without him there is no living, no real living. Ultimately, at his return, we find that there are those who live with him and those who experience the second death.

So it comes down to this: which kind of man do you want to be? Do you want to be the man who is hollowed out by the world, or the man who is enriched from within by the living Christ? You proclaim an answer to that every time you take communion; does that answer reflect the real you?

Fellowship

May 15

2Co 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. (King James Version)

The year 2011 marks the 400th anniversary of the King James version of the Bible. It is considered a landmark of the English language. Sometimes it is instructive to look back to this old edition and see how the early scholars translated various passages. In the modern translations the verse above speaks of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, where the King James speaks of the communion of the Holy Ghost. It's still a valid translation; the original meaning of communion, from the Latin, is to "share in common." That's a pretty good translation of the word which is now translated fellowship.

So we might ask: just what we share in common? Paul gives us three things here:

- The first is grace — the unmerited favor of God Almighty. We are the recipients of mighty blessings. It is the grace of Christ, shown at the cross, which helps bind us together.
- The love of God is next. What greater love could he show us then to send his own son to the cross? So you see we are both blessed and loved.
- All this is done in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit — the sharing in common of the things of the Spirit.

Communion is a symbolic representation of such sharing — it is a shared meal. Have you ever considered how hard it is to stay mad at someone while asking them to pass the salt? It is no accident that communion is a meal; for it is over dinner that many disputes are resolved. Sharing a meal, in most human cultures, calms the feelings of anger and betrayal that we so often have. In a similar vein, it's very difficult to go to dinner with someone when you have an unresolved issue with them.

So I ask you: is there someone here today with whom you are not in real fellowship? Perhaps there is someone with whom you have anger; someone that you have not been able to forgive. Please remember: your heavenly father forgives you as you forgive others. So if that applies to you today, let me encourage you to forgive your brother or sister from the heart before you take communion. Then, as soon as you can, convey that forgiveness to that person. Be imitators of Christ; forgive.

Tear Tracks

May 22

Those of you of a certain age will remember these lyrics:

> So take a good look at my face
>
> You know my smile looks out of place
>
> If you look closer it's easy to trace
>
> The tracks of my tears

Is that you? Are you the one that came in today with a smile on your face, hoping that no one noticed the tear tracks? The pains that cause this are many and varied; sometimes it's your children, sometimes it your parents, sometimes it's you. But we can point out one particular thing: all of the troubles of this world have a root cause — sin. Ultimately our troubles are traced back to the fact that we are sinners, and we don't have the power to do anything about it.

Sin! As one all preacher put it, when he said he was speaking about sin, "I'm against it." That speaks for most of us. We are against sin, but we continue to commit sin. We find that in dealing with the root problem of the world there are many people to tell us what we can do, lots of self-help books, loads of well-meaning advice — and nothing really works. So what can we do about it?

If you want the right answers, you must ask the right questions. The question is not what we can do about it, but what God has done about it. God's method is fairly simple:

- Sin comes with the penalty. Christ paid the penalty on the cross, for us.
- Christ tells us that he will return someday. When he does, the penalty having been paid, he will remake heaven and earth.

When he returns, he tells us that he will wipe away every tear from every eye. No more will our faces have the tracks of our tears. Until that day comes, he commands us to remember what he has done about sin, what he has done in our place. So as you take communion today, remember he has solved the problem of sin and is coming again to put his new heaven and new Earth in place. Just remember the price he paid to do this.

The Splendor of God

May 29

The author of the apocryphal Prayer of Manasseh acknowledges God this way:

...for your glorious splendor cannot be borne,
and the wrath of your threat to sinners is unendurable;
yet immeasurable and unsearchable
is your promised mercy,
for you are the Lord Most High,
of great compassion, long-suffering, and very merciful,
and you relent at human suffering.

I hope you see the point. It is that God is merciful beyond all measure and reason – despite the fact that He is high above us in glory and splendor, and his righteous wrath is unendurable. It is one thing to be merciful when you are weak; it is entirely another to be merciful when you are mighty.

May I submit to you that it is a fine test of the greatness of a man: what do you do when you triumph? Are you a revengeful, or merciful? A fine example of this is General Douglas MacArthur. When he took over Japan, at the end of World War II, many of his staff encouraged him to treat the Japanese as they had treated American prisoners of war. That treatment was gruesome and horrible. But MacArthur vigorously rejected the idea. In the American tradition of "malice towards none and charity towards all" he treated the Japanese with dignity and respect. No one was punished except through proper judicial procedure. The Japanese people as a whole found McArthur a benign monarch. The results of this procedure may be seen in the friendship of the Japanese towards the Americans to this day.

It is part of the glorious splendor of God that he is merciful to us. Indeed, just as his power is above and beyond all others, so is his mercy. Can there be any greater mercy than sending your son to die on the cross for the sins of those who rightly deserve death? That is what he did for us.

He asks that you remember this. Well we should; it is the most important fact in human history. So as you take this cup and eat this bread, remember: the splendor of the Almighty is displayed before you in the simplest of ways.

The Physical Side

June 5

One of the earliest heresies of the church was something called the Gnostic heresy. Its followers believed that all things made of matter were necessarily evil; things that were spiritual were necessarily good. The attitude stems from Greek philosophy, and does not concern us in the present day. But it certainly was a concern in the early days of the church; it is not too much to assume that Christ took care to see that this heresy would be defeated.

One way in which he did that was to give us a material, physical reminder of his sacrifice. Think about it: he could've just given us words to recite. He did that with the Lord's prayer. But for communion, he gave us the simplest of symbols: bread and wine. He wanted us to have something tangible, something we could hold in our hands.

Why is this important? The most important ritual in Christianity involves simple material things. How then can we deny that Jesus had a body just like ours? When he walked with them he left footprints; he had a shoe size. From that we may safely conclude that he suffered in the flesh — the same kind of pain and suffering that you and I go through. Even more important, he rose from the dead with a physical body. He ate and drank with the disciples; he told Thomas to put his hands into the wounds in his physical body. So we may have confidence when he tells us that he will return and we shall rise from the grave in a physical body. No one knows what that body is like, except Christ. But it is safe to trust him when he tells us we will be coming home.

All this was made possible at the cross. Without that sacrifice, there is no resurrection. His resurrection is our guarantee of our resurrection. Therefore, as you take of this communion, remember these things:

- Remember who it was who went to the cross for you — and give him your love for it.
- Remember the great love of the father which drove him to it, and know that you are his child.
- Remember that he is coming again, to judge the living and the dead — and that means you, and me. Therefore, examine your self and partake in a worthy manner.

Gym Clothes

June 12

Many Americans belong to a sports club — a place to lift weights, run on the treadmill and hope that the image in the mirror isn't really you. Such an establishment is one of the last few places in America with a dress code. You will see signs indicating that proper attire is required — usually proper means something like gym shorts and a colorful T-shirt. You can go to most restaurants wearing whatever you have, but you have to dress up to become hot and sweaty.

Perhaps you hadn't thought of it this way, but communion has its own dress code. It's just that it's not regarding clothing. The dress code concerns itself with your attitudes as you partake of the Lord's Supper. The first such item concerns equality — to be on equal terms with one another. The early church had quite a problem with this in Corinth. It seems those who are rich came early, ate most of the food, drank most of the wine, leaving nothing for the poor people who came last in line. That lack of concern for others was a great problem. As you can see, communion in those days was a large meal. Gradually the church solved this problem by making communion a formal ritual. But the lesson still stands; we need to approach the Lord's Supper with the sense that there is no one favored nor diminished in standing before the Lord. We come as equals to the foot of the cross.

Our next item is thanksgiving. Communion reminds us of what we must be most grateful for — the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. Indeed, it may seem strange to you but we proclaim the Lord's death in communion, not his resurrection. Why? It is because his death makes all else possible. So it is that we should approach communion with thanks in our heart for the tremendous sacrifice he made for each of us. Examine yourself; do the words of your mind express the gratitude which is proper for a memorial of the sacrifice of Christ?

Finally there is self-examination. May I suggest to you that the first place to start is with yourself; look on the inside for idol worship. Is there something which you hold to be higher than Christ? Is there something which competes with him for your time, your treasure, and your thoughts? If you proclaim his Lordship, should you not make it clear by your actions that you need it?

Self-examination extends to others too. Is there someone in your life who is unforgiven? Would you come before the King of Kings harboring bitter hatred in your heart? Rather, as the Scripture teaches us, we should forgive and seek restoration with such a person. Christ himself saw that reconciliation between God and man; surely we can seek reconciliation between man and man. Examine yourself, seek out the hatred within you and doom it to destruction.

Communion — proper attire is required.

One of Us

June 19

1 Corinthians 10:16 KJV (16) The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

The word translated "communion" in this passage is a well-known Greek word which is more commonly translated as fellowship. It is the Greek word koinonia. The apostle John, in his first letter, proclaims this fellowship to be with all who hear and believe. He argues that he has proclaimed to the reader the ultimate truth that he has seen and heard. He argues that he did this so that the reader may have fellowship with "us."

Just who do we have fellowship with?

- Fairly obviously, we have fellowship with everyone else in this room. Communion is what defines the fellowship of the local church.
- We also have fellowship with all living Christians. The exact ritual of communion varies greatly over the various denominations, but the cup and the loaf are always there.
- We are also in communion with all the Saints of all the times, that great cloud of witnesses.

Perhaps you had not thought of it that way. Sometimes the local church gets tied up and just who is eligible to take communion, or what is the right form of communion ritual, or how often should we serve communion — well, you get the idea. This is a very sad thing, for in the night in which our Lord instituted the Lord's Supper he prayed that we might all be one.

So I must ask you today: is there someone in this very room with whom you cannot have fellowship? As you take and eat the bread and drink the cup you are telling the world that you are in fellowship with that person. God knows the problem, and so it is that we are told not to take communion lightly. So consider well your fellowship, and if there is anyone in the room with whom you must reconcile be sure to do it today.

Pandora’s Box

June 26

Those who were educated in an older generation will be familiar with Greek mythology. This has largely disappeared from our school systems, which is unfortunate. The tales of the ancient Greeks have much to teach us in the matters of right and wrong in the ways of this world.

One such tale is that of Pandora's box. The English language phrase, "opened Pandora's box", is a common place phrase. The story behind it is rather interesting. Pandora, in Greek mythology, was the first human woman — something of a parallel to Eve in Genesis. She was given a box by Zeus and told never to open it. She opened it. Out of that sprang all the evils of the world. That much most people know. But there is one fact that you may not be acquainted with. As Robert Heinlein said, "the last thing to come fluttering out of Pandora's box was hope, without which men die."

The parallel in Christianity is quite clear. In the garden of Eden sin first spring forth with all the resulting evils. The Christian lives in a world full of such evils, but along with faith and love, hope endures. For what does the Christian hope?

- The Christian hopes for the return of Jesus Christ.
- At that return, the Christian hopes for the resurrection of the dead.
- Following that return the Christian hopes for eternal life.

All these things are promised by Christ — and all these things are verified by the cross and Christ's resurrection from the grave. The matter is certain; the timing is not.

Hope: that without which men die — eternally. The communion we celebrate is the marker of that hope. Those who live in that hope shall live eternally; all others shall die. Therefore, as you partake in communion today, partake in hope. The Lord has promised to his return, and his word is unbreakable. We do not know when he will return, but until he comes we are to remember the sacrifice which made our hope certain — the cross.

Gold

July 3

One of the most striking things about the Temple of Solomon is the amount of gold that was used to construct it. Depending upon which system of weights and measures you trust, the amount of gold could have been several hundred tons. Gold was everywhere in the Temple; bronze was used only because of its structural strength, like stone and wood. The wood was always overlaid with gold; the entire Temple was lined with gold.

The Temple was designed to stress the great distance between man and God. There were a series of courtyards, each more restrictive than the last until you reach the Holy of Holies, which could be entered only by the High Priest and only once a year. But the very first restriction was this: only the Jews could enter into the second court. The net effect was a portrayal of God as being mysterious, distant, and almost unapproachable.

May I ask you to compare that with communion today? Think, for a moment, about the gold. Some churches use communion trays that are colored in a gold tone, but picking up with gold object that size would not be something that was easy. Most such trays are made of aluminum or of wood. The material in your communion trays is seldom a point of pride and honor. More than that, communion is open to all. Some denominations restrict communion to those who are members of the congregation; others open to all believers. The sense that only one person could possibly talk to God is gone. And is God mysterious? Hardly: Christ spoke in parables, simple stories, so that he might be clearly understood.

What has caused this change? The simple answer is that God has come in the flesh; he is no longer distant. This was symbolized at the crucifixion by the fact that the veil concealing the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom. God no longer hides behind that veil, but seeks one and all asking that they come to him.

In commanding communion to be kept, Christ has given us a simple ritual, which may be performed with common and simple things. He did not tell us to use gold trays; nor did he tell us the bread had to be baked at a bakery in Jerusalem. He used ordinary things because he is the God of ordinary things; indeed, all things. His style is one that says, "I welcome all, even the poorest of the poor." He welcomes all, even the most sinful. So consider well today as you take communion just how your Lord used the simple things to remind you of his sacrifice. His style is one that welcomes all, rich or poor, Saint or sinner.

Test of Goodness

July 10

It's really very difficult to tell: after all during communion most of us pray. There is likely to be soft, spiritual music playing. It is therefore very easy to get by communion without the slightest trace of commitment. It is also very easy to be mistaken about whether your neighbor is doing that.

We are told to examine ourselves. We are not to examine the person next to us, but we are to examine ourselves closely. Towards that end let me ask you three questions:

- Does this ritual act come from true faith? It is not to be done because it's the fashion, or we've always done it this way. Unless this act springs from true faith in your heart, you're doing it wrong. It is not just a little ceremonial dancing he'd like you to go through; rather it is a symbol of your commitment to him in true faith.
- Do you do this in obedience to God's command? You have read the Scriptures; do you then follow them? Do you remember our Lord sacrifice on the cross; do you remember that the cup is symbolic of his blood; do you remember that the bread is symbolic of his body?
- Do you do this to the glory of God? If someone could see your true heart right now, would they see someone who is thinking not about his own image but about God's glory? Is your purpose in showing this to others to promote your own holiness, or is it to magnify and praise your God?

These tests are useful outside of communion also. If you think your Christian life is beyond perfecting, try this set of questions. The Father is seeking those who worship him in spirit and in truth. Come to him in true faith, come to him in obedience and give him glory. You will be surprised what will happen with you. For the Lord God is a rewarder of those who seek him in truth; he rewards those who are obedient to him and give him glory. Consider your ways, and be sure that you take this communion in full heart.

Practice Like You Play

July 17

Would you like to learn all about men? The easy way is quite simple: manage a Little League team. The boys on the team are just miniatures of the man you will encounter later. Their hearts, wants and needs are very similar to those of grown men, just more poorly disguised.

I bring this to your attention to remind you of what your Little League coach said: "you play like you practice, you practice like you play." In the communion we are about to receive, some of you will be practicing. You won't be serious about it, because you think there's no need. But consider well what that really means:

- You sin against the body of Christ. That means you offend the unity of the church, for the body of Christ is the church. Your actions would then tend to split the church.
- You sin against the blood of Christ. That means that you take lightly the blood that he shared at Calvary.

You may think that if something important came up, you could always do it right. Play like you practice, practice like you play.

How do you do this? Simply put, we are to judge ourselves before taking communion. Judgment is going to happen; the easiest way for it to happen is for us to judge ourselves. In that way we examine our own sins, and we repent of them. But do not neglect another form of examination; the sins of others against you. It is quite clear from the Scripture that your being forgiven depends completely on your willingness to forgive others. So as you examine yourself, think of those who have offended against you – and bring your forgiveness to the Lord.

If you want to do it the hard way, do nothing. The Lord will then judge you. He will take such steps as are necessary to get your attention and correct your behavior. This is much less pleasant than examining yourself. It's also an indication that you do not take communion seriously, or are just lazy. But when he disciplines you, be sure to listen carefully. He is doing this for your own good, and you should accept it.

For if you do not accept his discipline, tragedy awaits. Just going to church each week doesn't make you a real Christian. You may find yourself condemned with those who do not believe and defy the Lord. Defy the Lord? Yes, ignoring his judgment is defying the Lord. So I ask you: examine yourself, in all seriousness, and seek forgiveness and forgiving.

Identification

July 24

Have you ever rummaged through your desk drawer, looking for something or other, and found an old ID card? It can be a humorous experience. You look at that picture, and then you realize that's what you look like way back when. If you're old enough, there is one thing which is certain: you could never use that ID again.

But you are still you, right? You're still the same person that's in that ID card, or so you think. We tend to see ourselves as unchanging; that's normal — we live with ourselves every day and we see only the daily changes. The daily changes are so small. So from one decade to the next, we don't think of ourselves as having changed. But you have to ask: what were you doing with that hairstyle?

You have changed, of course. For most of us that means we have grown. There is an obvious sense to that; most of us have a few more pounds now than we did when that picture was taken. But we might also take into account some other things which changed.

- One thing is our experience. This isn't always some great and dramatic change — in fact, it's usually the slow accretion of experience that makes the changes in us. We become more capable.
- If we follow those things a Christian should seek, we should also gain in wisdom. This might not be obvious until you think back to some of the foolish things you did when you were younger. We laugh about such things – but we also learn from them.

It happens, however, that some of us don't bring those changes with us to the Lord's table. We approach communion just like we always have; we have the same little prayer that we recite in our heads. We sit in the same pew; we use the same hand to reach for the tray. It's like a little ritual. We do this without thinking. Let me encourage you this morning to think.

You have grown; you have new experiences and more wisdom. Bring that wisdom and such experience to the Lord's table with you. Hold it up to his light; bring him the "you" that exists now, not the one he knew 25 years ago.

May be the real "you" that meets the real Christ.

City Council

July 31

The work of a city council, especially in a city the size of Los Angeles, should be concerned with things which are important, perhaps controversial and partisan, and often enough expensive. But this does not apply to all the things the Los Angeles City Council does. One of its more common duties is to issue a variety of proclamations. This function may have hit its low point when the Council issued a proclamation commending the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo. As you might guess, they were a musical group — of sorts. What possessed the city Council to commend them I do not know; but the proclamation itself was done in the usual elaborate ornamental style. From all appearances you would think that this was something of great importance.

The Christian may not know it but there is an element of proclamation in the Lord's Supper as well. The very existence of this ritual proclaims at least three important things:

- It proclaims the perfect sacrifice of Christ. By its existence it says that the death of Christ was unique.
- It proclaims our unworthiness. To say that his sacrifice is perfect is to say that everyone else is imperfect.
- It proclaims the depth of the love that God has for his children.

If we proclaim his death, we must also proclaim the resurrection. It is the central miracle of Christianity; without it, the faith makes no sense. But with the resurrection we also proclaim that Christ has power over the grave — something that no one else has. We can partake of that power because of the grace of God; we therefore proclaim redemption by grace.

If we proclaim his death and resurrection, then we must also proclaim the sure and certain hope of his return. Christ made it clear: death, burial, resurrection and then his ascension — to be followed by his return. When? None of us knows. But we do know some things about his return:

- First, we know that he will bring with him the saints who have passed on before us. They will return in bodily form, as he has taught us. That alone would make this a wonderful and glorious time.
- He returns to judge the living and the dead; not just punishment, but also for reward.
- In some way not known to us yet, he will create a new heaven and a new Earth. The fundamental order of nature is somehow to be changed.

The city Council's proclamation was written on parchment paper, in a flowing calligraphic script, with gold accents and seal. Christ's proclamation is written in the ceremony of communion and in the conduct of the Christian. Therefore, when you partake, partake in a worthy manner. Remember what it is you are telling the world when you do this: you are proclaiming his death and all that that implies.

Statistics

August 7

The exact mathematics is somewhat in doubt, but the conclusion is not: statistically speaking, some of the crowd gathered around the cross of Christ on Good Friday were to become members of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem a few weeks later. We know this happened because Peter, in preaching his first sermon, tells the crowd, "you crucified…"

We hear it often, so perhaps it loses its astonishing character, but Christ forgave those who crucified him. The first martyr, Stephen, did likewise. And note, please, how this was done. It was not in the form of a command, or of a benevolent permission to be forgiven — it was a begging in humility to God the Father. It's not just that Christ forgave; it's that he begged the Almighty to do likewise.

Have you considered just what love Christ has for the church? It is not just in the sacrifice he made for our sins. That alone would be sufficient proof of love beyond any human nature. It is the perfection of his love that he also asked that those who crucified him be forgiven. Many of us, if we had to be crucified, would take it in a "macho" manner. We would threaten, and if we knew that seven weeks later the church would be born how many of us could resist the temptation to say to the crowd, "you'll be sorry?" By his great love for the church, Christ did no such thing. We know that that great love continues today, for as Paul asked the Romans, "what shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

Communion is the memorial of that great love. Married men will tell you: you should tell your wife that you love her, and you should do so often. Just because you told her once and you haven't changed your mind since doesn't mean that she has no need to hear of it. It is a characteristic of the human nature: we need to be reminded that we are loved. This ceremony reminds us of the great love of Christ, shown at the cross, and living still.

In a very real sense we are to proclaim our love in this ceremony. We remember his sacrifice; we remember his great love for us and in so doing we tell the world that we love our Lord, our Savior.

Sin After Baptism

August 14

1 John 1:7 NIV But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

The problem is a fairly common one: a new Christian, recently baptized, finds himself with the same sins that he had before he became a Christian. It's a great disappointment; but it's a very common one too. This passage, by John the Apostle, gives us the answer to the problem.

First, we are to walk in the light. There is one simple meaning to this, and many complex ones. The simple one is all we really need: act as if God were watching your every move — because he is. Of course, the complaint comes back from that, "how can I possibly do that?" The answer is given here quite simply; we are to walk in the light as he (Christ) is in the light. In other words we are to make Jesus Christ the model, the exemplar, of our conduct. The imitation of Christ has been the secret of Saints for 2000 years.

Then too we are to have fellowship. Notice the fellowship specified is with one another; there is no such thing has solo Christianity. We are meant to be the church, the body of Christ. So if a brother is troubled by his sins, should he not call upon the church for assistance? If you were physically injured you would not hesitate to ask one of your fellow Christians to call 911. How much more, then, should you be willing to ask for help with your sins? If you are new Christian this can be an enormous source of comfort and assistance. From this we may conclude that the church is designed to be in fellowship, helping each other along the way.

Of course, fellowship is not what cleanses us of sin. Only the blood of Christ can do that. This communion meditation is a memorial of that. It's not just the question of the blood itself; it's the blood of Christ. Jesus is the son of God, and this makes his blood effective for us. None other will do.

It's hard to see this in the English, but the word translated "purifies" in this passage is in what is called a continuous tense. That means that it continually purifies us, not just once. It is not a one time thing; it is lifelong.

To lay one other problem to rest, note that it cleanses us from "all" sin. This is a social distinction we often make; God never does so.

So as you take communion today, remember: God has provided for your sins, for the rest of your life. This communion is a memorial to the sacrifice which makes this possible.

Homework

August 21

It happens to even the best of students: you get to class and you realize you don't have your homework.

Most of us at that point begin to think of some way to convince the teacher that we have a legitimate excuse. You need something like, "I left it in a hymnal in the choir loft to mark my solo." Or, perhaps you say something like "I made it into a paper airplane, and it got hijacked." The really creative among us might use, "all I had was a right handed pencil and left-handed paper."

Whatever your excuse, the teacher probably saw through it. But it may come as a surprise to you to know that the people who are most anxious when they don't have the homework done are the A students. They tend to have very high expectations of themselves, and missing homework can cause a great deal of stress.

Christians, in a sense, have homework that needs to be done before coming to communion. These things are not trivial:

- Forgiveness probably comes first. Do you come to the Lord's Table and ask forgiveness of him, if you are not willing to forgive someone else?
- Humility is another necessity. Remember that on the night of the Last Supper Christ washed the disciples' feet. Do you come to communion in pride, or in humility?
- At the very least, you should be prepared for communion by confessing your sins. The Lord knows all about them anyway; but he does want you to own up to them.

The more experienced you are as a Christian, the more important these things become. It's just like the A students; you know what you're supposed to do. If you haven't done it, you have reason to be nervous.

By taking communion you proclaim the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross; its effectiveness in cleansing our sins and that he made this sacrifice for you. He asks you to come to communion with self examination; to do your homework, in other words. Communion is a memorial of the most important event ever to happen in the human race. By partaking, you proclaim your acceptance of his salvation. Surely you can come prepared; surely you can do your homework.

Flashlight

August 28

Military veterans will recall that the burden of military life is lightened by various humorous definitions. One such definition comes from the U.S. Navy: a flashlight is a cylindrical object in which one stores dead batteries. The uses of such an object are somewhat limited. It is useful as an object of wrath and naval language; if you happen to be trapped in a capsized battleship it is of some use in tapping out an SOS.

As useful as a flashlight is, the Christian knows that he is to "walk in the light." Most of us will remember what that light is: the word of God. Those of sufficient age will recall the King James version of this, "thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." (Psalm 119:105) We are therefore to study that word so that we may have the light. More than that, however, we are also told that God is light (1st John 1:5). It seems then that walking in the light means that we must know God. How is it that we can know God?

- We know him from our study of the Scriptures.
- We know him when we imitate his son, Jesus Christ.
- We know him from the Holy Spirit within us.
- Often enough, we know him by watching others who know him.

But there is one other way that we know him. It is by symbolic communication. Human beings use symbols to convey the highest and deepest of meaning; for example, many of us are wearing wedding rings. These communicate a depth and breadth of love which often cannot be expressed in words. In communion we meet two of these symbols:

- The first is the bread, which is the symbol of Christ's body. Is there to remind us of the bodily suffering he went through on the cross. It is by his pain that we are given his light.
- The second is the cup, the symbol of Christ's blood. The Red Cross tells us to "give life, give blood." Blood is life itself; it is by Christ's death that we are given salvation.

These two symbols teach us the price of Light in our lives. Consider well: without Christ’s sacrifice, there would be no light in our lives. A working flashlight is important; how much more the Light of Life itself?

Popeye

September 4

Those of us who are of a certain age will remember one Popeye the Sailor. For those of you completely ignorant, Popeye is a cartoon character. He is not seen much today on television, because most of the cartoons were very early on done in black and white. Popeye lived the simple life — of violence. Almost all his cartoons end with the fistfight. Just before the fistfight Popeye would consume an entire can of spinach, much to the dismay of those of us who dislike the substance.

Occasionally Popeye would describe himself this way: "I am what I am, and that's all what I am." It's a rather fatalistic view; it means that nothing can be done about this propensity to punch out other people. In truth, if something was done Popeye would no longer be Popeye.

Paul uses some of the same words to describe himself as a man thoroughly changed:

1Co 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. (NIV)

Paul started out as a thoroughgoing legalist. Completely certain of the righteousness of his opinions, he persecuted the early church. You might think that God would then consider him unforgivable. God did not. On the road to Damascus Paul met his master and everything in his life was changed. We are quite familiar with that change; sometimes we forget that God did this by grace due to his great love.

Grace is caused by the great love God has for his children. It is a gift; the gift is never earned. It is always given. That great love was given to us at the Cross, so that we might remember what God has done for us, Christ implemented the Lord's Supper. It is the way in which the church remembers and thanks God for what he has done.

"You are what you are, and that's all what you are." And what are you? Saved by grace.

Infinitely Stranger

September 11

Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent.

Sherlock Holmes, *A Case of Identity*

It is a common accusation against Christians: we are accused of creating God after our own image. But as Holmes tells us, our minds are not crazy enough to invent the truth. In fact, we know exactly how human beings invent God. Here are some examples:

- There is the merciless God – the furious God who is out to get you for everything you have ever done.
- There is a loving grandfather God — the one who wants to see you having a good time, and certainly wouldn't invent anything like hell. Mister nice guy, that's the loving grandfather God.
- The most common invented God is the cosmic bean counter — the God who counts up your sins and then counts up good deeds. If your good deeds outweigh your sins, you get to go to heaven. So no matter what you've done, just do something good and you'll balance it out.

The test is this: suppose you got to write the story of the universe. You might imagine yourself to be a noble and self-sacrificing God, but can you imagine sacrificing your son? Your only son? I can't either.

So what would you do at the time of the crucifixion? Remember, if you are God you have the power to start all over again. You can just re-create the whole mess and avoid those pesky humans this time around. Indeed, if you are writing the story you have no obligation to create the universe in the first place. Think of all the work, the mess, and then the sacrifice that you would avoid.

Life is indeed infinitely stranger than anything which we could invent. Think of it: the God of the universe, the creator, he who spoke and the worlds began comes down to this little planet to walk among his creation. You might do that; but if you did you would certainly walk among us as a wise, noble sage dispensing advice. After all of your good little advice tidbits were written down, you would get back in your flying saucer and leave.

But God didn't do that. He comes in the flesh and dies in the flesh. It was not a noble death, it was the death of a common criminal — a disgrace. He did that out of his great love for us.

That is what we celebrate at communion. We celebrate the sacrifice, we celebrate his coming, and we celebrate his death as our atonement— until he comes again.

Mulligan

September 18

He is lying in a bed in an assisted living home. The man his lawyer said was "the hardest man I ever saw in court" would be completely alone except for the paid companionship and care of the professionals around him. His family has largely given up on him; his sons no longer speak to him, only his daughter. Occasionally his mind becomes lucid again, and he realizes his situation.

Years ago he used to claim that he was "blessed by divine grace." He was rich; much of that money was made by his merciless business practices. He was smart; he saw business opportunities that other men ignored. He made a lot of money; he saw that as God's sign of approval. He was charitable; he gave away money for college scholarships in abundance. If he had a frustration, it was that his children showed no inclination to be just like him. Their admiration eluded him. He was a man who was owned by his money. They wanted no such master.

He had one great fear in life: the fear that he would lose his mind in dementia, and end his days in a hospital bed with no hope. His great fear has been realized. Sometimes his mind returns; when it does he will try do exactly what he wants. He wants to get out of this place. He wants his mind back; he wants his money back. He still has his arrogance. Then his mind fades and he loses all touch with reality again.

This man is in his 90s. There is virtually no chance that he will be able to start again. Life, unlike golf, has no mulligans. You're not going to get the chance to repeat your life and fix all your mistakes. It is therefore wise to go through life fixing the mistakes as you go along. This is why the Scripture commands you that when you take communion, you are to examine yourself.

It is fitting that you examine yourself in communion. For it is in communion that we are offered the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the symbols of the sacrifice which made the atonement. It is that sacrifice by which we are offered forgiveness. We need to correct our mistakes, to be sure. We also need to ask forgiveness for them.

As the old King James version had it, "it is appointed unto men once to die and then the judgment." Some of us go through life as if we are sure that we will have 30 seconds on our death beds to ask forgiveness for everything we have ever done. Do not be so certain of this; you may have years on your deathbed but no mind left to do the asking. Seek the Lord while he may be found. Follow his instructions; examine yourself.

Requirements

September 25

Micah 6:8 NIV He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

God, it appears, understands how human beings learn. It seems we learn best by example, not by precept. So our Lord did not give us just the Mosaic law to follow, but also gave us the examples of the great men of the Old Testament. The supreme instance of this is at the Cross.

Micah tells us that God has shown us what is good:

- He begins with justice. What many fail to realize is that the Cross is very much an act of justice. Sin must be atoned for; the atonement must be full payment for the sin. That happened at the Cross alone.
- This is also an act of mercy. We do not deserve the forgiveness of our sins; nor can we in any way earn that forgiveness. It must be done as an act of mercy, the grace of God.
- Humility? Consider that our Lord Jesus Christ is eternally God. But he came down from heaven, became like one of us, and took on himself the life of a human being. He who spoke and the worlds began walked the dusty streets of Palestine.

So may I suggest to you that as you prepare for communion this day you meditate upon these things?

- First, consider how great your sins are. Do not attempt to justify yourself, but look at them as God would see them. Recognize his justice and the price paid for it.
- Then consider how great the Father's love is. His one and only son was sent to die for you; can there be a greater love than this?
- Finally, please consider that he did this in the greatest of humility. The Cross is not an act of pride; it is an act of love.

Genius

October 2

By all that our society holds as being key to success, this poor creature should be among the greatest. Consider:

- He's noted for his brains, to the point of genius – and beyond.
- He has one clear objective to accomplish – all his effort goes into it.
- He's willing to take risks; indeed, his physical courage is undeniable as well.
- Ingenuity? His life has been one long parade of ingenuity.
- Persistence is sovereign, we say. He's a model of persistence over many years.

So tell me: just why is it that Wile E. Coyote, Super Genius, still hasn't caught the roadrunner?

Simple: it can't be done.

You see, Wile E. lives in a different universe than we do. If you don't think so, take a course in basic physics some time and go back and look at those cartoons. That universe is not a random place; it has laws, just as our universe has laws. It's just that they are very different laws. Every universe has laws, even those of human invention. They are a necessary part of creating a universe.

Laws of the universe may be physical, or they may also be moral laws. We live in a universe with moral law. (If you don't think so, tell me: do you believe that "what goes around comes around?" That's a moral law.) Breaking those moral laws has consequences. If you don't think you've ever broken that moral law, tell me: have you ever criticized someone for something you've done yourself?

Wile E. Coyote teaches us a valuable lesson here: break those laws, and you have to face the consequences. In our universe, the consequence of sin is death.

But – praise be to God! – our Creator has provided a way to get past that consequence. Christ has paid the penalty of our sins; God's great love is the surpassing moral law of the universe.

We commemorate that payment on the Cross by celebrating Communion. It reminds us of the moral law of God; the penalty for failure and the love that triumphs over it.

Wile E. Coyote possesses boundless self-confidence. The Christian clings to the hope in Christ. Wile E. knows nothing of his creator; the Christian knows the love of the Creator, and the hope that it brings. Remember the sacrifice that gave us that hope as you partake today.

Balloon

October 9

(You may want to begin this meditation by blowing up a balloon.)

Consider the common balloon. Blow one up and ask people, "what is this?" The answers may surprise you.

- Most people will tell you it's a balloon — something made of latex and air. Nothing more.
- Those of us with a biting sense of humor might say it's a picture of today's sermon: hot air under pressure.
- But ask a three year old. The eyes of the child see a magic and wonderful thing; it's big, but light enough for even a little child.

Somehow, in our time, we have failed to make the distinction between what a thing really is and what it's made of. It's easy to see the ingredients for things. The ingredients for communion, for example, are inspected by the Food and Drug Administration. They can tell you how many calories and what vitamins are contained therein. But only our Lord can tell you what communion really is. Think of it this way: the creator and sustainer of the universe has told you, "this is my body." Various groups of Christians interpret this in various ways; all agree that it's not "just bread and wine." It is much deeper than that – but you have to know how to look at it to see that.

As you partake, consider how you see:

- See with the eyes of your mind. See beyond the physical reality to the spiritual truth.
- See with the eyes of faith. We are given this memorial to proclaim the death of Christ; it therefore also proclaims his resurrection.
- See with the eyes of hope. We partake in communion "until he comes again." Christ will return; until then, partake in hope.

Sometimes, appearances can be enlightening.

Looks Like

October 16

Have you ever seen a leaf out of the 1611 King James Bible? It's rather hard to read, as the English language has changed quite a bit (not to mention the art of the printer).[9] But the style is unmistakable. It is the same style used in the Middle Ages by monks copying the Bible. It is highly ornate and the letters are rather fancy. That style was continued by the early publishers for the simple reason that people expected it. They knew what a "real Bible" was supposed to look like that.

The tradition carried over into the words themselves. The spoken word was also "ornate." The expectation was that the Word of God would sound like the word of God. If it started with "hey dude" it wasn't the real thing. We know the Bible should look like; we also know what it should sound like.

Christ, the word of God, meets a similar test. We have expectations of the word of God who became flesh. To put it simply, we expect him to act like God. But because he is also human, we expect him to act like a human as well. So it is that God gave us the miracle of the incarnation; Christ was born of Mary because that's how human beings get started.

The Scripture tells us[10] that he is the image of God. The word used for image is now our word "icon." If you see Jesus, you have seen God. More than that, we are also told that he is the exact representation of God's nature.[11] So we may well ask, what is God's nature?

Volumes could be written about the answer to that question, but we may point out two very prominent things. First God's nature is that of justice and righteousness; second, God's nature is that of love. To be the exact representation of that nature Christ went to the cross – satisfying the justice and righteousness of God with the overpowering display of the love of God. It is the most important event in human history.

We remember important days in history. The Christian world celebrates Christmas; America celebrates the Fourth of July; some of us even still celebrate our birthdays. The most important day in history is celebrated here at communion. In the wine we are reminded of the blood shed by Christ; in the bread we are reminded of his body. There is a certain style in God's memorial; simple and direct. By his body and blood he reminds you of the sacrifice on the cross and the victory over the grave.

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[9] An example may be found at http://www.greatsite.com/ancient-rare-bible-leaves/king-james-1611-picture.html
[10] Colossians 1:15
[11] Hebrews 1:3

Parting

October 23

You have seen it often: the formal goodbye. It seems that human beings need a ceremony in which to say goodbye. It's a form of ritual; symbolic communication, which is the highest form of speech, is necessary. Sometimes it becomes a cliché; think of how many times you've heard the phrase, "getting a gold watch" to mean someone's retirement party. We do things that way.

Christ did the same thing with Passover. He took this last Passover with his disciples and used it to symbolize his departure. He knew that that night he would be betrayed, and the next day would bring his crucifixion. He knew that he was our atonement sacrifice, and therefore took the symbolism of Passover — the sacrificial lamb — and made it his own.

It's also true that human beings, when they part, want to have a tangible memory. We have pictures of those were no longer with us; we also have memorabilia (how many of us have dad's favorite watch, knife, tie tack or who knows what else living in our desk drawer?) Human beings seem to need something physical to remind them of the one who is no longer physically there.

Christ understood that too. He gave us the simple symbols of bread and wine as touch points for our human senses.

Finally, parting hurts most when we know it's a permanent. So, even if we are deluding ourselves, we promise each other "we'll see you again." The human soul rebels against the idea of a permanent parting. If you've ever been to the funeral of someone who was not a Christian you will see this desire displayed. When we know the parting is permanent, a piece of us is lost.

Christ knows that too. At the end of the atonement there is the resurrection. His disciples would see him again. And the Scripture promises to us that Christ will return again — and when he does, he will bring with him all those saints who are temporarily parted from us now. For the Christian, even death is a temporary parting. So as you take the bread and wine, remember this: He shall return.

Taxes

October 30

Some time during the year you will get a very cheerful letter. It describes all the wonderful things your money is going to do. It's not a pitch for a charitable contribution; it's a delightful letter from your county tax assessor.

Oh, it's very convenient. They provide you with a handy form with all the relevant information on it. They even give you an envelope preprinted to avoid it being sent to the wrong address. True, they're too stingy to put a stamp on it. They even include as part of the form something you can file away in your file cabinet. But the bottom line is still the same: this is a reminder of what you owe for your taxes.

Not all reminders come in an envelope. We are explicitly told the communion is a reminder. It's not all cheery like the tax collector's letter; in fact, it's rather somber. It doesn't come with a form to fill out; rather, it comes in the form of ritual. As for records, God keeps them; you needn't bother with it. The bottom line, however, is the same: it's a reminder. It's not a reminder of what you owe, but a reminder of what Christ did for you.

Let's just think about what he did for us:

- First, there is the incarnation. The God of the universe, he who spoke and the worlds began, descended into the form of a baby. He was born in a stable to a couple living in a nation occupied by foreign invaders. He grew up just like we do. He knows what it is to be cold, to have his feet hurt, and most of all, the limits of the human body.
- Next, there is the atonement. Of his own free will he went to the cross to pay the price for your sins and mine. He suffered a horrible death, bled and died, all because of the love he brought to us.
- Finally, there is the resurrection. It is the great guarantee of our hope: someday, at his return, we will rise from the grave.

As you partake today, be reminded of the great sacrifices he made for you.

Memory

November 6

As one comedian put it, "memory is the second thing to go. I've forgotten what the first is."

Memory loss has often been used as fodder for the comedian, but it is a serious thing for those who have it. There are some medications for it; there are also some treatments for it. One of the most common treatments is simply repetition. You create an environment in which the old and familiar are very much present. The idea is that if you see the dog every day, you are much less likely to forget its name. This, perhaps, explains why it is that the older people in the church to object to the younger people's music.

Communion has something of that as well. We repeat it often; at least one church movement offers communion every day. Many offer it every week. When it is offered that frequently, it soon becomes a part of the old and familiar. Those of you who are younger have no doubt suffered from the elderly repeating the same story over and over again. But there is some virtue in this; especially when it's a good story. Communion tells a story too; the greatest story ever told.

And what is that story? Simply this:

- Jesus of Nazareth, born in the stable, is none other than God in the flesh.
- At the end of his life he was crucified by those who opposed him. In so doing, he served as the atonement sacrifice for our sins.
- On the third day he rose from the grave, by the power of the Holy Spirit. That same spirit lives within us as a guarantee of our resurrection as well.
- Lifted into heaven, he will return to judge the living and the dead.

These are things that are well worth remembering. So as you partake today, strengthen your memory by going over those things that he did for you — so that you might live forever.

Euthanasia

November 13

A common debate in ethics these days concerns the matter of euthanasia. Our liberal thinkers are sure that some of us are not worth keeping alive. They base this judgment on a number of things; here's a small sample:

- Some think that mere age itself should qualify you for euthanasia. After all, you've been on this planet for 70 years; you're using up its natural resources, and are taking up space that could be occupied by other people. Just being old is grounds for a death sentence.
- Even more commonly some think that sickness should determine death. This presumes, of course, that the doctors know in advance who's going to make it and who's not. The idea here is that we prevent old people from squandering money on medical care that does very little to lengthen their lives. (You knew the money was going to come into this, didn't you?)
- Most insidious might be this: you are no longer useful. If you can't hold down gainful employment, what good are you?

It should come as no surprise to you that the Christian view is entirely opposed to this. We may take these reasons and answer appropriately:

- Age? Remember when you were a little kid and you sang, "red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight?" Are you ever too old to be precious in his sight?
- Too sick? Do we really have the privilege, morally, to determine the date and time of our own death? The practical difficulty exists here too; just who gets to decide that you are too sick? Your doctor? The man from the insurance agency?
- No longer useful? Useful as what: computer programmer or grandmother?

The root of the problem is our view of human nature. Good liberals see human beings as just a smarter ape. We see the body as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. From that perspective we may raise some objections to euthanasia:

- What of the deathbed conversion experience? Would you deprive a human being of the opportunity to go to heaven because you are in a hurry to have him die?
- Indeed, do we dare to deprive death of its meaning? Is it not also part of the human experience? It is appointed unto man once to die, then the judgment. Death is often a fertile experience in mending relations and bringing forth forgiveness.

The example is clear to the Christian: it is the death of Christ. He did not seek an easy way out; he did not seek to avoid death or to meet it on his own terms. He participated on the terms of a common human being.

As we celebrate communion today we need to remember what our Lord taught us these symbols are to mean. The bread represents his body nailed to the cross; the wine his blood shed for us. Our Lord embraced death to the fullest. He did this so that we might live.

Hadrian's Wall

November 20

Tourists in the northern part of Great Britain may discover the existence of Hadrian's Wall. This is a Roman era fortification begun in A.D. 122. It stretches across the width of Great Britain, and consists of a wall buttressed by fortified towers every mile or so. It served a number of purposes:

- First, it was a fortification. The Roman Empire could not match the number of soldiers in the native tribes to the North. The wall helped compensate for that.
- As was the custom of the time, the fortification would include gateways at which officials would collect import and export taxes and other customs duty as well.
- Perhaps its most important use was this: it provided the definitive marker between civilization and the barbarians. If you lived on the south side, you were civilized. On the north side, nothing but barbarians. At least, that's how the Romans saw it.

The modern equivalents to Hadrian's Wall are still with us. Fortifications are rather out of fashion at the moment, being subject to precision munitions. But we still maintain structures at which we collect customs and process immigration. It is not likely that this will disappear soon.

One thing which is almost certain to endure until the Lord's return, however, we still mark boundaries. We still have the need to separate people into their particular groups.

Communion is just such a marker.

- By it Christian proclaims himself to be a member of the church, a fellow Christian. It says he has crossed the invisible line from sinner to saved.
- By it a Christian also proclaims Jesus Christ. Joining the church is not like joining a country club. The admission requirements are much lower, and the benefits far greater.
- By it the Christian proclaims hope. To take communion is to explicitly proclaim that you have the hope of the resurrection of the dead. You have that hope because Christ has returned from the grave.

Communion is the boundary marker of the church. Think carefully; examine yourself. Your actions may proclaim you to be on the Christian side of the marker; does your life make the same proclamation?

Scraps

November 27

You recall the story: Lazarus sits at the gate of the rich man, longing to be fed even the scraps. He evidently gets nothing. Then both of them die — and it seems their positions are reversed.

It's pretty obvious what we have to say to the rich man. After all, he could've invited Lazarus in and fed him at his banquets. Perhaps he felt that Lazarus just wouldn't fit in. He could have instructed the staff to take scraps and the crumbs out to Lazarus – but then again, Lazarus might be contagious. Having the dogs lick your sores doesn't do anything for personal hygiene. But most likely the rich man simply ignored Lazarus. He looked at Lazarus, and Lazarus wasn't there.

This is called a sin of omission; you refuse or fail to do something you should have done. It comes as a surprise to some Christians that “not doing” can be a sin. But it happens all the time. Sometimes, we just don't want to share our meals with the poor.

Consider, then, the spiritual meal known as communion. We cannot issue an open invitation to communion, as we would do for a banquet, for this meal is for Christians only. It is a meal specific to the community of Christ known as the church. A potent meal; it contains within it the bread of life, Christ himself. It is the meal of those who are saved. So you might well ask, "Just how do I share this meal?"

Let me rephrase the question for you. Do the crumbs of your Christian life speak of your riches in Christ? Can others tell how rich you are in spirit? Does your life speak for you and for Christ?

Let's go beyond that. Do you share this meal by spreading the gospel to all you know? The only way you can share this meal is for that person to become a Christian. And how will he become a Christian if no one speaks to him about it?

Remember, hospitality is a virtue. If this is true for our chicken and dumplings, how much more true is it when the table is not ours but the Lord's?

Warning Lights

December 4

Unless you are a pilot or a ship captain, you probably don't really notice them. They are the warning lights required by law. If you've ever looked at a radio tower at night, you've seen the flashing red lights. Their function is to warn airplane pilots that between those lights there's a radio tower. Likewise, ships display them — one side green, the other side red — so that the ship's captain not only knows where an approaching ship might be but also which direction it's going.

The lights are regulated by the government. This is something that must be because you don't want to worry about which lighting system you're looking at. All the pilots know what those lights mean, and all the ship captains can tell right from left. They are required for our safety, and regulated so that they will work.

In a way, communion does the same sort of thing. We are told that a man is to take communion after examining himself. That self-examination is to be a warning to the Christian. It's something that needs to be done; it's something that pays great benefits — and it is something needed to preserve the harmony of the church.

Note that it is regulated. Self-examination is a good thing, but to do it right we need to do so in the context of the sinless life of Christ. It's no use comparing ourselves to our next-door neighbor. The standard by which we are measured is Jesus Christ. When you examine yourself against that standard the results are usually quite clear. The key question then is whether or not you will do something about it. Confession and self-examination should lead to repentance.

If you can go to that self-examination and conclude that there is no action required then I suggest you are going to have some vision difficulties. Only the pure in heart can see God. If you say you have no sin, your heart is not pure and God will soon vanish from your sight. Therefore, pay heed to the warning lights. Let your self-examination give rise to confession, and your confession give rise to repentance. This is the honorable and worthy way in which to receive communion.

Photographs

December 11

The image we have of the various wars in which America has fought usually is represented by a photograph. No war is more eloquently documented than the American Civil War. This is largely the result of the efforts of one man: Matthew Brady. If you can think back to your high school history course and remember some of those photos, there is a style to them. That style is rather formal, does not at all look like candid photographs we would take today, but instead resembles some formal gathering. There's a reason for that; all those pictures were carefully staged. It took several seconds for the photograph slide to get enough light to make a good picture. So, everyone had to stay still for a few seconds. That's why action photos are so rare in the Civil War. If you think about it, the American Civil War looks rather stuffy. It's the formality of the pictures.

Formality tends to imply a certain seriousness. You find it in church as well; even little children know that something important is going on when everyone suddenly gets very formal. Formality implies seriousness. Formality also implies importance. We don't waste formality on things that are trivial. More than this, formality implies that there is a certain "right way" to do something. No doubt the people in charge of this at your church have selected such a right way; they probably follow it rather carefully.

So there is a right way for those who serve communion to do their job. There is also a right way for those who receive communion from them.

- It begins with self examination. Do not take this lightly; God is completely serious about that.
- The right way continues with repentance. You find some fault, fix it. You may have to be content with promising to fix it now, but fix it you must.
- Then, please, give thanks to the Lord who is gracious and forgiving to you. It was a great price he bought this privilege for you.

The result of doing it the right way leaves a significant impression. It is like a living photograph of your love for Christ. So as you partake this morning consider all that he has done for you. Examine yourself, start the appropriate repentance and give thanks.

Help

December 18

May we begin with one of the most famous Psalms the Bible?

I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip— he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD watches over you— the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

(Psalms 121:1-8 TNIV)

It is a Psalm of great comfort. It promises us help from the Lord, whose characteristics are well known:

- God is powerful.
- God is eternal, and therefore diligent.
- God is the God who loves you.

So the Psalm says. But how do we know that this is true?

- The power of God is clear when you look at the universe. See what his hands have done! His power is not disputable.
- This diligence may be seen in how he sustains the universe. The laws of physics do not change with time, because God, their creator, is eternal.
- But how do we know that he loves us? We may examine the stars diligently but can we see God's love there?

Nature does not display God's love, but that does not mean it is not on display. You take communion each time as a reminder of his love. The practicing Christian is a living display of God's love; in communion he displays it symbolically.

- The cup is a symbol of his blood, which reminds us of the sacrifice of his life by which we are pardoned.
- The bread is a symbol of his body, the Temple of the spirit. That body was tormented so that you might live forever.

As you partake today, remember to examine yourself. This is commanded of you. Once you have done so, take the time to reflect upon his great love for you. His body was broken; his blood was shed so that you might live eternally.

Mary's Question

December 25

It is quite the case that an angel does not easily tolerate any challenge to his statements. It is understandable, however, that Mary's question is reasonable. After all, was about to happen to her is a once in history event. Mary, quite logically, asks how this is supposed to have. After all, she is a virgin. Her motives in asking have been debated — curiosity, challenge, or just conversation – but the Angel Gabriel takes it in stride. He explains how it will happen; then just to make her certain he points out that her cousin Elizabeth (who had been presumed to be incapable of having a child) was in her sixth month.

He ends his discourse with a verse which is not commonly used:

"For no word from God will ever fail."

(Luke 1:37 TNIV)

The angel told us this about his first coming, the incarnation. Is it not clear that this will prevail in his second coming? It is prophesied many times and in many places that Jesus shall return. No word from God will ever fail — and therefore we should be prepared for his return.

So the question is: are you ready for his return?

- Have you forgiven those who have offended you? It is clear that God offers forgiveness only to those who forgive.
- Have you been forgiven by those you have offended? You should at least make the effort at reconciliation.

This is one reason why we are taught to examine ourselves at communion. It is a clear promise of God that those who are faithful followers will rise from the grave and live eternally. Therefore examine yourself and see if you indeed are a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. At the price of his body and blood he gives you eternal life. Examine yourself, and then partake.

Of What Use?

January 1

Benjamin Franklin, besides being the answer to any number of history test questions, was the discoverer of electricity. He published his findings to a world that was not particularly impressed. One news gatherer asked him just what use was this stuff called electricity?

Franklin's reply was in the form of another question: "of what use is a newborn baby?" We look back in hindsight today and consider the question foolish. But at the time it was a mark of wisdom on Franklin's part to recognize the use of electricity.

We might ask the same question about communion. If someone were to come in to our midst and see us taking communion for the first time he might be puzzled. We might find ourselves this way:

- First, we are commanded to do it. If only for the sake of fellowship, we are told to do this regularly. Obedience to our Lord's command is a reason to do something.
- Second, this is an act of proclamation. By taking communion you are saying that you are a practicing Christian, a true member of the church.
- This is also an opportunity for repentance. We are to examine ourselves, confess our sins and repent. Self examination is sufficiently difficult that apparently it must be scheduled.

Far and away the greatest use of communion is remembrance. It is a ceremony in which we remember what our Lord has done:

- It is a remembrance of our Lord's sacrifice on the cross. In these elements we see his body and his blood and remember that sacrifice.
- It is a remembrance of his great love for us. Can there be a greater love than that of an innocent man sacrificing himself for the guilty?
- It is a remembrance of his triumph. His story did not end on the cross or in the grave. He arose; and the world hasn't been the same since.
- It is a remembrance of his promise to return. The man who conquered the grave tells us he will return in triumph and glory. When we take communion, we remember that promise.

This is a new year; it's like a newborn baby – we don't really know of what use it will be. But we do know the Lord use it the good of those who love him. Look forward, to his return.

The Worth of the Christian

January 8

Most of us never get to really figure out how salaries are set in this world. As a result, we have a mistaken view of this process. Most of us figure it this way: the reason doctors make more than I do is that medical school is so much more complicated and hard than the training I've had. This breaks down rather quickly; it would imply, for example, that the reason rock stars make so much more money than doctors is that rock star school is so much more complicated and hard than medical school. So how do they do it?

- One of the most common methods is to subtly inquire of the applicant just how much money he's expecting. If it falls within what they think is reasonable, you get paid "enough."
- There is also the military method: if you don't like the salary, don't join.
- Baseball players find a different method. The question is not how much it will take to get them to play baseball; the question is how much will take to get them to play *here*.

The concept of "worth" in man's way of doing things is extrinsic. You are worth what somebody else will pay you. That's how the world does it.

What about God's way? Are human beings indeed worthy in God's eyes? The answer is yes, but not like you would expect. The psalmist, David, put it this way:

Psalms 8:1-9 NIV O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. (2) From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. (3) When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, (4) what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (5) You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. (6) You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: (7) all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, (8) the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. (9) O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

So we see that we are a little lower than the angels and a little higher than the fish. The key point is this: our worth is God given – it does not depend on what other people think. We have intrinsic worth.

But see this: our worth is given to us because of the majesty of the name of God. We didn't earn it; God gave to us for the sake of his name. The church does all things to the glory of God.

Nowhere is this see more clearly than the Cross. Jesus did not come to die on the cross because we are so worthy of his death. His sacrifice, like our worth, springs from the very nature of God. Neither intrinsic nor extrinsic worth has anything to do with it. It is entirely due to the fact that God is love. It is out of his great love for his children that we have the Cross.

As you partake, remember the motives of Christ. He did this for you because of his great love. As a Christian, you are to be an imitator of Christ — so that others might see his great love in you. Examine your self, and see if that love flows through you. Do this in remembrance of him.

Garden Prayer

January 15

Crucifixion as a method of killing someone is no longer in fashion. But the method is sufficiently simple that we can portray it in our minds. When we do, we see the suffering of Christ. Heretics in the early church sometimes argued that Christ could not suffer, because he is God. The church rightly recognized the truth: he must suffer, because he is also human. He is fully God, he is fully man – and he most certainly suffered on the cross.

If asked to describe it, most of us would use the word "pain". It cannot possibly be pleasant to have your hands and feet nailed to a cross. The entire process of crucifixion was designed to give the maximum of pain before death. But there are other forms of suffering, too.

- A criminal on the cross got no sympathy from the crowd. Executions were highly public, and the humiliation given by the mocking crowd was considered part of the punishment.
- Remember also that Jesus was crucified between two thieves. There were plenty of people around, but the righteous Savior was really alone. He was not one of many righteous men suffering that day; he was the only righteous man in sight.

We often remember Christ's suffering on the cross. But just before that event came another season of suffering for him: the prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. This too added to his pain:

- First, the three disciples he trusted most just couldn't seem to stay awake. In this most physical of ways, Christ was abandoned. He was alone.
- The occasion was not one of sending a memo to God the Father. It was one of extreme sorrow. How could it not be, knowing what he was soon to face?
- His prayer included the forlorn phrase, "if it be possible." He was asking for something he knew he wasn't going to get. It was a hard place to be.

When you ask why Christ did this, you usually get an answer which tells of his sacrifice for our sins. That tells us the intellectual reason. But all the reasoning in the world will not bring him to the cross without the two most important causes:

- The Father's love for mankind. The best-known verse in the Bible starts with, "for God so loved the world…"
- The Son's obedience to the Father. Jesus said it: "not my will but your will be done."

Today, as you partake, discern the body and blood of Jesus the Christ. This meal was bought at the price of the death of the only perfectly righteous man ever to live. He did it for love; he did it from obedience. Remember, then, the sacrifice he has made as you partake.

Approach

January 22

The most difficult type of airplane landing is that which occurs on an aircraft carrier. It looks difficult because it is. If the night is dark enough, and the storm is wild enough and the deck is pitching enough then the pilots will tell you this is the moment you find out whether or not you really know how to fly that airplane.

The secret is in the approach. The glide path must be very close to exactly right; the angle on the nose of the aircraft must be right and you must touch down at exactly the right spot. The approach is everything.

We see that same phenomenon — the approach is everything — in one of Christ's parables.

Luke 18:9-14 NASB And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: (10) "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' (13) "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' (14) "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

What is our approach to the altar of God? We don't normally see this done publicly as the ancients did, but we have our own ways, mentally, of approaching God.

- Some of us approach with gratitude. We should be thankful for what God has given us. The mistake comes when we assume that God's generosity to us is a sign that he regards us as somehow special. If God has blessed you, that doesn't make you wonderful. It makes you blessed.
- Others approach with penitence. We come to claim the forgiveness of sin as our Lord instructed us. We remember his sacrifice — and that perforce means that we remember our sin.

We must remember that the Lord's Supper commemorates Christ's sacrifice for our sins. If we are to take it in a worthy manner we should at least give thanks. Then we may ask for forgiveness and the acceptance of our repentance. The most important event in human history was our Lord sacrifice on the Cross. Remember it with thanksgiving and penitence.

Surgery

January 29

A doctor once revealed a great secret of medicine: "surgery is nothing but a friendly attack with a knife." Seen from that perspective, we might ask why people have surgery at all. The answer is fairly obvious; we do it because the alternatives are worse. In other words, the suffering we go through to have the surgery gains us something. Sometimes that's a positive gain (like having a baby) and sometimes it's negative (to get rid of the tumor). Very occasionally we have a different reason for surgery: love.

Permit me an example. A young lady, suffering from cystic fibrosis, received the transplant of two lobes of her lungs. The surgeons literally went in, removed one of her lungs, and replaced it with the donor lung from her father. The other lung transplant came from her sister. We can certainly see why the recipient would want the operation; cystic fibrosis attacks the lungs. But I think it is clear that her father and her sister had a very different motive. Their motive for having this surgery was quite different: love. Consider, then, that love is a cause which may motivate you to suffer pain.

It is that motive of love of the caused Christ to suffer on the Cross. It certainly could not be characterized as a "friendly attack." It was in fact an execution reserved for criminals. But there is no question about the willingness of Jesus Christ to suffer that penalty. He prayed that it might not happen that way. He asked his Father to relieve him of this pain. The answer was no.

So then Christ suffered for us out of obedience to the Father — and out of love for us. Permit me a simple question: how do you think the girl who received the lung transplants feels about her father and her sister? Undoubtedly there is gratitude; more than that, there is a loving memory. She's not going to say thank you just one time. It's going to be something that is a permanent attitude for the rest of her life.

This brings us to the point: just what is your permanent attitude towards Jesus Christ? It's a question that comes up every time you take communion. You are told to take it in a "worthy manner." Whatever else that might help hearts this means, it certainly includes a confession of sin, repentance and then gratitude for the Savior who will take you into his heart, sins at all. Reflect on these things, and search your heart to see if your attitude reflects his sacrifice.

Working with Weights

February 5

Your local sports club is home to an interesting phenomenon. Every now and then someone walks in by order of his doctor to get more exercise. Of course, he hasn't touched weightlifting since he was in high school – 40 years ago. The experience goes in certain phases.

Phase 1 consists rather simply of remembering that when he was in high school, he could bench press 180 pounds. Being a reasonable man, he modestly sets the bar up with 150 pounds of weight. While he is in the process of assembling those weights some joker welds the bar to the weight bench. Something is wrong; so we go to phase 2 – calling in the trainer.

There are two ways to identify the trainer. The first way is look for a man with a black T-shirt with the word "trainer" on the back in big white letters. Or you could just look for the guy that looks like a former Marine Corps drill Sergeant. The function of this individual is to give you a certain amount of fright: this produces adrenaline in large quantities and enables you to bench press a city bus.

Once.

The doctor then tells you that you will eventually heal, but perhaps you should take it a little easier with weights. He then asks you to be reasonable. What does reasonable mean?

- First, you need to find out your existing, real capability. Honesty should replace memory and ego.
- Second, find a trainer who can work with that and give you some advice on what you should be doing at what weight.
- Finally, work on improving your body in a gradual manner.

The key to making it work, of course, is self examination. This cures unrealistic expectations and deflates your ego.

That's why we are told to examine ourselves in communion. We need to have a realistic expectation of ourselves and others. Such self-examination will tell you that you are not going to cure your faults and flaws instantly. Nor would you cure the faults and flaws of others instantly. Rather, you will get a little better each week.

The Lord's Supper provides you an opportunity to examine yourself. May I suggest that as part of that self-examination you also examine your relationships with others? It is not sufficient to remedy those defects which only you can see. You are a human being; you live in a society; you need to examine your relationships with others. Then — most important — you need to examine your relationship with God.

As you examine your relationship to God, it is usually a good idea to start with gratitude. In your heart of hearts thank him for what he has done at the Cross. And knowledge that he suffered and died so that you might be freed of your burden of sin. Thank him for the gift of eternal life. As you partake, see with your mind's eye the body hung on the cross for you, the blood shed on the ground for you. Give thanks as you remember.

Down with the Ship

February 12

Recent newscasts brought us the image of an Italian cruise ship lying on its side after a collision with some large rocks. It's rather embarrassing for a cruise line to have pictures of your ship broadcast all over the world when it's lying 90° to the vertical. It's even more embarrassing when the press reveals that the captain of the ship, contrary to all tradition, abandoned the ship quite quickly. A number of people died which of course makes this a most serious incident. But have you ever asked where this tradition of the captain going down with the ship got started?

Veterans of the United States Navy have a simple explanation for this. The captain signs for the ship, financially. If the ship goes down he has to stay in the Navy until he earns enough money to repay the Congress for the ship. At Navy salaries this is going to take a long time. It's cheaper to go down with the ship.

The real reason for this tradition is, however, rooted in the task the captain has: leadership. It is a fact in warfare that some men may be required to die so that others might live. A ship in combat might require its engineering group to stay in the engine rooms to the very last second so that others might fight the fires above them. It is drilled into the sailor that the ship comes first. Very often good leaders will tell you, "I won't ask my people to do anything that I wouldn't be willing to do myself." If you're the captain, that includes going down with the ship. Such leadership is not confined to the time of a sinking; good leaders know that they must take care of those who are following them.

Look at this concept as it applies to our leader, Jesus Christ. All of us are required to die, for all of us are sinners. It would be easy for Jesus to claim the exemption from this because he is the only sinless man. He did not do this. Look at his example:

- Even though he did not deserve death, he was obedient to the Father's will, and accepted death.
- Remarkably, he did this without complaining. Indeed, often he spoke not at all.
- Most remarkable of all is this: he forgave those who executed him.

This is the example we have; this is the example we follow. In communion we remember the sacrifice Jesus made. Let us also remember how he made it: in obedience, humility and love. He did this for you and for me. He asks that we take this communion meal so that we might remember the example our leader has set.

Does Anyone Know?

February 19

In 1976 the Canadian singer Gordon Lightfoot produced what he considered his finest work: *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*. It commemorates the loss of 29 souls on a Great Lakes freighter. The song is written in the modern Doric mode, which gives it an eerie, haunting quality. In the song he includes this line:

Does anyone know where the love of God goes

when the waves turn the minutes to hours?

St. Paul would understand the question. In Acts 27 Luke describes their experience of being shipwrecked in a storm. I suspect that Jonah would understand the question quite well. Navy veterans will recall the Navy Hymn, "eternal father strong to save, all those in peril on the wave." It is the feeling of being helpless in the face of disaster, and every sailor knows it. Looking back upon such an incident, it does seem as if time somehow slows down – as if to give us time to question God's love.

Jesus knew that feeling. You will recall that one of the last things he said while he was hanging on the Cross was this: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Where did the love of God the Father go during the trial and execution of this most holy of men? Think about it: was there ever anyone in history who was closer to the Father? Was there ever anyone in history who deserved the love of God more than Jesus, the Christ? Yet in his greatest hour of need he cried that he was forsaken.

One of the great joys of being a Christian is that your God became man and suffered just like we do. We may not have the answer to where the love of God goes, but we know that our Lord and Savior shares the question with us. Indeed, more than that: the most popularly quoted verse of the Bible, John 3:16, tells us that "God so loved the world." We may ask why he was forsaken; we are told that it is because God so loved the world. The greatest possible display of God's love required that he take it from his own Son.

In communion he asks that you remember this sacrifice. In the cup you see his blood; in the bread you see his body. In both you see his love. In both you see the anguish of the Savior. You have but a few moments; he had hours. Contemplate, then, the love of the Father — at the price of the Son.

He Knows

February 26

One of the most comforting things about Jesus Christ is that he knows how we feel. We do not worship the God who has no experience with the human condition; we worship a God who voluntarily became a man, being born like the rest of us. He grew, he lived and he died just like the rest of us. But it's more than that:

- Do you remember that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for him? He knows what it's like to have to ask someone else to carry the load for you.
- If you recall, they offered Jesus drugged wine to dull the pain. He knows what it's like to have pain beyond explaining.
- Most of us are law-abiding citizens; some of us, however, know what it's like to tangle with the authorities — and we know what it's like to get no sympathy at all. They crucified Jesus between two thieves; even one of them gave him a hard time.
- We like a good laugh — but only if people are laughing with this, not at us. He knew what it was like to be mocked and laughed at while dying.
- Perhaps the worst thing of all was this: the religious authorities of his day, who were supposed to be the godliest people imaginable, treated him as if he were contagious vermin.

Perhaps you know someone who deserves such treatment; but you also know someone who did not deserve it — and got it anyway. We hear much of the sacrifice of Christ but little of the injustice done to him.

We are told to examine ourselves before taking communion. Sometimes we get the idea that we can't bring any problem to Jesus if we know we are at fault; if the problem is our sin, we feel we can't really bring that up. It is precisely because of our sin that the sacrifice of Christ was necessary. If your self-examination takes you down the trail of repentance, then it's likely that's where he wanted you to go. He paid the price; not just in death but in mockery. By that price you are redeemed. So then, as you take the cup and eat the bread, remember what it cost for you to be forgiven.

To Know Fully

March 4

In the midst of the great "Love Chapter" in First Corinthians, there is a very curious verse:

1 Corinthians 13:12 NASB (12) For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

It is generally taken as a prophecy, implying that we shall have much greater understanding when Christ returns than we do now. But there are certain other implications to this verse:

- First, it implies that we are known by God. Think of that! The creator of the universe, the ruler of all that is seen and unseen, knows you by name.
- Second, it implies that you are known as a God knows — that is, you are known in his omniscience. He knows everything there is to know about you.
- By the context we can infer one other thing: you are known to God *in love.* His is not a clinical observation, but the intimate knowing of one who loves you.

Do you see it? God knows me — and therefore he cares for me, because God is love. More to the point in communion, God knows all about me (including my sins.) As the prophet Jeremiah revealed:

Jeremiah 17:9-10 NASB "The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it? (10) "I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give to each man according to his ways, According to the results of his deeds.

Despite this, God knows me in love. He knows me in love to the point that Christ went to the Cross. Christ did not go to the Cross in ignorance, but in love.

We remember this every time we celebrate communion. It was an informed love that sent Christ to the Cross; that's one reason we "celebrate." Even though we cannot fully know such love until the return of Christ, we can show our love and appreciation for it. Thus we celebrate and remember.

I said that first part of the verse is a prophecy; it is. It will not come true until the return of our Lord. Our knowledge will remain partial until then. Likewise, until then, we celebrate the great love of God.

Party Crashing

March 11

Every mother of a teenage girl has heard the lament: "EVERYONE is going to that party."

- The definition of "bad" in that situation is this — your mother won't let you go.
- The definition of "worst" in that situation is this — you are not invited

It is at this point that the temptation to become a party crasher arises. Your heart aches to join, yet you fear the social consequences of being found out. Your entire social life now depends on one thing: who was invited to the party?

We may ask the same thing of Jesus Christ. Just who does Jesus invite his party? There is no explicit list, but we can get some idea from the history of those with whom Jesus partied. One of the chief accusations against him was that he was "a friend of winebibbers and gluttons." In short, he partied hearty. He went to places that the politically correct of the day just would never go. He was friends with people who were at the bottom of the social scale: tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers and in general the outrageous, the unwelcome and even the handicapped. The beggars, the blind, the deaf, and pretty much anyone else who just didn't fit in were welcome with Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, it seems that Jesus defined his own version of "in."

But everyone knows that if you are "in", you at least need to know the secret handshake. Or perhaps the cool phrase of the day. There has to be something that defines those who are in from those who are out. We are now come to the ritual which portrays that difference, that definition. To understand this you need to know the difference between those who are in Christ and those who are not. The difference is in one word: love.

That is the core of the meaning of the ritual we know as communion. It represents to us the sacrifice Christ made on the cross, the sacrifice which was made because of the great love God has for us. When we partake in this ritual we proclaim that we are those who are in Christ. The price paid was very great, but the invitation goes out to all who will accept him as Lord and Savior. If that's you, you're in. This is the time we remember our Lord, who loved us into the kingdom of God.

Jonah

March 18

Sometimes we have a strange way of looking at the mercy of God.

Consider Jonah. By the time he's done with Nineveh his lament to God is quite clear:

- First, he has worked extremely hard in preaching repentance to the city. He told them that doom and disaster were in the works and they had better repent.
- They did.
- God forgave them, and did not bring upon them the disaster the Jonah had promised.
- Jonah said, "I knew God was going to do that. Now I look like an idiot."

Sometimes we think that way. We're like the old philosopher who was sure God would forgive him because, after all, it's his hobby. We forget that God's mercy and forgiveness are not cheap; they were bought with a price.

Another common mistake is to assume that God forgets about our sins like we do. We like to think, "we've moved on." If we stall long enough, God will forget the problem.

We've forgotten: God's mercy is not cheap. Its price was the cross of Christ. The price of the justice of God is high; Jesus paid that price. God is eternal; he does not forget. But the fact that he is eternal cuts both ways; it also means he foresaw the cross as the price of loving his creation, mankind.

We must therefore not take God's mercy for granted, as a trivial thing. Nor can we take his forgiveness to be an automatic thing if we just wait long enough. He reminds us of the price each time we partake of communion. As we do, we remember that the perfect man, the sinless one, was sacrificed for our sins. He died that we might live. That sacrifice is effective no matter how old the sin. God knows we don't want to bring up old sins; we'd rather just forget about it. That's why he gave us something to jog our memory — not so much about our sins, but about his salvation.

From the Ends of the Earth

March 25

Psalm 61:1-4 TNIV Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.

(2) From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

(3) For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe.

(4) I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.

Have you ever felt far from God? It's a very lonesome feeling.

David, the psalmist, describes it well here. It's a time when your heart grows faint; you begin to lose courage. You reflect upon your own inadequacy and reach out for help, almost instinctively. It's wonderful if you get an instant reaction. Usually you don't. God allows you to sink to the point of asking him whether or not he's even listening. It doesn't matter where on earth you might happen to be, at home or far away. If God is not answering, you are at the ends of the earth. You are away from everything which is familiar, and the only real help you're likely to get.

One other curious aspect of the situation is that what you really want (at least to start with) is to be *heard*. It's extremely comforting to know that somebody is listening. Once you've established that God is listening to you, you then ask for directions. "What am I supposed to do now, God?" Have you ever uttered that thought aloud? If the situation is bad enough you will be asking for directions — to the nearest safe place. That's what David means by a refuge. In his time a strong tower was such a thing. A solidly built a tower was usually the cornerstone of a city's defense. So, in the language of his time, he was asking for a place of safety, a place where he could rest without fear.

You want to be heard. That's the first prerequisite. Communion is an assurance that you have been heard. It is the witness of God's love for you; it is also a way for you to reach out to God. How so? Remember that sin is the barrier between you and God, but he has prepared a path to deal with it. We are told that we are to examine ourselves before taking communion. Such self-examination should lead to repentance and in this way clear the road between us and God. You will be heard.

Ah, but: if I'm heard, will God do anything? Oh you of little faith! If he was willing to go to the cross for your salvation, which of your threats and needs is too large for him? As Christ himself told us, "consider the lilies of the field." Have no fear, little flock. The father has chosen to give you the kingdom — and all the safety therein.

Seeking

March 25

Proverbs 11:27 NIV He who seeks good finds goodwill, but evil comes to him who searches for it.

You have probably experienced this variant of Murphy's Law: whenever you go looking for something, it's always in the last place you look for it. True, right? But there is some variation to it:

- It depends on *what* you seek. Things that are quiet are harder to find.
- It also depends on *why* you seek it. If you're looking for something to make sure it's in a spot where it won't be seen, you don't really have to find it.
- *How* you seek matters also. A diligent search usually produces results long before a casual one.
- Of course, *where* you seek makes an enormous difference.

Solomon tells us here that those who seek good find it. We might indeed ask the same set of questions for Christians:

- What do we seek? Forgiveness.
- Why do we seek it? Because we are sinners. We need it.
- Where do we seek it? At the one place where it can be found: the Cross.

The hard part, of course, is how we seek it. But in the Beatitudes our Lord gives us the answer: those who have a pure heart can see God. Forgiveness for sinners must be sought at the Cross — but sought with a pure heart.

Communion, in a way, is a reminder of that search. We are taught to examine ourselves at communion, which is a reminder that we are sinners. As we are sinners, we must recognize that fact and seek forgiveness. Communion reminds us of that forgiveness, and it reminds us of the cost of that forgiveness — the Cross. Therefore, heed the words of the Scripture: examine yourself. Seek God while he may be found; seek him with a pure heart.

No Lurkers

April 8

1 John 4:15 NASB Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

Some people in this world are lurkers: they go through life without anyone discovering their loyalties, their affections or even their tastes in food. But there is another type of citizen of the planet; you know them by sight. Oh, the easy ones are those who wear the baseball cap with the team insignia on it. The hat is usually a little sweat soaked and worn, but you know which team it is. They are not shy about it. Others may be found wearing the shirt, the jacket, or the parka (depending upon the sport and the season). If you get the real fanatic, you usually find they've done a room in the house in the team colors with a fine collection of pennants, posters and other paraphernalia. Often enough, their excitement for their team will cause them to be absent from church throughout the entire season.

Such a person is making what is technically called a confession: a declaration of belief. Such a declaration is public — and how — sincere and faithful. Faithful even when the team is losing. Often enough they have never played for the team; it's not really a problem because most of us have never played professional sports, for example. Not many can. But such people set an example for the Christian: their belief is unmistakably public — and acted upon. Wearing the team hat is an act of confession.

Communion is a greater confession. It is also a declaration of belief; it is public and we hope sincere and faithful. The faithful follower of the team is sometimes said to have "team spirit." The faithful follower of Christ is promised the Spirit of God. Indeed, John the apostle tells us that God lives in him and he lives in God. This is, of course, a much deeper and more profound form of team spirit.

The question any fan must ask himself is that of sincerity. Communion commemorates the event of Christ dying on the Cross. That was hardly a "blazing victory" moment. We are asked to remember his suffering and death. It is fitting, therefore, that we should examine ourselves in this matter. Our participation in communion is public; but is it also sincere and faithful? You will have to answer that question to your Lord face to face some day. Perhaps it is best that you find the answer now.

A Modest Hero

April 15

The woman is one of my heroes. It happened this way.

Our new manager, an ardent feminist and liberal, was interviewing each of the employees. She came to a lady named Laurian. The discussion went pleasantly until she asked how many children Laurian had. The answer was four; this produced an explosion. Our new manager was outraged that anyone would have four children and thus waste the resources of the planet. With the rest of us in shock she proceeded to lecture the entire group on what a horror this was, and then stalked off in righteous indignation. If a Christian had done something like this, it would have been called Judgmentalism.

She stalked off without learning a crucial and important fact. There were four children; two of them were adopted from Laurian's sister — who was serving a very long prison sentence for drug dealing. Laurian rescued them from the foster care system, at considerable effort and expense.

Perhaps it is a coincidence that Laurian is a Christian. Perhaps. The truth is that the world judges the Christian constantly. The judgment is made on the world's terms, not those of Christ. And as in this instance, it is often done without complete knowledge of the facts. It is also often accompanied by a burning hatred. If you have not experienced that hatred, you are among the rarely fortunate.

It is tempting to think that the world's judgment, fallible as it is, is but a pale reflection of what God will do to us for our sins. But that is not the method the Almighty has selected. What he has done is similar to what Laurian did: he has adopted us. The Scripture tells us that we are joint heirs with Jesus; we are the adopted children of God the Father. He has chosen — at great cost — to give us grace, not judgment. As a father has mercy on his children, so the Lord has mercy on those who fear him.

In granting us that mercy he has asked us to remember the price: the Cross. Communion is the act of remembering the Cross. In this memorial he asks us to examine ourselves. In so doing we make his judgment unnecessary by accepting his loving discipline. So I encourage you: examine yourselves. Take stock of who you are and what you have done. If you find something there which is not pleasing to your Lord, ask forgiveness — and seek his aid in repentance.

Broad Ways

April 22

Many of the younger generation might be confused by this description. In a time when television was just beginning to make its mark on American society, it was still common to go to a county fair. One of the delights of a county fair was the collection of hucksters pitching their various products. I remember one I encountered when I was 10 years old at a county fair in the deserts of California. He was pitching a version of the Bible; rather large, well illustrated and — his major selling point – with an excellent concordance. So he said. His example was that his concordance pinpointed the only verse in the Bible to reference freeways.

Now, you might think the Bible doesn't have much to say about freeways. But then again perhaps you've never met these hucksters. If you will take a look at Nahum 2:4, in the King James Version, you will see something that might possibly be interpreted that way. (The exact wording is, "broad ways.") Notice that I said, "Possibly." Sad to say, I did not purchase a copy of this oddity to add to my collection of strange and weird things.

The truth is that there is always someone who is around who will interpret or just plain muddle what the Scripture says. Sometimes this is done simply to make a buck; sometimes it's just plain stupidity; sometimes it's more sinister than that. So the Christian is warned that he should always seek the plain sense of the Scripture. By God's good grace, the plain sense of the Scripture is almost always apparent.

The plain sense of the Scripture about Communion is this:

- This ceremony was instituted by Jesus Christ himself. It is not an accident, but something he intended to do.
- The ceremony is a memorial to his sacrifice on the cross. Bread and wine are meant to represent his body and blood.
- We are to remember that by this sacrifice God's grace is given to us.
- In so doing, we are to examine ourselves and submit ourselves to repentance as required.
- Then we are to partake; drink the wine and eat the bread in a "worthy manner."

There is an elegant simplicity to this, which is often the hallmark of truth. Our Lord has made it to be something simple and yet profound. Let us examine ourselves, and take in a worthy manner.

Spinach

April 29

I am what I am, Lord. I am what I am, no less but no more.

- I am what I am with my own failures and sins. Sometimes I remember the things I should've done; sometimes I remember the things I shouldn't have done.
- I am what I am – defined by my dreams. I have plans and ambitions Lord; there are things I want to do, places I want to go and even people I'd like to be.
- I am what I am – limited by my nightmares. I know the words I wish I hadn't said, the people I wish I hadn't angered or offended. I know the things that might have been. I know the man who destroyed what should have been a good relationship.

I am what I am Lord.

I'm like Popeye the sailor, Lord. As far as I know, he never apologized for being a sailor. He always wore the same uniform. He was quick to throw a punch — but only in a righteous cause. He was also quick to anger. He had an infectious laugh and a sense of self acceptance that a man could envy. But he had one other thing: he always had a can of spinach. No matter what his predicament, that can of spinach saved him. I don't carry a can of spinach.

I have you, Lord. In your presence, I examine myself. I don't always like what I see – but I know I must do this. I've been here before; it's part of who I am.

In your presence, Lord, I accept your grace. I've come to you before, often with the same problems. You have always been gracious and kind, quick to forgive. It would be wonderful to say that I have nothing for you to forgive; wonderful, but false. I did not come to make a show; I came for grace.

I have no can of spinach, Lord. But I do have your body and your blood. I am what I am, Lord — and I am becoming more like you.

To Live Is To Sin

May 6

Have you ever noticed how prevalent sin is in your life? It seems that no matter how much you try – at least in your own strength — sin persists. That's the common experience of mankind. We find that the individual, unaided, is unable to perfect himself to the point of being sinless.

Things get better when you get help. Most Christians have been taught that their first resource should be prayer, calling upon the aid of Christ himself. This is certainly a good thing. But it is not the only thing to do; the church exists. One of the reasons for its existence is so that we may obtain help from our fellow sinners — also known as the "body of Christ." But even with this help we cannot attain perfection.

Worse, we find that even with this help we sometimes repeat the cycle of sin. It can be very depressing to know that you've taken two steps backward instead of two steps forward. But this is the common experience of mankind: sin keeps coming back.

We might examine this in a medical light. Put medically, there is no "cure" for sin. There is no procedure which will rid you of it. There is no pill which functions like an antibiotic for sin, nor is there a pill which functions like a vaccine for sin. Sin can neither be cured nor totally prevented.

But it is possible to "treat" sin. Some of you listening to this meditation know what it is like to live with the condition that cannot be cured. It may be fatal; it may be simply something you must put up with for the rest of your life. A common example, medically, might be arthritis. There are treatments for this disease, but as of this writing there is no cure. Sin is much the same. We treat it with repentance, confession, forgiveness and acceptance; we treat, but we do not cure.

Will there ever be the cure for sin, totally and finally? Yes indeed — when our Lord returns. The ultimate price of sin is death, and death is defeated at the return of our risen Lord. This victory will be powered by his grace. That grace was enacted into human life at the cross. Communion serves to remind us that the triumph of sin is temporary. Death and sin will be swept away at our Lord's return. This is guaranteed to us at the cross; only our Lord has defeated death.

Therefore, let us take this communion in a worthy manner. Examine yourselves, and if you find something there which needs to be changed – repent. Admit your sins to your Lord; as soon as you can seek forgiveness from those you've offended. Then accept Christ's forgiveness, and know that you are still in the community of believers, his body, the church.

Flogging

May 13

The modern theory of criminal justice is a relatively recent invention. Originally intended to provoke the repentance of the criminal, or "penitence," (from which we get our word penitentiary) we have since reduced our system to one of two objectives:

- Reform. By various methods such as on-the-job training or 12 step programs we hope to produce reform in the individual prisoner. The idea is that the prisoner will leave the prison and become a productive member of society. This has proven to be expensive and not nearly as effective as we would desire.
- Warehousing. If we can't reform them, we can at least keep them off the street for some length of time. This seems to be a relatively obvious solution; however, keeping people in prison costs money, and the taxpayers are not quite so willing to pay for it.

As you can see, there seems to be no universally accepted solution to the problem of crime and criminals. But one thing we can claim as being superior to the ancient methods: we prohibit "cruel and unusual" punishment. It's quite a contrast with the methods in use in the time of Christ. The ancient theory of punishment worked quite differently.

- Cruelty was not only useful but welcome. It was made as public as possible, so as to provide a deterrent effect upon others. The law-abiding citizen was encouraged to see this as being simply a case of "just desserts."
- The system also encouraged as much public humiliation as possible. Should the criminals survive the process, this was supposed to make it memorable both to the criminal and those who might imitate him.
- The death penalty was much more common and much more widely applied. Prison, you see, was expensive. Graves were cheap.

The crucifixion of Christ was carried out under the ancient theory. He was physically beaten within an inch of his life, being flogged by an instrument designed to produce long bleeding gashes in the back. The procession to the place of crucifixion was intended as humiliation. The striking point of this, however, is not the cruelty of the punishment but the fact that he did not deserve it. He took upon himself this cruelty on our behalf. He did not have to come to this Earth; he did not have to suffer crucifixion. He did this at the command of the Father, in obedience to the Father's great love for us.

It is by his bleeding wounds that our sins are healed. Remember this as you take communion today. This is not simply a reminder to you, but a memorial to the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. In view of the price he paid, it is fitting and appropriate that we should examine ourselves before partaking. Therefore, look inside yourself, see if there is anything which needs repentance, and bring it to the Father for forgiveness. In the elements of communion you can see the body and blood of the Christ suffered for you. Do this in remembrance of him.

In Submission

May 20

There is a passage of Scripture in which it appears that wives are commanded to be in submission to their husbands. The passage ends with the comparison, "as the church is to Jesus Christ." The concept that a Christian wife should be in submission to her husband is extremely unpopular today. It is seldom preached. One unfortunate side effect of this fact is that we seldom hear of the submission of the church to Jesus Christ. I must leave to the listener the question of a wife's submission to her husband; but I would hope that there is no doubt that the church is to be in submission to Jesus Christ.

A Christian wife might well ask, "Why should I be in submission to my husband?" The church might ask the same question of Jesus Christ; the answers are quite clear.

- First, we are in submission to Christ because he is our creator — both of the universe as a whole and the church in particular. Without Christ, the church does not exist.
- It is Christ who purchased our salvation and forgiveness. If there is no salvation, of what use is the church?
- Christ is the source of wisdom which guides the church. That alone is sufficient for submission; if you know who has the right answer, it makes sense to follow Him.
- Finally, it is explicitly stated in the Scripture that all authority is given to Jesus Christ. We may safely presume that includes authority over the church. Thus the church should be in submission to him.

In communion we have a visible sign of the church is submission to Christ.

- In communion we acknowledge his sacrifice on the cross.
- By taking communion we proclaim ourselves be members of the community which has received salvation.
- To do these things we have not invented our own ritual. Rather, even in acknowledging him as our Lord, we use the pattern that he set forth.

Being in submission to Jesus Christ carries with it certain implications. The most obvious one is that we are to obey his commands; if you call him Lord, you do what he says. He has given you his commands concerning this communion. You are to examine yourself, conducting yourself in repentance for your sins and seeking his strength as well as his forgiveness. Then, in accord with his command, you are to take communion "in a worthy manner." Let each of us examine himself, bringing our sins to the cross and then accepted the sacrifice which makes us whole.

Graduation

May 27

Your author lives next door to a large university. Every year my wife and I get to experience the sights and sounds of graduation at close hand. The university in question is in the state of California, and the weather is warm. The sites are colorful:

- Every coed, it seems, is required to wear a short sundress and 4 inch high heels. Summer comes early in California. Mom, on the other hand, is more sensible. The campus is large and the walk is long; it's not unusual to see the coed barefoot and mom carrying the 4 inch heels.
- Flowers and balloons seem to be completely necessary. One balloon is not sufficient; the amount of helium per graduate seems adequate to fill a small zeppelin. You just hope that they don't tie the balloons to little brother and watch him float away.
- Of course, there are also the photos and souvenirs. You have to have the T-shirt that lists all the names of the graduates. You also need all possible combinations of friends in photographs, all with excited smiles.

Graduation is an Alpha and Omega. It's a time of new beginnings; perhaps a new job, or onto a new school for graduate work — but most often a newfound independence. For most of these graduates leave the university to go to life; they leave behind a social structure whose comfort they may not realize. It's also a time of endings. Would you ever see these friends again? That question is clear. What some don't realize is that soon they will say, "Once, I was a scholar." The intellectual life of the University dies and is replaced by the mundane and the every day. It's hard to hold a philosophical discussion over diapers and dishes.

It is not possible to hold the graduation without playing "Pomp and Circumstance." There are, after all, certain rules and traditions. When we hold a ceremony, we hold to those traditions. It is by unchanging ceremony that we mark the changing life.

Communion, too, is a ritual marking transition.

- It marks the great transition of history: from the law of the Old Testament to the grace of the New Testament. In this we see the way in which God has changed how he deals with mankind, and the benefits we derive from that.
- For the individual Christian, it marks the transition from the old life to the new life. It marks the time that you went from being self-centered and self ruled to being a disciple of the Lord.
- Communion looks forward to the next great transition: the coming of Christ. We partake of communion "until He comes." The old reality in which we now live will give way to the new heaven and the new Earth.

Graduation speakers encourage the graduates to look within themselves and see what has changed. It is fitting to do this at communion as well. Examine yourself; bring your hopes and your failures to God and remember the great transition at the Cross.

Memorabilia

June 3

One of the great things about American business life is that there is almost always some company out there that makes the product you want. Whatever your business need, there is usually someone to supply it. For example, most businesses like to be able to put something on your desk to remind you of their products and services. So they give you various items with their logo and phone number.

Various items? Do any of you have any of these items on your desk? Is someone's logo on your coffee cup, letter opener, note pad (in all shapes, sizes and colors), pens, highlighters, binders, cookie jars (I'm not kidding), coasters, manicure kits, Teddy bears, squeezable stress toys and – believe it or not – a matchbook cover containing four aspirin tablets. That last is just in case logo overload gives you a headache.

All these products are designed to cause you to remember someone's product, service or company. Communion serves a similar function: to remind you of the sacrifice of Christ. There are three reminders:

- The bread reminds you of Christ's body, and the pain he went through so that you might be saved. It tells you that this was not some sort of ghost or vision, but someone just as human as we are.
- The cup reminds you of Christ's blood, and the lesson from the Old Testament: without the shedding of blood, there is no remission for sin. In blood there is life – ask anyone who's ever received a transfusion – and it is Christ's life blood which paid the price of your sins.
- Finally, there is the command: examine yourself. Do not let this become empty ritual, but rather look into your own heart and bring the evil you find there to the Cross.

This works – much better than getting a coffee cup. Why has this worked so well for two thousand years?

- You see the coffee cup – but you see, feel, smell and taste the body and blood of Christ. We learn through our senses; we learn through repetition.
- You take it – and you are thankful. Unless you are brain dead, you cannot miss the message of the grace of God given to us in Communion.
- Finally, Communion reminds you of Someone: the one on whom you call for your help. You know to whom you should pray.

People can be quite forgetful; God knows that. He gave us Communion so that we might remember.

Designer

June 10

There is a curious phenomenon in American retailing. We might call it the "designer phenomenon." Put simply, it means that ordinary objects which are often sold at the lowest price possible can be transformed into luxury goods simply by attaching the word "designer." It seems that if we attach the name of a famous designer to practically anything the item suddenly becomes of greatly increased value. Perhaps the most extreme example of this would be blue jeans. For decades blue jeans were simply work pants, the only question you had was whether or not they would hold up to the work you were doing. They were considered not suitable for most white-collar work. Now, however, we are concerned about the fancy stitching, the rhinestones and of course the diligently placed wear spots which reveal, well, something. It seems that the human being has to have things which are "exactly right." You have to have just the right purse, just the right blouse, just the right shoes, and even just the right lingerie. Just in case you think this is a "female only" phenomenon, I have one word for you: Rolex.

So why, then, hasn't someone come out with the "designer communion?" It can hardly be denied people have been searching for "exactly the right church" for the last two thousand years. Surely, then, designer communion would tell them they had achieved that quest, wouldn't it?

Let's think about that. Just what would a designer communion have? Perhaps we need a finer vintage of wine. (For those churches which use grape juice, I'm not sure there is such a thing as a finer vintage grape juice.) We need to accompany it with gourmet bread. Should we put the service of the communion in the hands of some Las Vegas showgirls? To ask the question is to show the absurdity of the whole concept.

In fact, there comes the first question of designer anything: just whose name are you going to put on it? It currently bears the name of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the designer of heaven and earth. Where would you propose to find a better name?

There is no designer communion because the current version was designed by the ultimate designer of the universe. It's his universe; it's his communion. We even call it "the Lord's Supper." There is no designer version because we already have the ultimate design. Design takes work; it doesn't come out of thin air. Ultimate design takes sacrifice; the ultimate sacrifice is given at the Cross.

The elements are simple; bread and wine. The method of service varies, but the purpose is always the same: remember Him. Communion, at its root, is a simple thing. The mark of the Great Designer is that even his simple things are elegant. The elegance of simplicity lets you see the truth of the design behind it.

Sacrilege

June 17

Sacrilege: the crime of violating or profaning sacred things (Webster's Dictionary, 1828.)

The concept of sacrilege is one which has been often neglected in the evangelical churches. Indeed, many such churches make it a point to proclaim that there is no such thing as a sacred thing. Throughout the history of Christianity this has been a distinctly minority view. Sacrilege is directed irreverence.

- It may be directed at a *person*. This is more common in churches which have priests and bishops, but it must be admitted that even the humblest of pastors bears a certain dignity which should be respected.
- It may be directed at a *place*. Think of Christ driving out the moneychangers to understand his attitude towards sacrilege directed at the Temple. We may have lost the sense; graffiti on the walls of the church building seems to be well tolerated in some places.
- It may be directed at a *thing*. Certain items are set aside for the use, exclusively, of the church. These things are sacred — that's what the word means, set aside. When these things are treated with irreverence that is sacrilege. If someone picks up a communion plate cover and uses it as a Frisbee that is sacrilege.

Most of us can see that such actions are sin. But consider the communion bread and cup. Christ himself declared, "This is my body." He deliberately set this apart – that is, made it sacred – and taking it in an irreverent manner is sacrilege. More commonly, taking it without thought - just a ritual, just a routine – is also sacrilege.

How then are we to take it? The Scripture tells us: "Let a man examine himself." Take a good look at who you are. Did you walk in with the idea that there is *nothing* in your life which needs self-examination? In particular, is there no recurring sin in your life? Maybe you haven't been troubled with it lately. Now is the time to keep it from coming back; examine yourself, and then seek the power and protection of Almighty God to keep that sin away.

Some of us will see that incident during this last week which – to be honest with ourselves – we wish we could do over. Is that something for which repentance is needed? Now is the time to repent and ask forgiveness. Make no mistake; forgiveness is available. It's called grace. Communion reminds us that it is available to all who call Christ Lord. Communion also reminds us the price paid for that grace. The body and blood represented in Communion is a reminder of the body and blood of our Lord, given for us in his death on the Cross. Examine yourself; then partake in a manner befitting a sinner saved by grace.

Duct Tape

June 24

It has been well said: "If it doesn't move and it's supposed to, spray it with WD-40. If it does move and it's not supposed to, apply duct tape."

Have you ever noticed that good tools seem to have the same general characteristics?

- Good tools are simple. While it may be complicated to manufacture them, they are ultimately composed of what appear at least to be simple parts. You can take a look at them and know exactly what to do with them.
- Good tools are easy to understand. You don't need to be Albert Einstein understand what to do with a roll of duct tape.
- Good tools are effective. You use them and they work.

You can make the same argument for communion. Our Lord did not intend to implement the Lord's Supper as something complicated, finicky and fragile. It has the same characteristics as good tools:

- It is simple. The bread that is used is common and easy to make, not something that must be made in the Himalayan monastery by the light of a full moon. The wine comes from grapes which grow almost anywhere in the world. Indeed, it's hard to get much simpler than something that has two non-moving parts.
- It is easy to understand. You look at the bread and see the body of our Lord. You look at the wine and see the blood of our Lord. It is symbolic communication at its simplest. We use symbolic communication when we want to say something that is profound and complicated, but say it in a simple manner. If you'd like another example, look at the wedding ring.
- It is effective. It is effective because it brings to us the atonement that Christ made on the Cross. It is effective because that atonement brings to us the forgiveness of God the Father.

Of course, like all tools, you need to know how to use it. It is not complicated.

- You begin with self examination. This will require you to be honest with yourself, looking at your own actions to see if there is something you know that God will not approve. Bring it out, identify it and begin to deal with it.
- Since you know what it is, confess it. Admit that you are wrong, admit that you sent. Bring it to the light of the cross and let it be seen.
- There is no use in bringing it out and admitting it unless you intend to do something about it. Complete your confession by beginning your repentance. Determine that you will change; you will turn around and not go in that direction anymore.
- Then — and most important of all – except the grace that God the father has given you at the cross. For those who will confess and repent he offers you forgiveness. That forgiveness is not just a one time thing. Some of us will be confessing today to the same old sin, trying one more time to turn from it. The grace of Jesus is still greater than all our sin.

It is simple; easy to understand and effective. But like all tools, you have to use it, and use it correctly, to get results.

Gall of Bitterness

July 1

In Acts chapter 8 we find the interesting story of Simon the sorcerer. We need not going to details; it is sufficient for us to notice that Simon attempted to buy the ability to lay his hands on people and give them the Holy Spirit. Peter, who was asked to sell, told Simon quite bluntly his heart was in the wrong place. In so doing he used an interesting expression: "gall of bitterness." This is found in the King James and New American Standard; the New International translates it differently, ignoring the colloquial expression. The word which is translated "gall" is used in only one other instance in the New Testament. It is found in Matthew's account of the crucifixion, where Jesus is offered wine mixed with gall.

What is gall? As the ancients would've used the word, it is a secretion of the liver. The substance is rather yellow and green colored and tastes extremely better — though why anyone would want to taste it I could not say. The people of Peter's time believed (incorrectly) that gall taken from a reptile was the source of its poison. Thus, gall could be seen as a somewhat poisonous substance. The wine offered to Jesus is in some Gospels described as vinegar, whose original meaning is "sour wine." The gall was added to counteract the sour taste and was believed to have some anesthetic quality as well.

The question occurs: why did our Savior refused to drink it?

- The passage in Acts gives us one answer, symbolically. He wanted to be clear that there was no bitterness within him. He did not go to his death cursing those who nailed him to the cross, or those who sent him there. Rather, he asked his Heavenly Father to forgive them. It is an example to us that bitterness has no place in a Christian's life.
- More obviously, it was our Savior's intent to suffer the penalty of the cross to the fullest extent possible. He rejected the wine until the very end of the crucifixion, when its anesthetic properties could do him no good. The wine he took at the very end before saying, "It is finished" was not mixed with gall. Even though the wine and gall was offered to him as a matter of kindness, he refused it in obedience to the Father's command.

It was our Lord's intention to drink the cup his Father had given him, not the cup of wine. The notes to the ancient Geneva Bible put it this way: "Christ took no comfort, that in Him we might be filled with comfort."

Does the gall of bitterness afflict you today, Christian? Examine yourself for this, and then take it to your Lord in prayer before you partake of Communion. In giving his body and blood, laid out before you, he had no bitterness. He would drive any bitterness from you — if you will but ask. Examine yourself, and then partake in a worthy manner.

Tradition

July 8

The reader will pardon the story in the first person. Please be assured; this really did happen to your author; it's not just a "preacher story."

When I was 10 years old my father, a career soldier, was transferred to a new post — a proving ground. This is a place where the Army test fires cannon, tank guns, mortars, and conducts all sorts of highly destructive tests. Shortly after we arrived, my family was obliged to attend a training session.

The instructor began by telling us that the post had a long-standing tradition which was part of this training session. He began by taking us to one end of the parade ground and placing there a can of explosive. As I recall, it weighed about 5 pounds; it was not very big. We then marched the length of the parade ground — about 300 yards — in a hot Midwest summer. When we reach the other end of the parade ground our instructor set off the explosive.

Please, forget everything you have learned about explosives in Hollywood movies. This small can of explosive went off with a tremendous roar and a shockwave which almost knocked us over. All of my curiosity evaporated with the shockwave. I had absolutely no interest in taking apart anything that remotely resembled a military explosive. Our instructor went on to explain that the proving ground contained many examples of unexploded ordnance – all of which should be left strictly alone.

As I mentioned, this was considered a traditional introduction to unexploded ordnance. Why do we do things in a traditional way?

- Tradition works. That small can of explosive made the point much more clearly than any number of charts, graphs or modern audiovisual aides could possibly do. They used this method because it worked.
- We also use tradition because practice makes perfect. This demonstration was repeated every time a new family joined the post. They had it down to a tradition; they practiced it well.
- Like all military personnel, our instructor would eventually be transferred off the post. By doing things in a traditional way, he was able to pass on to the next instructor that which worked well. We do the same; when we have something working well we pass it on to the next generation via tradition.

Communion benefits from the same process of tradition. We keep doing it because it works; the grace of God does not grow stale with age. It is eternal, and things eternal are often best set in tradition.

Tradition is also a way of making practice make perfect. What is it that we practice at communion? We practice confession and repentance, for at communion a man is to examine himself before partaking. And of all the things we do, is this not one of the most important to pass on to the next generation?

Communion is a tradition as well as a commandment, handed down to you from the time of the Apostles. Keep the faith – and pass it along.

Melchizedek

July 15

Sometimes God uses the living bodies of human beings as canvas on which to paint a picture. An example from the Old Testament might be Hosea, and his love for his unfaithful wife — a picture of God's love for the people of Israel. In our own time, we are taught that marriage is a picture of the love Christ has for his church.

One such picture is Melchizedek.[12] The man appears out of nowhere — no genealogy, no explanation of his existence and only the briefest description of him as the King of Salem. He is a complete mystery in the Old Testament, but he is also the greatest of priests. The ancient Jew would see this in the fact that Melchizedek blessed Abraham, which is always the action of one greater towards one who is lesser. Abraham tithed to him. Interestingly, he brings out bread and wine to Abraham — the very same elements we use in communion.

There is only one reference to him in the Old Testament; it is Psalm 110. The Psalm is prophetic, concerning Christ. Looking at this from the light of the New Testament, we see that the Christ is a priest – but not like the Old Testament ones. He is a priest like Melchizedek, and thus greater than the Old Testament priests. The matter is explained more fully in the book of Hebrews.[13]

Have you ever asked yourself just what it is that the priest is supposed to be and do? Consider these three duties:

- The priest represents us to God – and represents God to us.
- The priest intercedes for us with Almighty God.
- The priest offers sacrifices.

We see all of this in Christ, our High Priest. In him we see God in the flesh, the Word incarnate. But God also sees us through him, for it is said that his blood covers our sins. He intercedes for us with God the Father. He offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

At communion we remember his sacrifice. The cup represents his blood; the bread represents his body. It is by this sacrifice that he is able to intercede for us; it is by his sacrifice for our sins are covered. In the presence of communion we are in the presence of Christ our Lord. The greatness of God is held in our hands. It is fitting, therefore, that we do this in a worthy manner. We should not take it trivially; we should not view it as an interruption to the worship service; we should not take it as an empty ritual. Rather, we are instructed to examine ourselves. Look inside; see if there is any wicked way with you. Confess your sins and repent of them – and then accept the sacrifice which covers them.

God likes to draw living pictures; this is one of them.[14]

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[12] Genesis 14:18-20
[13] Hebrews 6:20-7:28
[14] The reader will pardon the extreme brevity of this explanation. I encourage you to explore the depths of this matter more fully on your own.

Deaf

July 22

There are many translations of the Bible. Indeed, the Christian who goes to a local bookstore to buy a copy of the Bible is confronted with a large array of different versions. Some of these versions are based on the same translation, usually the New International, and others are completely different translations — with very different purposes. Some attempt to be a modern update of the great King James Version; others brag about their footnotes or even which famous preacher wrote the devotional commentaries that are included.

There are also some specialty versions. One of the most common of these is a Bible for someone who's English is not very good — for example, someone who is a recent immigrant to our country. There are others which are designed to be used by new Christians, or for those in a particular age group. We have a wide variety of these Bibles.

One of the most specialized of these versions is the Bible for the Deaf. It is not an adaptation, but an original translation specifically designed to be transmitted in sign language. Apparently, sign language has its limitations in transmitting what might be considered the ordinary text of the Bible. In a sense, it's a translation into a foreign language for most of us — a language made up of pictures.

It's not entirely a unique idea. There are several languages on the planet, quite common, which are ideographic – meaning they are made up of pictures rather than letters. Japanese is one such language, likewise Chinese and if you go back far enough, Egyptian hieroglyphics. Our road signs are also pictographic, which brings with it the advantage that people who don't speak English can still understand our "no parking" signs. If you will, everybody "gets the picture."

Communion is pictographic as well. The bread that we use is a picture of the body of Christ. It's a simple picture which makes it easy to understand in any language. The cup — wine in the time of the apostles — was selected because it is red, and therefore an excellent picture of the blood which he shed on the Cross.

Signs and languages have a purpose: to convey a message. Communion conveys a message too. It tells us that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ loved us so much that he died on a cruel cross so that we might be forgiven of our sins. This simple picture was given to us so that we might remember the greatest gift ever given to mankind.

Restoration

July 29

Have you ever had an antique piece of furniture in rather poor condition? If the piece is valuable enough, or has precious memories associated with it, you are likely to want to get it restored. Some of you will want to do the restoration yourself; others will take it to a professional. But the object is the same: the restoration of something precious.

In the church there are two kinds of restoration:

- We speak of restoring a position — as in, "he's in a position to help." Sin puts you out of position with God; when that happens, you need to get back to the position you previously had.
- More important is the restoration of a relationship. This could be our relationship with God, or could be our relationship with another human being. Here too, sin put you out of a relationship that you should have. Sometimes our relationships need restoration.

Restoration is not easy. It requires work; it requires sacrifice and it requires humility.

In a way Communion is a formal restoration of our position and relationship to God. When we confess our sins, repent and accept the grace offered to us symbolically in Communion, we are being restored.

- We are being restored to our position as children of God, members of the divine household. In that position we are privileged to intercede on behalf of others with the Almighty God.
- We are being restored in our relationship to God as well. The basis of that relationship is love; sin disrupts love.

This is not something we could do on our own. Our restoration is the result of His work and His sacrifice — but it does require our humility.

There is also a sense of physical restoration in Communion. We take it "until He comes." Every time we take Communion we proclaim our belief that Christ will return in bodily form someday — and that we, in a new bodily form, physically restored, will rise to greet him. To take Communion is to proclaim that we believe in the resurrection of the dead, just as we believe in the resurrection of Christ.

Until then? Keep the faith. Remember that you are a child of God, one in a position to intercede on behalf of others. To do that, keep your relationship right with God. Examine yourself, and partake in a manner worthy of a child of God.

Detective Story

August 5

Many of us are fans of detective fiction. One of the reasons such fiction appeals to human beings comes from the nature of the problems which are presented in a detective story.

- The detective story is always soluble. When you get to the end of the book, the name of the villain is known. It's not much of a detective story if you can't figure out who did it.
- The detective story is completely soluble. There are no loose ends to tie up; all of the red herrings are explained and the miscellaneous clues properly categorized. The solution is neat, tidy and complete.
- The detective story is solved in the same terms in which it was presented. We don't suddenly discover in the last chapter that there's been a ghost story in here all along.
- The detective story is always finite. When the mystery is solved, that's the end of the book.

Wouldn't it be great if all our problems in life were that kind of problem? But life's problems aren't like those in the detective story. Most of our problems in life come from sin, and those kinds of problems are rather different.

- Sin is always soluble — but not by you. Its solution is in Christ.
- Sin is not completely soluble. You may have to ask the forgiveness of someone you have offended — and they may not be willing to grant it. Its effects linger on.
- Sin is not solved them the same terms in which it is presented. Sin is presented in the terms of what you did; the solution is in what He did.
- Sin is not necessarily finite. Sometimes it keeps coming back to bite you again and again.

Sin is a very different kind of problem than those presented in detective stories. So what kind of answer should we expect?

- The answer is not a solution – it's a creation. We know that we are "a new creature in Christ" when we accept his forgiveness at baptism.
- That answer changes the problem. We no longer seek the solution to sin – we want to know how we can remain that new creature in Christ.
- The new creature in Christ knows the answer to that too: the continuing cycle of confession and repentance.

That cycle of confession and repentance is closely entwined with Communion. When you come before him to accept what he calls his body and his blood, you remember the sacrifice that made your forgiveness possible. But Communion should impel you to confess your sins and repent of them, so that you might take his body and his blood in a worthy manner. This is how you remain a new creature in Christ. As often as you do this, remember what it cost to solve the problem of your sin.

Loneliness

August 12

For many of us, loneliness is a commonplace of life. Often enough this is through no fault of our own, but through the various events of our lives. Many of you will know an elderly widow, whose friends are long gone, and her husband no longer with her, the very picture of loneliness. It is a very sad picture; I would encourage you to do what you can to brighten it.

Sometimes, however, our loneliness is self-inflicted. We are lonely because of the way we have treated other people, or they have treated us. Most of us know people like that; it seems impossible for them to have friends because of how they treat their friends. Their loneliness seems insurmountable.

Worse yet, there are those of us who are lonely with respect to God. The one constant lover of your soul should not be a distant name but the closest of relationships. When you can't talk to God, you are lonely indeed.

The reason, of course, is sin. Most of us understand this when we offend someone else and they stop speaking to us. Many of us have had a manager like the one who said, "I personally will do all the thinking around here because I personally have all the brains." He got to do all the thinking, including asking the question why he had no friends at work. Offending others breaks a relationship.

It works the same way with God. When you sin, you become distant from him. You don't want to talk to him because you know that he just might remind you of what you have done. As C. S. Lewis once said, you want to let sleeping worms lie. But this can be cured. The cure, however, is the one God prescribes: repentance and forgiveness.

Communion is God's offer to restore the relationship and rescue you from loneliness. When you accept Communion you acknowledge your own confession of guilt and your repentance. You cannot do otherwise; this is the body and blood of Christ, given for your sins. If you say you have no sin, why would you ever take Communion?

But see God's response to your taking his offer. He does not tell you to sit at the back of the church and be quiet; no, his response is, "welcome home." Every day he stands at the edge of the road, looking into the distance, seeing if there is some sign of the Prodigal Son coming up the road.

But you ask: how can I know this is true? The answer is in your hands. Your eyes can see it closely. The cup is his blood; the bread his body. They tell you of the sacrifice He made for your sin – because He loves you. As you partake, confess your sins and repent of them — and listen to God tell you, "welcome home."

A Gentleman's Word

August 19

Some of you will find this surprising. A writer was once gathering information for a book on the American banking system. He interviewed the president of a bank in a community which was primarily Amish. He asked this man what his default rate was; that is to say, what percentage of his loans were never paid back. He replied simply, "none."

The writer was absolutely astonished. It was incredible to him the bank could have that record; so he asked him a second time, "do you mean to tell me you've never had a problem with a loan?" The banker thought for a minute and replied: "Well, my father did once. But he went out and talked to the boy's father and they straightened it out."

Those of an older generation will remember being instructed with the phrase: "Your word is your bond." My father made it clear to me that I was expected to keep my word in all circumstances at all times. If I failed to do so, he would consider it a disgrace to the family as well as to me. He encouraged me to come to him for help if I needed it to keep my word. There it is; your word is your bond and your family backs you up.

May I ask you to consider God's promises in the same light? In particular, he has made four promises of supreme importance:

- He promised to send his son to us (Psalm 2:7). He fulfilled this when Christ was born.
- He promised that our Messiah would bear our sins, which we cannot bear ourselves (Isaiah 53:11). He did this at the Cross, our atonement.
- He promised that Christ would rise from the grave untouched (Psalm 16:9-10). This was fulfilled that that first Easter morning, at the empty tomb.
- He has promised that he will swallow up death in victory (Isaiah 25:8) — and this will be fulfilled when Christ returns and all of us rise from the dead.

The word of God is trustworthy. Indeed, when God takes a solemn oath he swears by himself for there is no one higher. The first three of these promises have already been fulfilled and we have his word that the fourth one is coming (soon, please Lord, soon). When we partake of Communion we are to remember that he sent his son to us, to bear our sins on the Cross, and that he rose from the grave. But we are also to remember that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. It is therefore fitting that we should examine ourselves as we partake, repenting of those things we find repugnant. We do this in memory of him; we also do it in anticipation of his return.

Eyeglasses

August 26

Although the use of the glass lens has been known since ancient times, the objects we would recognize as eyeglasses seem to have been invented in the 13th century. Ben Franklin is noted as the inventor of bifocals; those of us of a certain age should be grateful to him and his predecessors. With such lenses we can often restore our vision to what is considered normal.

Please note the object: to restore our vision. We don't buy glasses to obtain Superman's x-ray vision; we simply want to be able to see as well as we used to. But what if you want to exceed the normal range of vision? Well, if you want to see something very small you would use a microscope. If you needed a slight extension of your vision — for example, if you were bird watching — you might get a pair of binoculars. If astronomy is your object, you would get a telescope. If you want to see something beyond normal vision, you need the right lens.

In a sense, communion is a lens as well. It is a lens which allows us to see through time, exceeding our normal vision.

- Through communion we can see the past, looking all the way back to the Cross. In communion we see the atonement performed by Jesus Christ.
- Through communion we can see the present, deeply. For it is in contemplation of our Savior’s sacrifice and our own lives that we see our need for repentance.
- Through communion we can see the future, for we take communion "until he comes again." Each time we take communion we remember that he is returning.

The past is history; we can do nothing to change it. We can, however, learn from it and use its lessons to change our ways. The future is beyond our grasp, but we can shape our own future to some extent by the decisions we make today. Only the present is within our grasp. Let us therefore take the lessons of the past, and the teachings of our Lord; let us use them to anticipate what is to come when he returns with our reward. In short, let each of us examine himself, repent and ask Christ to strengthen us against the temptations to come.

For This Reason

September 2

May I bring to your attention and unusual passage in Scripture?

1 Corinthians 11:27-31 NASB (27) Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. (28) But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (29) For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. (30) **For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.** (31) But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. --- (The additional emphasis is added.)

Our ancient fathers would've understood this passage quite clearly. They would've recognized from the Old Testament that God often punishes the guilty by means of disease or disaster. Indeed, one of the main features of the book of Job is that his "friends" accuse him of being a secret sinner because — obviously to them — God must be punishing him.

The modern Christian has two objections to this. First, he says, we know what causes disease: bacteria (or whatever other modern cause.) Second, he says, we now know that God is a loving God and would certainly not do such a thing. The second objection is easily disposed of, for God is righteous as well as loving. We must take a bit more time with the first one.

If you want the right answers, you must first ask the right questions. As anyone who has suffered severely can tell you, the question which occurs to the mind is not, "why" but "why me?" The doctor's explanation satisfies our academic curiosity; we go to God with our spiritual curiosity intact. Why did God do this to me?

C. S. Lewis once said that God whispers in our pleasures but shouts in our pains. Pain is God's megaphone for getting our attention. Why does he do this? It is a result of the fact that he is love, and therefore desires that deep, personal relationship with his children. Think about it: can you have a personal relationship with someone if you don't know who they really are? If you don't know who God really is, can he have that personal relationship with you? The answer is obvious.

In Communion we know God with the deepest form of communication of which human beings are capable: symbolic communication. When you place that wedding ring on your bride's finger, you are saying "I love you" in a way far beyond the capability of mere words. What does it say for your marriage if you did that but really didn't mean it? That would be greatly insulting to your bride. Think how much more insulting it is to God when you take communion as if it means nothing.

Therefore, as you partake this morning, ask God in prayer that it may be the "real you" meeting the real God at his table. Do this in a worthy manner; you have been warned.

Love Ritual

September 9

Perhaps you have noticed this common phenomenon: people who are in love with each other develop little rituals. They are private little affairs; at the most you might notice something a little odd or just a bit humorous in their conduct.

Such rituals are usually known to the lovers only. For example, one man I know is in the habit of gently patting his wife on the back exactly eight times. Why eight? It's because the phrase, "I love you," has exactly eight letters. Every time he does this, he reminds her that he loves her.

Curiously, he does not do the same thing for his children. The ritual is a private one; rituals are like that. Often enough a ritual defines who is an insider and who is not. Such rituals don't have to be elaborate; actors, for example, sometimes tell each other to "break a leg." It's an encouragement to do a good job, but you have to be an actor to really know that. Love rituals have the same effect. You have to be "inside" the marriage to know the ritual; the ritual serves to reinforce who is "inside." It says, in a minor way, "you belong to me and I belong to you."

It's important to remember this: love empowers the ritual; the ritual only reaffirms that love. If the love is not there then the ritual is empty.

Communion, as a ritual, serves the same purpose. It is something only the "insiders" (Christians) would really understand, for this is a ritual between Christ and his bride — the church. To those outside the church it is meaningless; to those inside the church, it is the sacrament of love. It symbolizes to us the love that our Savior has for us, demonstrated At the Cross. There is no greater love; Communion reminds us of this.

But like any ritual of love, the love must be real or the ritual is empty. So as you partake of Communion today remember to acknowledge in your heart what the Lord has done for you. Remind yourself of his great love for us; he endured the Cross so that we might have life. Remember Jesus, the lover of your soul.

Portable Communion

September 16

It did not appear to be a major difficulty at first. The lady was dying of brain cancer, and her husband wished that she should have communion brought to her at home. It is a custom well-established in many churches that communion can be brought to the sick and the dying rather than have them travel to the church building. There seemed to be no one else available, and it appeared to be a small thing.

Perhaps we should have expected this; but there was no one appointed to do this on a regular basis. Indeed, it was with some difficulty we found the traveling communion kit. It evidently had not been used in some time. Apparently, no one thought this little ministry worthwhile.

It brings up the question: why do we take communion to people who are too sick to come to the church building on Sunday morning? Why would we go out of our way to perform this ritual in their home? The answer takes some examination.

If you go back into the original texts of the Scripture you will find that the word we translate as "communion" comes from the Greek word *koinonia.* It is often translated "fellowship." There are a number of uses for it:

- We are told that the Lord's Supper is fellowship "with the blood of Christ." When you take the Lord's Supper you are in fellowship with Christ.
- The same word is used to denote the sharing of worldly goods by the church. This means everything from sharing a meal to loaning your brother some of your tools.
- It's also used in the context of charitable giving, especially where one church gives to another church in a different area. A modern example might be your support of missionaries in Africa.
- Finally, it is used to describe a certain oneness of experience. Those who have been through the same troubles together understand that they are in fellowship with each other.

So then, communion is fellowship with Christ and his church. Can you imagine how important that must be to someone dying at home? We tend to do our dying in private places, out of other people's sight and mind. This may or may not be good, but it does have the effect that sometimes we ignore the dying. Likewise, when we don't ignore them, it is a great comfort to them to know that they are in fellowship with Christ and with the church. After all, when you're about to enter eternity the difference between heaven and hell is rather important.

But may I point out to you this: all of us die? The question of heaven and hell may become the most important thing you have at any moment. You want to face that moment of eternity in complete fellowship with Jesus Christ and his church. Taking the Lord's Supper means that you are in fellowship with the blood of Christ and with his church. If the ritual symbolism portrays the truth of Christ in your life, then you indeed have accepted his sacrifice on the cross. That means your destination for all of eternity is with Christ.

So, just how important is communion?

To Remember Is To Renew

September 23

Have you ever been to your high school reunion? Some of us (this author included) would view the prospect of a high school reunion as an absolute terror. But others look back on our high school days with great fondness, and a reunion is something which refreshes the memories of a very pleasant age. Military veterans know something of the same thing. If your military service was dull and boring (mine was) there is usually no reunion. But if you served in combat the friends you made there are friends for a lifetime. A reunion of your old outfit is an occasion not to be missed.

There are personal reunions too. It's a common case that, no matter how large the university you went to, you have friends that you want to see for the rest of your life. It may be only once a year, but the opportunity is cherished and you approach it with a smile.

It's something that is built into human beings. We want to remember the good times, or even the tragic times that bonded us together. But human memory fades; sometimes that's a good thing. Other times, it causes us to neglect the good times or even the great times of our lives. Humans, however, have a way of dealing with this. We invent rituals so that we might remember the past. They may not be very formal. Often enough at a military reunion the chaplain offers a prayer for those who never returned. It's customary; it's a ritual. If you go to your high school reunion, you might sing your school's alma mater. The truth is that rituals renew our memories.

Communion is a ritual — a ritual that renews our memories each time we participate. This is a ritual which commemorates the most important event in human history: the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Of all events this is the one most worth remembering. Indeed, the Christian knows that it is the most important event in his own personal life. It gives eternal life; therefore, it is much greater than any human event that we could remember in our own lives.

There are three essential steps in this ritual, each of which reminds you of the sacrifice of your Lord on the Cross:

- First, there is confession. You came to the Cross because you are a sinner. It's time to bring out the details.
- Second, there is repentance. There is no sense at all in telling the Lord that you are a sinner, that this is the particular sin, and that you don't want to do anything about it.
- Finally, partake in the elements of the Lord's Supper. The bread is his body, the cup is his blood; take, eat, remember — and renew.

Passing Over

September 30

Most Christians are aware of the fact that Communion was instituted by Christ using the Passover meal of the Jews. This was done at what we call the Last Supper; and it is a fact that Communion is taken directly from Passover. For example, the bread that we use is unleavened, just as the Jews used unleavened bread in Passover. The elements of Passover were transformed by Christ to represent his body and his blood, as sacrificed on the Cross.

What many Christians do not know is where the name "Passover" came from. It came from the fact that the Angel of Death passed over the Jewish houses in Egypt (those marked with the blood of the Lamb) and did not visit the plague of the firstborn death upon them. That's how Passover got its name.

The impact of the story is quite difficult to visualize. One example of how difficult this is comes from Cecil B. DeMille in his motion picture *The Ten Commandments.* The first nine plagues were shown quite well, by the special effects standards of the time, in that movie. But the death of the firstborn children doesn't lend itself too much to special effects. DeMille portrayed this simply by the wailing of the mothers. It's hard to picture. You can see a similar effect if you talk to combat veterans. Many of them know what it is like to have someone next to them killed yet they themselves are unharmed. It produces a very spooky sensation — and one they don't usually like to talk about. We get a very funny feeling when death just misses us; when death passes over us.

Christ took this incident and gave it an entirely new application — eternal life. If you have made Jesus Christ Lord of your life, then you are one who is saved and will spend eternity with him. Passed over? Yes, you are passed over for eternal death — the eternal torment of hell.

You did not purchase this passing over. It was freely given to you by Jesus Christ — but it did have a price. That price was the Cross. The elements of Communion symbolize his body and his blood. Therefore, remember the sacrifice he made for you. Then partake with humble gratitude, in a worthy manner.

Didn't Happen To Me

October 7

Every church congregation develops a series of customs which soon become familiar. For many years in our congregation it was customary on the Sunday before December 7, Pearl Harbor Day, to have the veterans of the World War II rise and be recognized. When a new preacher was hired he was evidently not told of this custom. The veterans of the war were then few, and no recognition was given. To the old-timers in the church this seemed almost sacrilegious. The custom is now gone.

The problem is repeating itself, however. The older generations take note of the anniversary of September 11, 2001. But if you ask the next generation for the significance of that date, you will get a blank stare. They have no idea why you hold this date with regard. The reason for this is simple: September 11 didn't happen to them. It happened to you. For many of our people, if it didn't happen in their lifetime it's not worth remembering.

Older heads know better. We know that there are some things that are worth memorializing even though they happen before we were born. For example:

- We remember and memorialize great changes in our society. Who could fail to be stirred by a visit to Independence Hall in Philadelphia, touching the Liberty Bell?
- We remember and memorialize great sacrifice. To go to Gettysburg and walk the battlefield is a moving experience. The sheer number of marble monuments tells you that the survivors were compelled to remember the great number of their fallen comrades.
- We remember and memorialize great men. If you go to Washington DC you can see the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument and many others.

These things took place; these men lived well before our time. How do we memorialize something like that? Sometimes we do it in stone; sometimes we do it in ritual.

You see, of course, that all three of these kinds of great things to remember apply to Jesus Christ. What greater change has ever happened to the human race than the advent of the grace of God? What sacrifice could be greater than the sinless One on the Cross? What man could be greater than the man who was God in the flesh?

The sacrifice of the Cross happened about 2000 years ago; we remember it in ritual so that we might be reminded of an event that none of us have ever seen — but all of us know. As you take the bread and the cup this morning, remember the greatness of the grace of God, the sacrifice of Jesus, the man who was God in the flesh. Take, eat and drink, and remember.

Hearing Aid

October 14

Getting your first hearing aid can be an interesting experience.

Once you get past the initial testing of your ears — the frustrating process of listening for beeps that may or may not be there — you discover that it is not a simple matter of handing you a hearing aid. There are multiple adjustments that must be made, usually with a hearing aid connected to a computer. The person doing the work mumbles a good deal (at least until you get the hearing aid in) and speaks in jargon completely unfamiliar to the user. Meanwhile, you just sit there. It's a little frustrating to think that it's your hearing aid, going through all these adjustments, but the only adjustment that actually pertains to you is whether or not you can stick it in your ear.

There is usually a button to push; the real instructions come at the end of the session. You are handed a little cleaning tool and given the only firm instructions you'll get. The admonition a simple: keep the hearing aid clean. If you don't, it won't work. If you can change the batteries and use the little brush, you can keep the hearing aid working.

But if it isn't clean it won't work. That's not at all unique to hearing aids. For example, there is a good reason you change the oil in your car. There's a reason there's an oil filter in your car — he's things keep the oil clean, which lubricates the engine well, and keeps you on the road instead of the repair shop. This also applies — believe it or not — to your computer. Particularly for those machines that have a tower that is placed on the floor, it's possible for cat hair, dust and dirt to clog the filter and sometimes get in the machine itself. This can cause some of the sensitive bits to overheat — and that's not good.

If it isn't clean, it won't work. Did you know that also applies to Christians? We are meant to have a relationship with our Lord based upon righteousness. We cannot achieve such righteousness by ourselves, but that does not relieve us of the effort of trying.

How do you do this? The process starts with self-examination. There's a reason it's part of communion; if you want to have the right relationship with your Lord, the regular cleansing of the Christian is a requirement. That means you're going to have to examine yourself. Check and see that nothing is clogged by sin. Sin gets between you and the Lord Jesus Christ; seek his help in sweeping it out of the way. You do this by repentance, then asking forgiveness. He will not only forgive, but cleanse.

Once you've done this, then, you are ready to take communion. Your relationship is restored and cleansed once again. But don't forget who made this possible. Communion is a memorial to the sacrifice Christ made on the cross, and it is by that sacrifice that you are made clean. Therefore, as you take communion honor the Lord who makes your cleansing possible.

Welcome

October 21

Have you ever encountered the social situation in which you weren't really sure whether or not you are welcome, even at home? All of us know the distinction between being really welcome and knowing that your host is socially obligated, though reluctant. Sometimes, however, were not exactly sure.

- For example, how did you feel the first time you had dinner with your future in-laws? Were you sure of a warm welcome, or were you facing the Spanish Inquisition?
- Sometimes it's closer to home. For example, do you remember the feeling when you came home after getting your first traffic ticket (or having your first traffic accident) and knowing that your father was waiting for you?
- Sometimes you're sure you're going to be welcome. A good example of this is when you bring the first grandchild home to your mother. No matter what the circumstances, a baby's smile is always welcome.

The Prodigal Son understood the problem perfectly. He had taken dad's money and squandered it, demonstrating in the process the dad shouldn't have trusted him with it in the first place. He knew he wasn't welcome. In fact, as he was walking home, he was practicing his apology speech. He understood his own sins; he didn't understand his father's love.

Oh he got the speech out, all right. It's just that dad ignored it. Dad saw him coming a long way off and took off towards him at a run. While dad was hugging and kissing him he got out his speech. Dad simply didn't care; his boy was home and that was all that mattered. Your Heavenly Father is like that.

The ultimate proof of the Father's love is found at the Cross. The night before Jesus was crucified he told his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them. He was making sure they were welcome in heaven.

It's normal for Christians to yearn for heaven. It's also normal to have doubts about whether or not you're going to get there. But you're welcome in heaven was guaranteed at the Cross. Indeed, the Scripture assures us that Christ is our forerunner, going ahead of us into heaven to prepare that place for us.

One other thing about being welcome: it usually involves a meal. Is there any sight which is as welcoming as a table that has been set in anticipation of your arrival? That table is set before you today in Communion. As you take the bread in the cup remember that your Lord has gone ahead of you to prepare a place for you — a place where you will be welcome. A place called home.

Easy

October 28

You have probably seen the commercial. There's a stationery company which advertises its services by the use of what they call an "easy" button. The gimmick of the commercial is that you press the easy button and all of your needs (at least in terms of paper goods) are instantly met. It's a giant red button; therefore, you won't even have any trouble finding the button to hit it.

Have you ever asked yourself why they use this method? The answer is simple enough. They know that you think ordering products like this is something that's hard. Stationery stores typically carry a very wide variety of products, and this can make finding exactly what you want rather difficult. They know that you think it's hard.

But what if you're right? What if it is hard? After all, not everything in life can be easy. In fact, we tend to avoid those things which are hard and do the things which are easy. So let me ask you: is Communion hard or easy?

At first it seems that Communion is easy. After all, you're not the one who is dying on the cross; your job is to remember the death on the cross. You're not the one doing the suffering. Someone else paid the price for your sins on that cross — and that absolutely has to be the hard part of the entire thing. More than that, you've already gone through the process of accepting your salvation. Most of us remember that as a rather emotional experience — but it's over. It's done. Remembering that sacrifice is easy; remembering the benefits that it brought you is a joyful experience. Communion is easy.

But perhaps it is not easy. We are told that at Communion we are to examine ourselves. Self-examination is never particularly easy, especially when it concerns something like sin. It is intrinsic to the nature of self-examination that you are looking for something which is defective; nobody ever looks to see how wonderful they are. You look to see if something's wrong. At communion, you are looking for sin in your life; that's not easy.

Once you find it — and there is nothing like looking to cause finding — you are told to confess it. Own up to it; "man up," as they say in the military. It's not that God doesn't know that you're a sinner; he just wants to hear it from you. He wants you to know what he already knows. So admit it. That's hard.

Then once you've admitted it, repent of it. Most of the difficult things in life involve change, particularly change for the person. We are often creatures of habit; we don't really want to change the curtains in the bedroom, let alone the way we behave towards others. But that's what repentance is; a change of you. It's a difficult thing to do; Communion is hard.

So you tell me: is Communion hard or easy? Maybe it depends on the amount of practice you've had.

Return

November 4

Most of us are familiar with the story of the Exodus. Among its other virtues is the fact that it makes great theater. If you don't think so, ask Charlton Heston — the guy who parted the Red Sea. When God called the Jews out of Egypt, the Exodus was accompanied with numerous and frequent miracles.

But did you know that there's a second Exodus in the Bible? It's found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah — two books that you have probably never studied. Should you chance to read them, you will discover that the miracles so prevalent in Exodus are completely missing. Yet the Jews shown to us in Ezra and Nehemiah place their complete confidence in the Providence of God — even though they have not one miracle to see.

You might well ask why. It's because the nation of Israel, coming out of Egypt, felt that they were righteous but oppressed. The nation of Israel coming out of Babylon knew that, as a nation, they were sinners. The attitudes were completely different; coming from Egypt we felt the anger and insecurity they showed us. Coming out of Babylon we see their sense of guilt.

It is instructive therefore to see what these Jews did. They had to get permission from the king to do this, but a small group of them set out for Jerusalem. Their objective was simple: rebuild the Temple. That something is going to take quite a while, building techniques being what they were in those days. It was a journey of several months just to get from Babylon to Jerusalem. When they arrived, they put first things first. They did not immediately start upon the building of the temple. Rather, they built an altar on which to make sacrifices, in accordance with the Law of Moses. They started celebrating the feasts which were described there. In short, their first step was to be obedient to the commands of God — even though they felt very guilty about what they had done.

There is a lesson for us in this. Many people will tell you that they can't come to church; they can't take Communion because "they don't have their act together yet." This is an exquisitely wrong attitude. In communion we see the steps by which the Christian comes back to Christ. It starts with self examination; what have I done? After this comes confession. God already knows what you've done; he wants you just to admit it. Once you've admitted it, he wants you to try to correct it; it's called repentance. In Communion we see the way back to the heart of God.

It came as a surprise to the Prodigal Son that his father would want him back. Perhaps it surprises you that God wants you back, also. He doesn't want you to be perfect before you come back to him; he just wants you to come back. He doesn't want your perfection; he wants to give you his.

Mega-church

November 11

One of the recent developments in church history is what is called a mega-church. One of these churches recently opened its new building; for those who grew up in a country church, it's quite a change.

The first thing to strike you is a fantastic quality of the audio and video productions. Most preachers don't get to have a high definition, 40' x 60' screen behind them for their audiovisual aides. The impact of the site and the sound reminded one most of all of a rock concert. The preacher was his usual self — humble to a fault, humorous as always with a heartfelt message. As befits a church this size his presentation was detail perfect. In fact, the entire thing is not described as a "worship service" but is officially known as a "weekend experience."

Of course the church I grew up in had something similar — in a way. Well, we had a piano (an organ with just a little too expensive) and there were hymn books in the pew racks. People knew how to sing, even in four-part harmony. The preacher's messages were simple, but it must be noted that his collection of jokes was rather small and often repeated. It was a simple church; simple, but sound.

It's hard to think of two churches that are more different, but one thing they had in common — right down to the last detail. That one thing was Communion. Both churches use the same simple plastic cups, filled with the same stuff. The little wafer of bread was identical. The trays were identical.

Both churches offered the fruit of the vine as a memorial to the blood of Christ. Just as Christ commanded, both churches remembered his blood shed on the cross. Both churches offered the bread as a memorial to the body of Christ. Both churches did so in imitation of what the Lord instituted at the Last Supper.

These two churches are so different; how is it that this part of their worship is the same?

- Both of these churches serve the same Lord — one Lord, one faith, one birth.
- Both of these churches honor the same sacrifice by that Lord — his death on the cross as atonement for our sins.
- Both of these churches celebrate the same victory. On Easter Sunday that one Lord they both serve walked out of the tomb, alive.

He lives; we serve a risen Savior – the same Lord, the same remembrance.

Shiny Sequin

November 18

The Christmas gift giving season is upon us. If you head out to your local Christian bookstore you will soon find gifts in abundance. They tend to come in three categories.

- There are the traditional gifts; such things as nativity sets, candles and tree ornaments.
- Some items might be classified as “new every year” — the type of gift is the same but each year it looks a little different. These are things like books, Christmas themed cookware and mugs, and of course Christmas cards.
- Then there are the not so traditional gifts. This year we have a Veggie Tales Flip Train, for example. Or, if you tend more to the scriptural side, there is a version of the International Children’s Bible which is known as the “Shiny Sequin Bible.” (Really.)

If you stare at the selection long enough you will eventually begin to ask yourself, “just what is Christmas all about?” The answer for the Christian is very simple: it commemorates the incarnation of God. That means that we are celebrating the fact that God, the creator of the universe, came to live among us as a human being, born as a baby. It is the miracle upon which all of Christianity depends.

It is also the miracle that makes the atonement of Christ possible. The sacrifice which atones for our sin must be perfect, and perfection comes only from God. But the sacrifice also needed to be “in the flesh”; and therefore human like us. It is this combination of perfect God and perfect man which makes Christ eligible to be our atonement sacrifice. The incarnation — Christmas — looks forward to the cross, and from there to Easter Sunday.

It is in the incarnation that God gives us his greatest gift: himself. We celebrate that each week when we take Communion. The bread you take symbolizes his real, physical body; the flesh of a human being who was also divine. The cup celebrates the blood. The Old Testament teaches us that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. If Christ does not suffer, we cannot be saved.

So it is that we take Communion on a regular basis, at his command. It was given to us as a Memorial — something that would cause us to remember. We are to remember his sacrifice, his great love for us — and to do so until he comes again. The incarnation — Christmas — was his first coming. His children eagerly await his return.

Shoe Size

November 25

One of the more mundane consequences of the incarnation of God is this: Jesus of Nazareth had a shoe size. We don't know what it was, of course. In fact, Jesus probably wore sandals which tend to have a looser fit than shoes. We don't know if those were custom-made sandals to fit his feet, or whether or not they were just a standard, one size fits all sandals. We do know that he didn't have to put up with credit cards to buy a pair of sandals, nor did he have thousands of styles to choose from. But he did have feet, just like the rest of us. We may therefore safely conclude that, just like the rest of us, sometimes his feet hurt. As he walked everywhere he went this is quite likely.

The humanity of Christ carries with it a profound implication: he knows how you feel. He knows the pain of ordinary living. When he got up in the morning during the winter, his feet were cold. I suspect the sandals didn't do much to warm them up. So he understands the pains of daily living. He understands the frustration dealing with other people who have petty grievances, strange eccentricities and feuds from long ago still being carried forward. A man who fasted forty days in the wilderness certainly understands what it is to be on a diet. Jesus is fully human — and therefore understands what it is to put up with the rest of us.

This gives us insight as to how he approached the Cross.

- The pain of the Cross was real — and Jesus knew it. He had probably seen many executions before (they were a common public sight). There is little doubt that the anticipation was not at all pleasant.
- Thus, the fear of the Cross was also real. He knew what it was like to experience the terror of pain which would arrive in the morning.
- Therefore, the ache to be released was also real. You cannot read the account of his prayers in Gethsemane without knowing that this was a man who wanted so much to find some other way to accomplish what God wanted.

The astounding fact in all this is simply that Jesus did not have to do this. He did not have to come as a baby in the first place; he did not have to suffer — unless he wanted to do his Father's will. Out of the Father's will came the love which placed Jesus on the Cross.

As you partake of Communion this morning, remember that the bread is your reminder of his body hanging on the Cross. The cup is your reminder of the blood shed out of love for you. Examine yourself; take these solemnly — and remember.

Celebrate

December 2

Have you ever considered the many uses of the English verb “to celebrate?”

- We say that we celebrate holidays. That can be a joyous thing, at Christmas or solemn thing such as Veterans Day.
- More personally, we celebrate anniversaries and birthdays — something that special to people we love.
- We can also celebrate people. Lillian Lieber went so far as to introduce us to T. C. MITS - which stands for The Celebrated Man In The Street, who is mainly celebrated for being so ordinary.

The verb is also used with reference to communion; we “celebrate communion.” It’s an appropriate use of the word:

- It represents the original meaning of the word “holiday.” Holiday originally came from the phrase “holy day”, and communion certainly marks a holy day.
- It might not celebrate a birthday, but it is, in a sense, a celebration of a rebirth-day. Each of us knows what it means to be born again.
- Most of all, it celebrates a person: Jesus, the Christ. It is his accomplishment on the Cross that we see in communion.

Perhaps more important is the question of why we celebrate.

- Sometimes we celebrate to remember something. Celebrating a birthday is like that; it is a remembrance of the fact that you were born. Such a celebration is welcome when your child but might be a bit less welcome as you get a bit older. Communion helps us remember what Christ did for us on the Cross; bringing us the love of God — and that is always worth remembering.
- Sometimes we celebrate to honor someone, as we do on Veterans Day. In communion we honor the man who gave his life that we might live — eternally.
- Sometimes the celebration is an occasion to reflect upon what has been done. It is not just a question of honoring someone, but reflecting upon what we should do about it. Communion is like that; we are told to examine ourselves.

“Let a man examine himself.” Self-examination is never very popular, because you’re looking for things that are wrong. But if you don’t look for things that are wrong, how would you ever find them? Self-examination brings our sins to the cross where they may be forgiven; self-examination brings us to the cross to seek the aid of the one who truly can help. Examine yourself; seek his forgiveness and accept it in the body and blood given to you now.

Traffic Jam

December 9

Perhaps the Guinness Book of Records might know for certain, but it's likely enough that the world record traffic jam — at least for length — recently occurred in Russia. The traffic in question occurred on the road between St. Petersburg and Moscow, a distance of 125 miles. The entire roadway was jammed — 125 miles of pure traffic jam. The major cause of this (and the traffic jam was on both sides of the road) was 3 feet of snow which fell rather suddenly. As of this writing, the Russian officials say that they have reduced the traffic jam down to "only" 34 miles. It has lasted several days as of this writing.

That is what my mother used to call a "learning experience." Simply put, mother's attitude was that you should learn something from this little problem. We might gather some lessons from this traffic jam:

- Patience would be the first thing that comes to mind. You might not be learning it as much is exercising it, but you would need it.
- For those who come from a warmer climate, this might just be a lesson that teaches you that snow and cold are life-and-death matters. You are definitely going to pay some attention to how good the automobile's heater is. This just might have an effect on what car you buy next.
- It would also teach you the importance of — or rather, the lack of importance of — that fancy walnut interior in your car. You'll know the difference between essentials and luxury.

You can depend upon it: if you're about to freeze to death your mind focuses on how to get warm very quickly. An automobile heater is an ordinary and mundane thing, until you're in 125 miles of snow with no movement in sight.

Communion can seem to be a mundane thing too. Many churches do it every week, and it fades into something routine. But like the heater in the car, Communion is an essential — not a luxury.

- It keeps you in contact with the most important person in the universe — Jesus, the Christ, the creator of all things.
- It keeps you in contact with the most important facts in all of history — the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord.

You need to stay in contact with Christ and the power of his resurrection; it is a matter of eternal life and death. That's what Communion is about. So as you partake, think. When it's a matter of life and death, stay with the simple things that work.

Manners

December 16

Apparently St. Paul had some difficulty with the Corinthians on the rowdy way in which they celebrated Communion. He was obliged to impose a little dignity upon them.

Parents understand this quite well — children must learn to be civilized. You start out with a baby. When they get hungry, they scream. When you feed them, they stuff their faces as rapidly as possible, as full as possible. Despite your very best efforts to anticipate this and to meet their every need, they show you absolutely no gratitude whatsoever.

Eventually, of course, the baby becomes a child. A certain primitive set of manners is imposed. The child no longer screams when hungry, for example. After a little discipline and training the child no longer stuffs his face as full as possible as fast as possible. Gratitude? Well, that seems to come a little bit later. Those of you who are parents of young children, do not despair.

What about adults? It's our expectation that adults should be polite at meals, in whatever form fits the occasion. For example, we expect adults to wait patiently and quietly until the food is served. It's our expectation that they eat with decorum which is appropriate to the occasion. It might be a backyard barbecue full of fun, or it might be a solemn, formal dinner, or anything in between. No matter what the occasion we have an expectation of proper conduct. In particular, we anticipate that adults will express proper gratitude, both for the meal and for the surroundings in which they find themselves.

Have you ever considered that the Lord's Supper has a similar set of expectations for good behavior? We are to wait for it with anticipation — and patience. We are to take it in a worthy manner, showing a proper, solemn respect. In some churches there is music playing; others, not. But if there is music it is appropriate to the occasion.

What may surprise you is that a certain amount of gratitude is proper on this occasion as well.

- The fact that you are in church at all implies a certain freedom — and not all Christians have it. You should be grateful for the fact that you can meet in an open church meeting.
- Of course, the central purpose of the meal is to remember the death of Christ. His sacrifice for you is the occasion of the greatest gratitude. Why? It is the greatest exhibition of love that man has ever known.
- Beyond that, you should have a heart of gratitude for the fact that by this sacrifice you are given salvation.

For those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, blessed are they — for at this meal they shall be filled.

Beginnings

December 23

Elementary school teachers of any experience will tell you that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, which attracts a crowd of fifth grade girls quite like a newborn baby in a stroller. The attraction is almost magnetic. Interestingly, most adults think of this as a teachable moment, a chance to explain to the girls just how much trouble a newborn baby can be. It doesn't seem to help very much.

The truth is that human beings love new beginnings. It is a God-given fact that young girls see a newborn baby as being absolutely precious. The natural view of a new human being is one of hope; we see great things ahead and monumental cuteness now.

Adults tend to view the arrival of a new baby somewhat differently. As a practical point of fact we tend to have a parallel to the Wise Men who attended Christ's birth — we call it a baby shower. While the Wise Men are the source of the custom of giving gifts at Christmas, the practical matter of fact is that a newborn baby needs a lot of things. The selection of baby gifts that Mary received was fittingly different than what we would ordinarily give. It might be reasonable to conclude however that there were no fifth-graders involved; after all, Mary and Joseph were new in town and they were living in a stable. It's a humble way to start a life, being born in a place away from family and friends. The birth of Christ was the same as the birth of any of the rest of us — only different.

So why do we celebrate the birth of Christ?

- First, because it is the supreme miracle of all time: the Incarnation. It is the time in which God, the creator of all things and the rumor of the universe, became one of us. His status as ruler was confirmed by the choir of angels and the gifts of the Wise Men; his status as human being was confirmed by a stable and shepherds.
- Second, because it is the birth of the supreme Person of humankind: the Christ. No other human being has had nearly the influence on human thought and human action as Jesus of Nazareth, the babe of Bethlehem.
- Perhaps the greatest reason is this: the birth in the manger is necessary for the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. Mary was warned that a sword would pierce her soul. Were it not for that sacrifice, Jesus of Nazareth would join the long list of teachers of man — and no more.

So as you partake of Communion today, remember that the babe in the manger became the man on the Cross. His shed blood, his body are before you. Remember the sacrifice that makes you clean.

Funeral

December 30

Once in a while you get to go to the funeral of a genuinely distinguished Christian. I'm speaking of a man who has devoted his life to the church, living the Christian life so well that his family and his friends knew him as "the real thing." A man in whom there is no hypocrisy, just the imitation of Christ. Such funerals are often well attended, and occasionally some of the guests are people who are not Christians. They tend to have a very interesting reaction to this: they think all these people who are Christians must be nuts.

Why is a funeral like this such a surprise? Most of the funerals a non-Christian goes to are rather sad affairs. After all, there is no real hope — either for the deceased or for the mourners. When you're dead, you're dead. You might have some spiritual leader delivering a vague message of hope that there must be something out there. There may be something out there — but the non-Christian can't see it. In this day and age, if you can't see it then it doesn't exist. There is no hope without Christ.

That's what surprises the non-Christian: hope. It seems that all these Christians know that they will see this person again in much better circumstances. The task at hand is not to mourn and grieve but to celebrate. A Christian funeral brings out all the funny pictures, all the stories from family and friends that bring a laugh or sometimes a tear. Often enough, it's not called a funeral. It's called what it is: a celebration. It's as if death is different for the Christian. It is.

Why is death so different for the Christian? Let's look at what's changed.

- Death has lost its real sting: sin. Let's face it: most of humankind believes in a judgment to come. There is a god out there someplace, and he is just and righteous. We're sinners — and he's going to do something about it. The Christian knows that God already has done something about it.
- For the Christian judgment has given way to redemption. Yes; something has to be done about sin. It has to be paid for. It has been — by Christ on the Cross.
- To the great surprise of the non-Christian, we do indeed expect to see this person again. Not just in some vague, gaseous spiritual form, but in the resurrection body. The church has always taught that Christ returns in joyful reunion with all of his saints. Lift up your heads; redemption draweth nigh.

The real cause of this celebration is Christ himself. He is the one who has paid the price of sin, doing so at the Cross. Sin is a debt; but the Christian has his debt marked paid. The story does not end at the Cross; after the cross comes the tomb, and after the tomb comes the resurrection. It is the triumph of life conducted by the author of life.

The Christian life is the imitation of Christ. There is one thing in his life that he asks you to remember on a regular basis: his sacrifice on the Cross. That's what communion is: remembering. As you take the cup remember his blood shed for you; as you take the bread remember his body broken for you. Do this in a worthy and noble manner, until he comes again. Then we shall see the fruits of the resurrection.

The Last Adam

January 6, 2013

Aerospace veterans, among many others, will recognize the word prototype. It comes from a pair of Greek words which, if translated literally, mean “first impression.” A prototype typically has three main functions:

- First, you have to prove the thing will work. It’s not just a picture of what you want; it’s a working example of it. It may, however, leave out some of the details.
- Next, it serves as a model for what is to come. You can go back and look at the prototype and see how you did it the first time.
- Perhaps its primary use is as a source of lessons learned. Often enough the prototype will tell you what you didn’t want to do.

Adam — you remember him, the fellow in Genesis chapter 3 — is the prototype human being. He is the original working model of the combination that makes human beings what they are: a hybrid of flesh and spirit. We have animals in wide variety, but only one animal has a spirit: man. Adam was the prototype of that. As such, he serves as a source of “lessons learned.” There are two which we might point out:

- The first is that man is, by his very nature, a sinner. It doesn’t get much simpler than this. You place man, created by a perfect God to be the perfect example in a perfect garden. You give him one possible thing to do wrong, which earned him the death penalty. What does he go and do? Right, he does that one possible thing to do wrong. Man, by nature, is a sinner.
- The second lesson is even greater. It is that God, by his nature, loves man to the point of redemption. The very first prophecy of the Christ is found in the story of the Garden of Eden.

As Paul points out in First Corinthians, Christ may be referred to as “the last Adam.” He too is, in a sense, a prototype — of what men will be following the resurrection. If Adam is the prototype of Man 1.0 then Christ is the prototype of Man 2.0. In Christ, after the crucifixion, we see the resurrection body. It’s not clear to us yet what this body is really like, but it is clear that it’s one we want.

This did not happen by chance. The new man comes about by death and burial and then the resurrection, just as Christ was raised from the dead. In communion we remember the price that was paid so that Christ might be the last Adam. That price was his death on the cross. As you take the bread and cup, remember that they represent his body and blood. That was the price paid. The result ultimately will be the resurrection in which you and I will become like him. We look forward to that result with joy; we look back to his suffering, and remember.

Friend of Sinners

January 13

Matthew 11:19 NASB "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Sins, it seems, come in a variety of categories.

There are several sins which are considered quite socially acceptable. Greed is always welcome when you call it "entrepreneurial spirit." Stinginess does quite well when you call it thrift. Indeed, the human mind is quite good at this. It's been known that a failure to evangelize has been called "preserving the character of our witness."

Certain sins fall into a rather indeterminate category. In our time this is particularly true of sexual sin. For many of us, sexual sin is something that someone else does. We, on the other hand, appreciate the beauty of sex. So we are not sure whether or not sexual misconduct is really unacceptable sin.

We still have unacceptable sins. It is considered more than tacky to get yourself rip roaring drunk and drive home, only to run into somebody on the way. Drug addiction — particularly if you're homeless — is also socially unacceptable.

Exactly which sins fall and what category has changed over time, but the idea that there are acceptable and unacceptable sins is a very ancient one. Jesus had to confront the same thing. We can tell which sins were socially unacceptable in his own time by the accusations made against him.

The most common one was that of gluttony. To put it quite simply, they felt that Jesus was a man who partied much too hearty — and with all the wrong people. As a matter fact, he seemed to regard his own presence as reason to throw a party. And on at least one occasion he invited himself to come. The man was a party animal.

The second one was that he had all the wrong friends. In those days the worst of friends to have was a tax collector — remember, they worked for the conquering Roman Empire. The IRS (at least in theory) works for us. A similar category was politely named "sinners." You didn't specify exactly what kind of sinners they were, because they were the sexual sort — and you might have to explain that to the kids. If you will recall, Jesus was merciful to the woman taken in adultery.

After the accusations we have this statement: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." It's a shorthand way of saying that all the smart people of the time thought that Jesus was really stupid for doing this. His answer is simply this: look at the results. If you want sinners to repent, you have to talk to sinners. They're not going to get it by osmosis. The truth is recorded; some of those centers repented. One of those tax collectors was a fellow named Matthew, the author of the gospel of that name. It's generally recorded that the socially unacceptable sinners loved the Man; the socially acceptable sinners turned their noses up at him.

It’s a good thing for us that Jesus didn’t take the advice of the socially acceptable sinners. One of the glories of the Cross is that salvation is open to all, whether your sins are socially acceptable or not. As the old saying goes, the ground is level at the foot of the Cross. As you partake of communion today, remember that the sacrifice of Christ was given not only for the gluttons, tax collectors and unmentionable sinners but also for those who sins are approved by our society. His sacrifice opens the door of heaven for all who will go through. Remember the price he paid as you partake this morning.

Review

January 20

Sir Winston Churchill, in his memoirs of World War II, recounts an incident which occurred after his first visit to the United States during the war. On the return trip (in a battleship) he stopped in Iceland. The United States had just started to take over the defense of Iceland, and Churchill was invited to review the troops of both the United States and Great Britain who were on the island. Apparently the commanders wanted to give the world the impression that there were far more troops than actually were available. They arranged Churchill's review to be a march in a column of threes — thus taking a great deal more time than would usually be required.

Sir Winston recorded the fact that the march was accompanied by a band playing the marching song of the US Marine Corps, "United States Marines." He tells us that the tune "bit so deeply into my memory that I could not get it out of my head." Have you ever had a song do that to you? Most of us have, and it can be quite annoying. We might pause and ask why.

The human memory is a rather complicated thing, but we can see in this instance three very good reasons why the tune got stuck in his head.

- **Repetition**. It was a long march and the band had to repeat the tune quite a number of times.
- **Focus**. It's not like the band was playing in the background, or that he was listening to elevator music. He was reviewing these troops; you're supposed to be paying attention when you do that.
- **Simplicity**. As a form of music, the march is not noted for its complexity. All marches have the same meter and tempo. They are designed to keep everyone in step. That doesn't allow for a lot of complexity.

Communion, in its own way, uses the same elements. It's not something that we do once; depending upon what church group you belong to, it can be administered weekly or even daily. Most denominations do it frequently, so it is not a rare event but repeated one. When we put have communion, it is the focus of every Christian's attention. It is the center point of worship. We do it in an atmosphere of calm and quiet, so that all can focus their thoughts on the meaning and purpose of communion. When done correctly, there is nothing else going on to compete with it; it's the only thing were doing at the time.

It is also a model of simplicity. The bread represents the body of our Lord; the cup, his blood. It is designed to be a symbolic picture of the suffering of Christ on the Cross. In short, when our Lord instituted the Lord's Supper he meant for it to be something you would remember. Therefore, Christian, let it bite deeply into your memory, so that it will not go out of your head. Take, eat and remember.

Before Pictures

January 27

It is not generally a good idea to ask a grandmother whether or not she happens to have a few pictures of the grandchildren — that is, if you're a little short of time. This is particularly true if the grandchildren live at some distance; if it's not possible to visit the grandchildren, pictures are the next best thing. They keep you up-to-date with what the children are doing, so that you feel that you're watching them grow. And of course, they are insufferably cute. If this is your situation you will eventually here grandma come running into the room with a picture in a hand, yelling out to you, "He's standing up!"

Even if your grandchildren don't live at a distance, the pictures themselves are kept in cabinet drawers, cardboard boxes, albums and various other places. Photographs are memories of the mind; you see, and thus you remember. Most of us can remember a time when we sat down with grandma and she showed us the pictures from her life. It was fun to listen to her say, "oh that's cousin so-and-so" especially when cousin so-and-so was the one who ran off to Australia and hasn't been heard from since. We like to be able to pull our memories out of the files every now and then.

Of course, the most common use of photographs among grandmothers is what is referred to as the "brag book." You use it to show your friends what the kids look like — which of course invites them to do the same with their grandchildren. But isn't that like friends? Don't we always share our good things with our friends?

It's hard to imagine this, but most of humanity passed without the photographic camera. Have you ever wondered what we did before we had pictures of our grandchildren?

- We told stories — and sometimes we wrote them down and letters. Those who are Civil War history buffs know that much of the history is written in the form of letters to and from home. The map of the campaign may be in the official records; the mud that you slept in is in the letters.
- We kept diaries — sometimes with the intention that they be read, and other times with the thought that we were sharing our thoughts only with ourselves. Diaries aren't always honest, but almost always they are personal. Memories are personal.
- Another way we kept the past was through ritual. We still do this to some extent today; some of us for example make tea in grandma's teapot on special occasions. To a little child this helps hold on to the memory of grandma.

Communion, you will recall, was created for us in a time when there were no photographs. So we have to use the older methods. Like our ancestors, it's a story we tell, particularly to those who are younger. Children are inherently curious about this ritual in your church; when you tell them about it, they connect with the memories you

have. In this way you share the story that you were told when you were a child. This story was kept for us in biographies written at the time. They tell us the story, but our Lord knew we needed something more than that.

So he gave us a ritual. A ritual has the advantage that you repeat it very often, and each element has its own specific meaning. It's there to help us remember. So as you partake this morning, remember what this ritual means, the sacrifice on the Cross. As you are commanded, examine yourself, so that you may take in a worthy manner. Then, after remembering, take the cup and the bread, thinking of the One who died for you.

True Colors

February 3

Most women who have ordered anything from a catalog, either print or online, have had the problem: “Is that really my eggplant?” Well, it may not be eggplant — but it is some sort of color. Experience has shown that the catalog doesn’t necessarily get the color quite right. There is often a subtle, but very definite, difference between the color that is shown in the catalog and the color of the actual item.

Thus, when the item arrives the first thing a woman does is to look at it to see if it’s the right color. Even then however there is a difficulty. Colors look different under different types of light. If this is an item that a woman is going to wear to an office that is always lit by fluorescent bulbs, then she needs to examine the item under a fluorescent light. But in most circumstances that’s the wrong answer. Most women will immediately take the item to the location where they can see it in natural light. The human eye is designed to see things in natural light; therefore, that’s where you examine the colors. You need to look at the color in the right light.

The process of examining practically anything works pretty much the same way. First, you must have a standard in mind — you need to know “what it’s supposed to look like.” If you have no idea what a ruler is, it’s really tough to measure the length of something. So the first thing you need is a standard.

You then need some process of judging whether or not your item meets that standard. The most important thing here is that you should never fudge it. As one wise person put it, “good enough, isn’t.” You need to know whether or not your item meets your standard, and you need to be honest about it.

Then, there is the matter of light. Most things we examine are examined in the light. If you are inspecting diamonds, the lighting is important. You don’t want the light you’re using to give you the wrong picture.

When you come to communion, the thing under examination is you. This is the time you conduct self examination, in accordance with the Scripture.

- You will need a standard; for the Christian the standard has always been the imitation of Christ, the sinless man. Do you measure up to his standards?
- You will need the right light — and He is the light of the world.
- The question is one of process — will you be honest with yourself? Or is the temptation there to fudge it?

“Let a man examine himself,” says the Scripture. Examine yourself; repent where you need to repent and then partake. His body, his blood are there for you and your salvation.

Tax Season

February 10

There are a variety of seasons during the year, but none carries with it such dread as the phrase “tax season.” Merely mentioning that phrase can produce groans of anguish among grown men. One reason for this comes from the fact that tax returns place quite a burden on the memory.

- One such pardon comes from a variety of tax forms themselves. There are, quite literally, hundreds of different forms that can be filled out which are appropriate for your taxes. It is your responsibility to remember which forms you need, fill them out, and turn them in. Presuming that you know which form you need, can you always remember the number that goes with it?
- Once you have the right form, of course, you have to fill it out. Income tax forms are not noted for their simplicity and ease of use. In fact, the phrase “complex tax form” is redundant. It is not by accident that most of us use a computer to aid in the process.

That’s enough to really test your memory. It’s also enough to make you impressed with the CPA who fills out your tax forms for you. It gives rise to such parodies as the form 1040EZ - which had two lines. First, write down how much money you made. Second, send it in.

Humor aside, there are reasons why it is hard to remember which form and how to use it. For example:

- You only do this once a year. It’s not something particularly pleasant, nor is it particularly interesting. So you wind up learning each year what you forgot from last year.
- In particular, the details on each form can be confusing – and change every tax year. If you wanted to design a system that would cause memory lapses, our tax system would be a good example.
- There is also an emotional reason. You want to avoid doing your taxes, because your taxes cost you money.

Communion carries with it the opposite characteristics. It was designed to be easy to remember, for it is the memorial of our Lord’s sacrifice on the Cross.

- Communion is taken much more frequently than once a year in most churches. The apostles and the early church took communion at least once a week, and

there is evidence that they did so even more frequently. Frequent repetition aids the memory.

- The details of communion are simple. The bread represents his broken body; the cup represents his shed blood. By taking these elements, you are remembering what he did for you on the cross.
- It is something that you should want to do. Some of us are of the school which says, “let sleeping worms lie,” but those with any wisdom know that it is necessary to get your sins forgiven. Therefore you examine yourself. And upon that examination, you take communion, remembering the forgiveness of your sins.

Communion: it is simple, easy to remember — and profound. As you partake, given the serious attention it deserves.

Franklin's Hat

February 17

Ben Franklin was a man of both ingenuity and wit. Like all of us, he had to deal with growing old. He remarked that of the young man forgets his hat at the bar, no one thinks very much of it. But if an old man forgets his hat at the bar, everyone says he's losing his memory. Either way, most of us need some help with our memories.

In our common folklore there are two major ways of remembering something. One is to use an elephant, because elephants never forget. This is not particularly practical in our day and age, as most elephants don't know enough to fasten their seatbelts, even assuming we could get them into the car. The more common method is to tie a string around your finger. But let me ask you: have you ever actually done that? Most of us, in fact, use some form of list or calendar to remind us of things we need to do. It may be paper or electronic, but we rely on something where we can write it down and we know we won't forget it.

Those who are students of history know that the word "remember" makes a very good opening for a rallying cry. For example:

- Remember the Alamo!
- Remember the Maine!
- Remember Pearl Harbor!
- Remember 9-11!

All these things are negative memories, with the hope of positive results.

Our Lord gave us something to remember as well, and it too is a negative memory with a positive result. He asks us to remember these things:

- What he did. He asks us to remember that he went to the cross and died a horrible, suffering death — by his own choice.
- Who he did it for. He asks us to remember that he did it for us, not for himself, so that whosoever will come to him shall be saved.
- Why he did it. He asks us to remember that he did it because of his great love for us, not for our own merit.

As you partake of communion today, remember the sacrifice he made out of love for you. Examine yourself; take stock and repent. Then, as you partake, remember the body and blood of your Lord and Savior.

Blueprint

February 24

Have you ever seen a blueprint? It's a rather rare document these days. Originally, the process of making blueprints was an invention of the 19th century. It produced a dark blue piece of paper with white lines on it which could show a great deal of detail. Once invented, it quickly became a standard method for dealing with architectural diagrams and other construction related documents. The process itself is messy and time-consuming; we have largely replaced it with newer methods.

Even though most of us have never seen an actual blueprint, we continue to use the word. Figuratively, a blueprint is some sort of diagram or instruction which tells us how to put something together. Sometimes these are literal diagrams — someone might speak of the blueprints for their house, for example. Sometimes these are completely figurative; you might speak of a blueprint for holding a party, for example. We use the word to mean something which tells us how to put something together.

In modern times we have replaced the blueprint with diagrams which come off a xerographic copier or something generated on a large bed plotter by a computer. It's much less messy, and you can get color in it. But the old blueprints do still exist. For example, your author used them when working for the telephone company. Some of the blueprints we used dated back before the turn of the 20th century, showing the position of underground cables. The cables were still in the ground, so the blueprints were still valid. It doesn't matter how old your diagram is, as long as it's correct.

That's true of communion as well. It's 2000 years old, more or less, but still quite valid. We think of the bread and the wine — the product of the creation of Passover, 1500 years before Christ. The picture is clear, even at this great length of time. God passes over and saves those who are true participants in his communion. We are to remember his sacrifice in the picture shown by the bread and the wine.

More than that, we are told that taking communion should lead to self examination. We are to examine ourselves, and see if there is something of which we need to repent. It's a simple thought. We must remember, however, that repentance sets the relationship between man and God on the right path. Once again, an ancient document which still tells us the truth, still has its great use.

We are also told that we are to do this until our Lord returns. Our blueprint tells us that we do not have the end of all things yet. Our Lord is due to return, and all things change. There are many theories about how this will happen, when this will happen, and what will be the result. We need not speculate about that; the blueprint tells us that he will return — and that should be sufficient. Remember that your Lord is coming back; examine yourself now and then partake.

Shared Memory

March 3

The moment is absolutely unforgettable.

Dodger fans will remember it as long as there is a team. The year was 1988; the Dodgers had struggled and parlayed unusual luck into a visit to the World Series. Their opponent was Oakland; the odds makers in Las Vegas were quite certain that Oakland should be heavily favored. No one outside of Los Angeles expected the Dodgers to win.

In the ninth inning of the first game, with two out and trailing by one run, the Dodgers had a runner at first base. Dodger manager Tom Lasorda went to his bench and tapped the National League's Most Valuable Player that year, Kirk Gibson. Gibson had serious knee problems and a strained hamstring; he limped to the plate. He worked the count to 3-2. Then, as Vin Scully put it, "in a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened." Gibson pulled the pitch into the stands; the Dodgers won and rode the momentum to win the World Series in five games. It was the first time in World Series history that a team trailing in the ninth-inning had won on a walk off home run.

It's not just a memory for Dodger fans; it's a shared memory. It's something they talk about even to this day. Shared memories are like that:

- Shared memory summon up the power of deep emotions. You don't so much remember the event as remember the excitement.
- Shared memory defines you as one of the group, in this instance Dodger fans. You become one of the bunch by sharing that memory.
- If it is a pleasant memory, there is the joy of sharing it. Memories have the power to make you feel better; sometimes they have more than that. You feel you just have to share them (which I just did!)

Communion, by its very nature, is a shared memory. It summons up from within us the deep emotions of salvation. As John Newton put it,

"I once was lost, but now am found; I was blind, but now I see."

It brings back to you the sense of "I was there." You recall the day that you accepted Christ as your Savior; you remember the moment when you were baptized. It's the day that everything changed in your life.

But that's not the end of it; if Christ is real in your heart you must share. As the old hymn put it, "I love to tell the story."

Before you is communion; let it reach into your soul and bring forward the memory of salvation. Then, as you partake, let your memory dwell on the sacrifice that Christ made. It is by his body and his blood that you are saved. Remember it well. Then go forth, saved to serve.

Sawdust

March 10

… So the man behind the pulpit says, “examine yourselves; then partake.” Things get kind of quiet; you close your eyes and begin to pray — but about what? You’re supposed to be examining yourself; the distraction is that yourself often include your interaction with others — and the others are the ones you’re praying about. It may be your pastor; and maybe your spouse, children or parents, who knows? But you’re praying about them and the way they have offended you.

Of course, this being communion, you’re being merciful about it. You are quite willing to forgive them, sometimes without even being asked. And you have plenty of good advice for God on how he ought to move in our affairs to bring about such a happy reconciliation. It is a warm and wonderful thought — but it is not self examination. And no matter how warm and wonderful it feels, it’s not what you’re supposed to be doing.

Christ tells us why:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

You are not here to ask God to change them; you are here to examine yourself and ask God to change you.

It feels so good to examine others that it may occur to you to ask why he would want you to examine yourself. The answer is simple: it is the command of Christ that you remember his suffering and sacrifice at the cross. Remember that the world’s only truly innocent man went willingly and suffered and died for your sake. That, and that alone, makes your self examination and repentance truly effective. If God does not wish to forgive you, you cannot be forgiven. He offers you forgiveness, but only on the terms of the cross. It’s the only way that works. All the examination of other’s sins will get you nowhere.

If this is so obvious — and it is — why are you so easily distracted? It’s because Satan understands this to be the strong point of Christianity. Satan may be able to argue the intellectual side quite well; there is no denying the brute fact of the crucifixion and the resurrection. Satan must distract you. For that reason you must ask God’s aid in avoiding the distraction.

About that speck of sawdust: do you not know that it is only the pure in heart can see God? Perhaps that is the kind of vision necessary to remove sawdust from someone else’s eye.

Common

March 17

Perhaps you never thought about it, but pause for a minute and reflect on the fact that the physical elements used in communion are among the most common edible substances on earth. There is nothing rare or esoteric about either bread or wine (or grape juice.)

- Bread? It's something that you can make out of ground-up wheat, which is flour, and water. Wheat grows practically anywhere, except Antarctica.
- Grapes? One of the oldest plants known to civilization. Wine is something that mankind has known how to make for thousands of years.

Christ chose to elements for communion which were extremely common. We might well ask why.

I submit to you that he picked these elements, as common as they are, specifically because they were so common.

- First, this enables practically everyone to participate in communion. The ingredients are right at hand and available even to the poorest of the poor.
- Next, the very ordinariness of these elements makes it certain that you will not be dazzled by the way they are presented. Have you ever really been impressed by gold plated communion trays? Have you ever commented on what vintage the wine might be? Have you ever been impressed by the artisan nature of the bread? To ask the question shows the absurdity of the answer.
- Perhaps most important, the elements are ordinary so that you will look beyond the elements to see the meaning in communion. Bread and wine are so ordinary they cannot be the meaning of something so special as communion.

So our Lord puts these common elements before you; what does he ask you to do with them? He simply asked that you partake of them "in a worthy manner." What does that mean?

- He asks that you take this as a *repentant* sinner. Do not come to justify yourself; come to claim the forgiveness he freely offers.
- He asked that you take it in a *respectful* manner. Do not take it lightly; do not think that it is "just a ritual." Rather, know that it is the center of worship.
- Finally, he asks that you *remember*. Remember the sacrifice that he made on the Cross, for you, dying so that your sins might be forgiven. His body, his blood make up your communion.

Jukebox

March 24

Many of the people in this audience are too young to remember — or even have encountered — a jukebox. It was an impressive looking device; often lit up in garish lights. It allowed you to press a couple of buttons, after you put your money in, and thus select a record to play. Records were discs made of vinyl on which sound was recorded. The mechanical motion of the record itself was something to behold. It was probably the closest thing we had at the time to a robot.

One particular version of the jukebox was designed to sit at the end of the table in, for example, a coffee shop. It didn't hold as many records as the others did, but it was conveniently located and usually had a fair selection. In accordance with the long-standing rule that any device that makes noise must be set so loud as to annoy people at the near tables, this device was quite capable of playing your favorite song for the benefit of those anonymous people in the next 16 tables.

My parents, being civilized, absolutely forbade their children to spend any money on that jukebox at the table. Their reasoning was that the next 16 tables had no desire whatsoever to hear — repeatedly — "The Teddy Bears' Picnic."

The technology has changed, of course, but the principle remains the same: we will pay good money to hear what we want to hear. That doesn't just apply to music; it applies to sermons as well. We like to hear what we like to hear. We want to hear it when we want to hear it — and particularly we don't want to hear it when we don't want to hear it. In terms of music, we have made great progress in this — headphones. In terms of preaching, perhaps not so much.

But preaching is not music. Communion is the great reminder that we approach God on his terms, not on ours. There are no buttons to push with God; he does not tell us what we want to hear but rather tells us what we need to hear. In a very real sense communion is a message we need to hear.

- In communion we celebrate his sacrifice; we do not celebrate our desires.
- Communion reminds us of just who is in control of this universe — who "calls the tune."
- And what tune does he call? It is his love call to us — the demonstration of the fact that he has such great love for each and every one of us, evidenced by his sacrifice on the cross.

Music has the power to bring forth emotions. God is so constructed communion that he wants to bring forth a reaction in you too. He wants you to remember the sacrifice that he made. On the basis of that sacrifice, he calls you to repent of your sins. If you confess them, he is faithful and just to restore you to fellowship with him. It is not a time for you

to hand him your laundry list of things to fix; it is a time for him to reach out to you in love.

Renewing Your Vows

March 31

We recently attended the celebration of the 50th wedding anniversary. The couple doing the celebrating did not actually give the celebration; their kids got together and invited everyone they knew to a party to celebrate the occasion. As a part of this celebration, the happy couple took the time to renew their wedding vows in front of all of us. It's an interesting comparison; the wedding and the renewal.

We had lots of pictures of the original wedding. Like many such things, it was an elaborate affair. It was full of the usual bridesmaids in symmetrical dresses, the bride in a flowing white creation and of course the gentleman in tuxedos. The pictures give you a sense of how elaborate the wedding is. If you look at the faces in the pictures you will see something else: anticipation. You could see this young couple eager to be married, looking forward with great hopes and desires — and just a touch of that at a worry that says, "you know, I've never done this before." It's a feeling most brides and grooms experience. And like all weddings, there were witnesses — in this case, a church full of them. We invite all these friends because we want to share our happiness and joy; but we also invite them to be our witnesses, testifying to the seriousness with which we took our vows.

The renewal of those rows was quite a contrast. Where the original wedding was elaborate, the renewal was simple. Nobody wore tuxedo; the bride wore comfortable shoes. It was just two people who were so obviously happy with each other standing up and saying, "yes, I would do it again." The anticipation of the wedding day has been replaced by the calm assurance that comes with experience.

But like the original wedding day, this day was packed with witnesses — witnesses who were there to share the joy, but also to celebrate the fact that 50 years later their commitment to each other is even more unshakable.

We sometimes forget that one of the most common metaphors for the church is that she is the bride of Christ. If I might make a parallel, baptism is the closest thing we have too wedding ceremony. We do it only once. If your mind can go back so far, do you not recall the anticipation that came with it? You could know what being a Christian was really like unto you, yourself, experienced it. But you look forward to it with anticipation. If you had the chance, you probably someone family and friends to be the witnesses of this happy occasion. Baptism is like a wedding.

Communion is like the renewal of your wedding vows. Where baptism involves a fair amount of ceremony, communion is taken in a simple and low-key manner. You do it with the calm assurance of someone who had is an experienced Christian, confident in the Lord's care and blessing. Baptism looks forward to the future; communion looks back. Communion looks back to the sacrifice on the cross which made your relationship with God possible. But like the wedding vow renewal, we still have witnesses.

Communion is a public ceremony so that all might see that you are still committed to Christ.

So as we take communion together, let us look back to that sacrifice. Let us see Christ on the cross, giving body and blood for our sake. But let us also remember our relationship with him and in taking communion proclaim that we are still committed to the cause of Christ. Yes, we would do it again.

Repetition

April 7

Over the last few decades most churches have noticed a distinct shift in the type of music used in the worship services. We have shifted from the old hymns to the new choruses.

The old hymns had their virtues. For one thing, they were generally packed with a lot more theology than the modern chorus. This, of course, implied that they had several verses to carry that theology. It is also quite the case that the hymn book often had in a four-part harmony, which implied that the congregation could read music and to some extent sight read music. Unfortunately, given the state of music education today, this is no longer a reasonable expectation. We have lost something here.

The new choruses feature much more use of repetition. Older members may object to the loudness and the thumping bass, but the younger generation likes them because they keep repeating the same message over and over. This is exceedingly useful in dealing with people whose attention span runs to about 10 seconds. It also makes them unsuitable as background music for communion.

If you'd like to start a church fight, just bring the subject up and ask which is better. We might gain some insight into that subject, however, by looking at the Scriptures. There is one section of the Scriptures which is in fact a collection of hymns, namely the book of Psalms. Most of the songs resemble the old style hymns; think of trying to do Psalm 23 as a modern chorus, for example. One of the most remarkable songs is Psalm 136, because it does include the modern style of repetition. In fact, every verse in Psalm 136 ends with the same phrase. The phrase varies by translation; those who are raised on the King James will recall "for his mercy endureth for ever." We shall adopt the New International translation: "his love endures forever."

Is it not remarkable that the only Psalm which resembles a modern chorus has that phrase? It**'s** as if God wanted to make it clear to us that there is one thing that can be repeated over and over and over again, to our profit. That one thing is, "his love endures forever."

- Note that it is "his love." His love is not dependent upon ours; his love endures whether were mad at him or not.
- His love "endures." It means that it's not only something that lasts, but it cannot be ground down. Despite all our troubles in life, God's love endures all through them.
- His love endures "forever." We cannot see them into his love; no matter which interpretation of Revelation is yours, you see the great love of God portrayed forever.

As he repeated this for us in every verse, he repeats it for us every time we take communion. Communion is the sign of his love, for it brings back to our minds his sacrifice on the cross. There is no greater love than giving your life for your friends. Communion is the sign of the endurance of his love, for we are to take it until he returns. Indeed, it is the sign of his love forever, for he tells us that he will drink it new with us in the kingdom when he comes. So as you partake today, remember that he has one message for you. His sacrifice on the cross is the sign that his love for you endures forever.

Simon of Cyrene

April 14

In the Scriptures there are three instances of taking up the Cross:

- There is the command of Christ that each of us must daily take up the cross.
- There is the example of Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha.
- And, curiously, there is the example of Simon of Cyrene being pressed into carrying the cross for Christ.

Simon the Libyan, as he might be called today, is little remarked upon. We know from other accounts that he was the father of two Christians who were prominent in the Roman church. The reason this is mentioned is probably that it distinguishes him from a large number of other people named Simon. We know that he came from the city named Cyrene which is founded what is today Libya. Otherwise, Simon of Cyrene might just simply be Simon the Anonymous.

Anonymous: the picture of the ordinary, everyday Christian. In a sense he is the picture of all of us, in that we are all commanded to carry the cross. But he is also a picture of each of us: he was just an ordinary guy who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got stuck with the job he really didn't want. But somebody had to do it, and somebody picked Simon. He's the person the medieval church would've called "Everyman." So it is logical to conclude that Simon, representing all of us and each of us, teaches us that we must carry the cross. Somehow or other, we have to participate in the cross too.

How do we participate in the cross?

- One way is in baptism. We are taught that baptism is a picture of death, burial and resurrection; surely you can see the cross in that.
- Another way is in communion. We are taught that communion is to bring to our memory the body and blood — that is, the sacrifice — of our Lord. "This is my body," he said. When we partake, we are proclaiming the cross.

Those are the public, symbolic ways in which we proclaim and participate in the cross. But there is no sense in making such a public proclamation if your life doesn't match up to it. So as you partake of communion this morning, ask yourself this: does my life show that I am taking up the cross daily? Is there any evidence that I am bearing the burden for Christ? Am I really carrying the cross? Your Lord died on the cross, so that you might live, and live eternally. The least you can do is carry the cross for the little while you are here.

So Clever

April 21

There is one thing that human beings do with excellence: self-justification. It's as old as Cain and Abel; you will remember Cain's question — "am I my brother's keeper?" When your conscience is bothering you, there are usually some time tried strategies that will come to you quickly.

- The first is relatively simple: I have an excuse. I understand that there is a general rule against what I just did, and my conscience is bothering me about it, but I have an excuse. There is some sort of special exception that applies to my case. So often, we like the fella trying to explain it to the traffic cop — we were only speeding because we had to get ahead of a dangerous speeder. You're right, it's a bad thing in general, people shouldn't do it — but I have an excuse.
- The second is simple also: you see that other guy over there? He's a lot worse than I am. You don't see him repenting. So let's get our priorities straight here: go over to that guy get him to repent and straighten out his life. Then we can deal with a small stuff, like me.
- Perhaps the most common of all is the idea that, if we just wait long enough and our memory fades well enough, God will forgive us because it's been so long since we did it. Time, in our view, heals all wounds — and forgives all sins.

Of course, there are many other techniques. But have you ever looked at it this way? We are so good at self-justification because we need to be. Self-justification is really a form of self-condemnation. You wouldn't be justifying your conduct if you didn't feel the guilt of sin.

- You have an excuse? Why did you think you needed one? If what you did was right, why would you ever need an excuse? The truth is that coming up an excuse is usually a good sign that you are in the wrong.
- Of course, comparing yourself with somebody else doesn't work at all. Your mother taught you that. If all the other lemmings are running off the cliff, does that mean you need to run off the cliff too? Worse, just because somebody else is a wicked sinner does not imply that you are a perfect saint. There is really no logical sense to it at all.
- We are quite correct in saying that God will forgive us — but not just because a certain amount of time has passed. He will forgive us based on our confession and repentance. If you want God's forgiveness, you have to get it God's way.

The real cure for guilt and sin was given at the cross — the blood of Christ. That guilt and sin is real; otherwise there would of been no need for the atonement. The fact that he went to the cross for you and me tells you that you and I needed it.

More than that we need to remember it. We need to be reminded regularly of the sacrifice that He made for us. That memory is not just a polite nothing; it is also meant to be a spur to repentance and confession. In communion we take time to examine ourselves. The result of that examination is meant to be repentance and confession. Therefore, as you partake this morning, throw away the excuse; ignore the comparison to the other guy and seek your forgiveness in the way in which God intended — by repentance and confession.

Per Crucem Ad Lucem

April 28

The preacher's message that particular Sunday was both powerful and touching. He was speaking about human suffering, how it belongs to all of us and what we should do about it. To make the matter one of practical example he asked those in the audience who were feeling completely overwhelmed by life to stand. A small percentage of the people stood. He then asked those nearby to stand with them and pray over them.

To my complete surprise a young lady who was sitting next to me and my wife stood up. We gathered around her; as I was the only male within touching distance it soon became apparent that I was going to lead the prayer. I fumbled around in my mental attic for a while, and then remembered the old Latin expression: *per crucem ad lucem*. It translates something like, "through the Cross to the light." The thinking behind this is rather simple. No matter how righteous you are, that is no guarantee that you will not suffer — think about Job, for example. Indeed, our Lord himself suffered on the cross. We are his servants; we are not above the master — we therefore must accept suffering as part of the human experience.

But see what follows suffering: the Ascension. Christ goes from horrible suffering to return to the light that is God. It is true of our own suffering as well; if we will present it to our Lord as being something we have taken upon ourselves for his sake, then the suffering will lead to the light of God. I have no method for eliminating suffering; but God has a method of redeeming it. So it was that I said a few appropriate words in prayer, and then we all said "amen."

As we got up to go from the church, we asked the young lady if there was something of a practical nature we could do for her. She declined any assistance. That would've been the end of it, you might think. But as we were sliding out from the pews an older lady in the pew in front of us stopped me and began to thank me effusively for my prayer. I muttered an appropriate nothing; after all, I wasn't praying for her. She hadn't stood up for prayer. But God's Providence was at work that day. She explained her gratitude in one simple sentence: "I have to go to the hospital this afternoon and disconnect my husband's life support." You never know when the person next to you might be standing in the need of prayer. Sometimes that need is rib cracking and gut wrenching.

Perhaps that's you today. In communion we use the emblems of the body and blood of Jesus Christ to remind us of his suffering and death. You are at the foot of the Cross. Bring your burdens there. Accept these burdens as being for His sake – and someday he will turn them into a greater good. You will go through the Cross to the light, for God is light (First John 1:5). But while your burdens are still with you, remember the burden he bore on the Cross for you. If he did not bear the Cross, we could not see the light.

Gratitude

May 5

"Much obliged."

It's a simple acknowledgment that someone has just done you a good turn. We are content to state the fact, though most of us would prefer being the person *doing* the favor rather than receiving it. In particular, it can be quite grating when the person who did the favor for us reminds us of it frequently. We really don't like to have the fact brought up and repeated constantly.

Why is this? There are a number of reasons. Most of us are taught that adults ought to be able to stand on their own two feet. We feel we should be self-sufficient. In many things this is true; we are taught, for example, that we ought to earn our own living so that we might share with others. This, of course, implies that there are others who need the sharing, however. Sometimes the "others" really are us. It's a matter of pride, really.

There are, however, instances where our aversion to "much obliged" more or less disappears. Take, for example, your parents. Most of us realize we couldn't possible repay our parents for all the effort, money and especially patience they put into us. There just isn't a way to do that, and we know that we must recognize that fact. But if you can't repay them, you can at least pass on the favor. Those parents are very pleased when you treat their grandchildren well.

The ultimate example of this is Christ. Not one of us has the slightest possibility of repaying Jesus for what He did on the Cross; it is simply beyond the realm of human effort. It is equally true that he does not expect you to pay him back. But he does ask that you remember what He did – which rather sounds like that fellow who keeps reminding us that we owe him a favor. But Christ never asked that you repay his love for you; rather, like your parents, he asks that you pass it on. Take the great love He showed you on the Cross and let it move you to "do unto others…" That most particularly includes sharing the Gospel with them.

Gratitude should be a gracious form of thankfulness. Christ, knowing our failings and needs, has given us a way to be grateful without being resentful of it. He asks simply that we, in solemn ceremony, remember the way in which He gave us the most important gift ever given: salvation. By the bread and the cup we remember the price he paid on Calvary.

But do not stop there. Let your gratitude overflow by passing on his great love for you. When you leave this place, remember that Christ died for all – and those who are grateful for it will pass the Good News on to the others they meet.

Simplicity

May 12

Any modern writer will tell you of the frustration that now faces writers in the electronic age. It is not sufficient to put your thoughts into words; the words must be put into electronic form.

- If you want to be available in the format known as “e- book”, you need to be prepared for the fact that there are at least 15 different formats of e-book. Each one has its little eccentricities; each one is sold in a variety of different places. Each one is usable only on a limited number of devices. If you want your e-book to sell at a good pace, you need to accommodate everyone.
- Even if you just want to put your material on the Internet, you have the problem of multiple browsers. There are at least four main varieties of browser, with hundreds of variations on these. Any particular browser may also have several different versions in the hands of users at any given time. The code on your website must be capable of being properly displayed on each and every one of these.
- All of that assumes that you are dealing only with able-bodied human beings. But some people have poor eyesight; others have trouble using the keyboard and there are a variety of other disabilities. There are various standards which have been set up to accommodate this; they are not easy things to do.

The frustration of dealing with all this is sometimes sufficient to tell the author simply put the words on paper. But what size paper? What kind of binding? Color covers, or black and white?

Those are just the technical difficulties. A storyteller will tell you that just the language itself has a similar set of problems. What level of vocabulary do you want to use? What kinds of stories and images do you want to tell? Even if you restrict yourself to one language you have the conflicting demands of simplicity and precision. If you stick with simplicity only, everything begins with “Run, Spot, run.” If you want to be terribly precise, your reader is going to need a doctorate level education. To be a successful storyteller you need to be able to put things simply without losing any of the meaning.

In a very real sense Communion achieves that. The symbols we use in communion — the bread and the cup — are simple, ordinary things. They have straightforward meanings: the body and blood of Christ. As a result, the meaning of communion comes through quite clearly; you don’t need a doctorate in theology to understand the Cross.

The story is simple: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, bled and died — his blood and body sacrificed for you — so that you might be forgiven of your sins and inherit eternal life. Any storyteller would recognize this as a story well worth the telling, and therefore well

worth the listening. Indeed, it is the greatest story ever told. The storyteller knows that a good story is worth repeating. Its lessons are always of interest. So it is that each week we take the body and the blood of Christ to remind ourselves that we are sinners, saved by grace given at the Cross.

Fair Exchange

May 19

It sometimes comes as a surprise to modern Christians that the word “mercy” encompasses the idea of putting up with someone.

Let me give you an example. Most of us have known at one time or another someone who is the absolute epitome of an uncouth clod. That’s the kind of person whose manners, if they exist at all, are woefully deficient for their position in life. You know, of course, that society as a whole is not going to give you the slightest bit of help in reforming such a person. We are enamored with the concept that each of us should “do your own thing.” So what your grandmother would’ve referred to as rude and crude now seems to be just personal style.

One thing about it though: it is a chance to show mercy. And as the good Lord teaches us, blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.

Have you ever ask yourself whether or not that’s a fair exchange? We know that God is merciful to the merciful. It’s often presented to us as something which is a matter of fairness; if I forgive you, then it’s only fair that you should forgive me. Sometimes this idea creeps into our relationship with God. I’m a very forgiving person; it’s only fair that God should forgive me. Get that idea out of your mind. It is not a fair exchange of mercy. What do I give up? I give man’s mercy, flawed and sinful as it might be. God, in his infinite love, gives me his mercy, pure and sinless.

You can see the difference. Forgiveness between two sinners is, sometimes, a matter of fairness. Sometimes it reaches the point that you can even laugh about it. But man’s forgiveness is limited; just like man’s patience. God’s forgiveness is not limited. He made that point to us at the cross. Look at it this way: Christ, on the cross, forgave those who are executing him. Some of those very same people who were sneering at him and mocking him became members of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem about 50 days later. Think about it; it’s tough for us to forgive our friends and loved ones. He demonstrated his forgiveness to those who were sneering at him and executing him.

That’s one of the reasons that he gave us the Lord’s Supper. He wanted us to remember the example of mercy that he gave us at the cross. He did not give us an example of a fair exchange of forgiveness. He gave us the highest example of God’s unconditional love for his children. As you partake this morning, remember the price that was paid to put that unconditional love into effect. His body, his blood were sacrificed for you. Therefore, examine yourself and take the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner. It is not a fair exchange — but then, love never is.

First

May 26

One of the things you can count on in human behavior is the desire to be first. It's not just a case of wanting to be first in line; we have all sorts of competition.

- When you hear the word competition, you usually think of athletics. Each of us has encountered at one time or another the athlete who is eager to let you know just how much better he is than you are.
- This applies in other areas as well my: have you ever run into the smartest kid in the room who isn't going to let you forget it?
- A bit more subtle, perhaps, is the woman who knows she can have any man in the room with just a smile. And that includes your man, too.

But there's one thing all these people have in common: they have to have a criterion for being first. It rarely helps to be the smartest athlete in the room. So you need some way of measuring whether or not you are first.

For the Christian, the criterion is very simple: if you want to be the greatest of all, you must be the servant of all. When Christ was asked this question, he picked up a baby and showed it to the disciples as an example of greatness in the kingdom. Greatness in the kingdom of God requires humility and service. Note, please, that this says nothing about the particular position you have. Humility and service become the janitor as well as the pastor.

It soon becomes apparent that being the servant of all is going to involve sacrifice. This can come in many ways; it might mean that you sacrifice and things that you put up with. One wonders if pastors must take a special course in how to deal with obnoxious parishioners. If you have someone who comes up after every sermon to point out every tiny, nitpicking little mistake you'll see that the good pastor smiles and nods. He thanks his critic for enlightening him. It's a sacrifice. It may be a sacrifice of time — particularly time that you had set aside for something else. For some of us it's a sacrifice in money. For many of us it's a sacrifice in work, hard work.

It should therefore be apparent that Christ is first in all things for the church. He is our example in this; for he is the servant to all of the church. By his grace and power the church is sustained; when the church evangelizes, the story told is always the same: the cross. You can see therefore the Christ not only is servant of all but sacrifice for all. He is therefore the greatest of all.

In Communion we honor that service in that sacrifice. The cup symbolizes the blood, the bread his body sacrifice on the cross to atone for our sins. As you partake you proclaim Christ first in all things — and that includes first in your life. Remember this as you

partake. Honor him in a worthy manner – take this completely seriously. May your actions be those of a man of truth.

Cup of Demons

June 2

There is a modern view of the whole concept of a relationship with God which is completely foreign to the Scriptures — but well known within the church.

Here's an example. In a sermon delivered before the Diocese of Venezuela on the island nation of Curacao, Presiding Bishop The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori said that by driving the demon out of her Paul was "depriving her of her gift of spiritual awareness." The lady is the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America. You might well ask how anyone could make such a statement.

Here is the difference: in the new spirituality mankind defines what is acceptable and not. Is mankind says one thing is right or another is wrong; and it's perfectly acceptable if it's right for you and wrong for me. From this you can easily determine that the concept of "right and wrong" has been reduced from a fact of nature to a point of view. It sounds warm and fuzzy to say that someone who is demon possessed really was someone who had "a gift of spiritual awareness." Indeed, if Paul is guilty in this circumstance, then how often was Jesus likewise guilty of depriving someone of their "gift of spiritual awareness" (formerly known as demon possession)?

The Scripture finds it rather differently; warm and fuzzy opinions which allow practically anything to be called Christian just simply don't exist there. Here's how Paul put it to the Corinthians:

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

(1 Corinthians 10:21 NASB)

There it is. Taking communion is to proclaim that you have made a choice to believe and trust in the sacrifice of your Lord Jesus Christ. It means quite specifically that you believe in the death, burial and resurrection in bodily form of Jesus the Christ. If you do not believe this, then please accept this warning: don't touch it.

Communion implies that you've already made the choice:

- You have chosen to accept grace rather than rely on your own merits.
- You have chosen to be righteous all the time, not double minded just on Sunday.
- You have chosen to be in the union with Christ and with his church, which is his body on earth.

That's what you are telling the world around you; that's what you're telling the church beside you. Be sure that you are telling the truth.

Room Temperature

June 9

Suppose you went about the room today taking everyone's temperature with a thermometer. You would find that most of us are somewhere around 98.6°; a few this might be a bit higher with a fever. But he discovered someone with a temperature around 70° — in other words, room temperature – you would be forced to the conclusion that they were dead. Living human beings have temperature of around 98.6°; dead ones don't.

But notice, please, that the temperature is just a symptom. If you take that body and heat is up to 98.6° that person does not suddenly come alive again. Heating up the body might fix the symptoms, but not the problem. May I suggest to you that this is somewhat of an analogy with regard to faith? The Scripture informs us that faith without works is dead. We all know this. So it should be obvious to us that going through the motions of taking communion without any real, living and working faith is nothing but an empty ritual.

Just what does it mean when you take communion?

- First, it means that you believe in the death, burial and physical resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. You believe that this death atones for your sins, and that you have accepted that atonement.
- Next, you believe that this is — in some sense – the body and blood of Christ. That implies that you wish to be like him; spiritually, you are what you eat. So this says you are trying to imitate Christ.
- Finally, as we are told to do this in remembrance of him until he comes again, it means that you believe that he will return as he promised and bring with him judgment — four reward or condemnation, as deserved.

So this is serious business. How do we go about taking communion in a truly serious way? Paul gives us an outline in this passage:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

(1 Corinthians 11:27-32 NASB)

May I point out two things:

- First, you are to examine yourself. Take stock of your life, see where you have failed, ask forgiveness for it and also ask for the Lord's help in keeping it away from you.
- Second, you are inviting the Lord's discipline in your life. If you tell them you have a problem, you should expect him to help you overcome that problem. He does this by his loving discipline.

Therefore, you should be completely truthful in your self examination — and expect appropriate discipline to help you in your failings. Whom the Lord loves, he disciplines. If he disciplines you, then, considered a sign of his love.

Editors

June 16

Editors are ghouls and cannibals — Dorothy Sayers.

It does not take very great experience in writing to encounter the usefulness of the editor. There are people in this world who get paid to read your material and fix it. To those who are not writers, this may seem a little bit odd. After all, can't you just read your own stuff and correct it? That's what my high school English teacher told us to do. So here's what they do:

- The simplest form of editing is copy editing — fixing your spelling and most particularly your grammatical mistakes. It's amazing how often you make those mistakes even when you know better.
- A more complex (and more expensive) form of editing is content editing. This service provides you with feedback and correction on how you've organized your material and whether or not your quotations came from a valid source or your imagination.
- Finally, for the very serious author, you can hire an editor as a coach. It's not just fixing your mistakes; it's preventing the next ones.

That's what editors do. They exist; therefore someone must need them. But why is it that writers need editors?

- The truth is, you can stare right at your own mistakes and miss them completely. Your brain knows what it meant to say, and that's what your brain sees on the paper. The editor sees what's really there.
- Sometimes you really don't have the correct grammar in your head. For example, do you know when to use "shall" as opposed to "will"? (Neither do I.)
- Sometimes, you simply need encouragement to continue writing. There are days when you stare at the blank sheet of paper and haven't the foggiest notion what to put on there for the first word.

In a way, the Holy Spirit is the editor of your life. The process of editing is most apparent in communion, for it is there that we are cautioned to examine ourselves carefully. So as you do that today, I would encourage you to ask the Holy Spirit for these three things:

- First, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what it is you're staring at and not seeing. Ask him to show you those things which are obvious in your life to everyone but you. Ask him to bring them out so that you may repent and strive to do better.

- Second, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you those areas in your life in which your thinking is incorrect. If you have “thought amiss” then let him reveal it to you for correction.
- Self examination often results in discouragement; some of us fail rather often. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring you comfort in this and encouragement, knowing that Christ’s sacrifice for you on the cross is not in vain.

Qualified

June 23

The very act of taking communion carries with it certain acknowledgments:

- First, by the act of taking communion you acknowledge that you are a sinner. If you are not a sinner, you are in no need of the atonement. One might also add that if you are not sinner, perhaps you should find another church — this one is full of nothing but.
- Not only are you a sinner, you have asked the Lord of the universe for his mercy, rather than his justice. The fact that he freely offers that mercy no doubt helps with the motivation; but the plain fact is taking communion means you are asking for God's mercy.
- Communion is a public ceremony, performed in a public place. Therefore, by taking communion you acknowledge that you are willing to let anyone else see you acknowledge the fact that you're a sinner, seeking mercy. In communion we proclaim the Lord's death — and his atonement. This is not classified information.

Perhaps you're a bit disturbed by all this. But it's really quite simple; mercy never precedes justice, but justice always precedes any mercy. Mercy, by its very definition, requires that the recipient be found guilty first. So if you apply for mercy, you are acknowledging your guilt.

It is also the fact that mercy cannot be earned. By its very nature it proclaims that the guilty one cannot right the wrongs that have been done. It is an admission of your inability to deal with your own sins, and you make that admission when you take communion.

Mercy also is at the discretion of the judge. No one is "entitled" to mercy — but in God's court everyone gets the offer. It is as God said to Moses:

For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION."

(Romans 9:15 NASB)

Communion would be quite different if it were a private thing. We are encouraged to confess our sins one to another, and this is usually best done in private. But Christ commanded us that we take communion in public, in community with each other. Symbolically, you do this to remember Christ's sacrifice and atonement, and these are things the church has proclaimed publicly since its very first days. When you take communion, you are telling the world — by ritual — that you have been given the mercy

of God. You are also telling the world that each and every one of them can obtain the same mercy.

Therefore, as you partake this morning do so in a worthy manner. At the very least you should take it seriously because you are proclaiming the greatest truth the world has ever known. Examine yourself in the light of both God's justice and his mercy; then tell the world what you have received.

Antarctica

June 30

It is probably the most famous advertisement which never happened. Ernest Shackleton, the famed British explorer of the Antarctic, is quoted as placing the following ad in the classified help-wanted section of some newspaper:

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success."

Whether he placed this ad or not, we do know that he got over 5,000 applications for something like 56 openings. As of this writing, no one has been able to provide the name and date of the newspaper. But apocryphal or not, he should have done it – it's the only way to recruit those who are willing to risk the Antarctic. In a similar way – see Matthew 10 – Christ sent out his disciples, telling them to pack nothing for the journey, but rely entirely on God's provision.

In the grandest sense, Christ too sought "honour and recognition" – and found it at the Cross. As Paul put it,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Philippians 2:5-11 NASB)

Imagine, if you can, the descent from being God with God to being a babe in the manger. It is the "supreme miracle," as C. S. Lewis put it. Exploring the Antarctic is trivial in comparison.

He did this with a destination in mind: the Cross. God is love; he wants his children, the works of his hand, to be with him forever. God is righteousness; sin cannot be in his presence. The only possible solution to the divine dilemma is the atonement. That atonement required a pure and perfect sacrifice.

It is that sacrifice we honor in the practice of communion. It keeps his glory before our eyes as we partake, and will do so until he returns. It is fitting, therefore, that we take it in a solemn and worthy manner. God does not take his glory lightly; nor should we.

Pictures

July 7

When I was a child one of the things which puzzled me was the fact that paintings didn't always reflect what a photograph would pick up. It was curious to me that a painter would paint something that wasn't exactly photographic in quality. But as I grew older I realized that painting — and for that matter of fact photography — are not necessarily best when they exactly replicate something. I thought of paintings as something to tell you what somewhere looked like. As I grew older I realized that paintings weren't meant to be a substitute for a police ID picture. If you want an example of that, look at the picture on your driver's license. It may identify you but it doesn't do what a good picture does — because a good picture or painting tells a story.

Let me give you an example of this. One of the members of our Bible class graciously volunteered to be our photographer. Like many classes, we have a board that shows the pictures of all the people in the class. New members particularly appreciate this, because you can't memorize all the faces and names in one weekend.

One particular Sunday he had the camera with him and took a very interesting picture.1 it shows neither my face nor my wife's face, but it is an excellent picture of the two of us. It is fashionable among the liberated women at our church that they would not be seen holding their husband's hand; this picture shows the two of us holding hands in church. We didn't plan it this way, but it's our counter-testimony (without words) to that fashion.

More than that, the picture tells a story. You can learn a lot from looking at someone's hands. You can see the washed dishes, the tears that were dried and perhaps even the comfort in time of sorrow. Most of all it is a picture that says "us" rather than "me and me." The picture tells a story; a love story.

Communion is a picture too. Look at it this way:

- The bread is a picture of Christ's broken body, nailed to the cross.

- The cup is his blood; by his bloodshed we are given eternal life.

It's not a photograph; it's not a police ID; it's a picture. It's a picture that tells a story, as it should. That story is about our sin and God's great love for us. So great was his love that he sent his only begotten son to us for the specific purpose of dying as our atonement. Like all great pictures it requires you to be involved. Great pictures cannot be ignored, but must be experienced. Great pictures tell a story if only you will listen.

Communion tells a story. A love story.

Little Toot

July 14

The name Hardie Gramatky probably doesn't mean much to you. In fact, you probably have no idea who he is. But many of you will know his most famous work. Especially if you are a grandparent of small grandchildren, you will be familiar with his famous children's book, *Little Toot.* It was first published in 1939, and has sold millions of copies since.

The title character is a tugboat. It is a curious but common fact that writers — especially for children — can take an inanimate object like a tugboat and anthropomorphize it. Little Toot is still a tugboat, but he has a human face. Why do we do this? I submit it is because we're not very good at understanding the feelings and emotions of a tugboat; but we're pretty good at understanding the feelings and emotions of another human being.

A good story, you see, must have within it some conflict and suffering. If the main character is human or humanlike we can empathize with their struggles and their suffering. We "understand." Think about that for a moment: you understand tugboats. At least, if you're six years old. More than that, once our sympathy is invoked we cheer when the good guy wins. Further, we are cheered when the good guy wins. We're human; we like to have our good guys be human too.

I mention this because, as you have been taught, God the Father is not a physical body. But all through the Old Testament we hear expressions like "the arm of God", "the works of his hand" and particularly "the mouth of the Lord." He uses these expressions so that we will understand him better. God took that to the ultimate reality in the New Testament; God became one of us — and not in particularly regal circumstances. He was born a poor boy.

This was not just an attempt to be nice to us. Jesus, like us, was obliged to face the ultimate destroyer of mankind: death. He did not come for a visit; he came to die.

He left behind the Lord's Supper. In its way, it is a story too. And like any other good story it should be told, not kept silent. Like great stories everywhere it is simple for the simple but profound for those who are deep. Each and every one of us can understand it:

- The bread is his body, which suffered and died on the cross.
- The cup is his blood, shed for us, that our sins might be forgiven.

The six-year-old in me is cheered and encouraged when Little Toot becomes a hero. This story has a cheering end also — He arose; and so shall we when he returns. So we remember the conflict and suffering — and look forward to the happy ending.

Spoils

July 21

One of the lesser-known events in the life of David, King of Israel, is found in the thirtieth chapter of First Samuel. It seems that while David and his fighting men were away the local villains raided his home town, stole off with all the livestock, wives, children and other valuables and departed in haste. David and his band of 600 raiders gave chase. In the course of the chase about 200 of his men became so tired they just couldn't go on. The remaining 400 caught up with the villains, defeated them (despite overwhelming odds) and retrieved wives, children, livestock and stuff.

This led to a crisis of leadership. Some of the men who had gone the distance thought it would be appropriate for those who had stayed behind to receive only what had been stolen from them, without a share of the spoils, the trophies of war. David made it a lasting ordinance in Israel: share and share alike. Everybody got a fair share. His reasoning was at the victory was given by God and therefore belonged to all of God's people.

Perhaps this is an example of how God views the situation. Have you ever wondered why it is there are no degrees of salvation? Why is it that some people whose life is exemplary don't get a ticket to first class in salvation? Some of the rest of us probably deserve to fly super economy class. It's very clear to us that some people are much better Christians than others. Yet, God offers his salvation on a one size fits all basis. Have you ever wondered why?

Perhaps we might look at it this way: what is the price of salvation? That, clearly, is the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. You can easily see that the same price was paid for each and every one of us. It therefore makes sense that we get the same class of ticket. But there's more to it than that.

Most of us tend to look at it that we earn something by being a good Christian. God indeed does promise a different reward to those who worked harder. But the baseline entrance into the kingdom of heaven, salvation, is the same for all of us. As the old expression goes, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. The reason for this is simple: none of us have ever earned salvation. Salvation is something which is so far beyond our ability to earn that it must be a gift from God. There is no other way to get it. It is a victory we could not win, but our Lord did – and graciously shares the fruits of that victory with us. Like David, it is an ordinance in the kingdom that all of us will get the fair share — salvation.

So, as you take the cup and the bread today, remember that you did not earn this. Remember that you could not earn this; it could only come as a gift from God. So as you examine yourself, remember that you are not worthy of what you are receiving — but God is gracious.

Manna

July 28

If you go back into the Old Testament, particularly the book of Exodus, you will encounter the incident in which God rains manna from heaven down onto the Jews. It's a familiar point. Please recall that the amount of manna you got was sufficient only for the one next day — except on Friday night, where you would need two days to get you through the Sabbath. As you were not allowed to work on the Sabbath, this made some sense. I submit there are three lessons we can learn from this:

- Lesson number one: you have to live by faith. Stocking up on manna just got you more maggots.
- Lesson number two: God will provide just what you need — but probably not just what you want.
- Lesson number three: if you suddenly get an abundance instead of just enough — that means you're going to need it, and soon.

I suspect that last one is new to you. But it is true. God will provide, even if he provides more than you estimate you're going to need. Communion is exactly such an abundance. Think about it this way:

- The Jews got by for several hundred years with animal sacrifices; the cross greatly exceeds that. Why didn't God continue with the system that seemed to work?
- Modern folk like us think that a life of "good deeds" and "clean living" would be quite sufficient to satisfy the merciful God; what's wrong with that?

So it's clear that the sacrifice at the cross is distinctly superior to what we perceive to be our needs. It's "over the top." Why is it that God thinks we need it?

You are going to need it. There are two reasons:

- You are going to die — and after that there is the destination of heaven or hell.
- You are going to give account to the sinless and perfect God of how you propose to meet his sinless and perfect standard of righteousness. The only thing that works is the atonement given at the cross.

In the meanwhile we are admonished to have communion regularly. Why? Because you need to be reminded of the overwhelming abundance of God's love and sacrifice displayed at the cross. You do not know the day of your death; therefore it is wise to be prepared every day. As you take this communion, see in the bread the body given for you. See in the cup the blood shed for you. God is giving you the answers to the only

final exam you really need to pass. Remember, when he gives you an abundance, it means you're going to need it. Communion is an abundance of mercy.

Teddy Bears

August 4

It comes as a modest surprise to first-time customers. There is a restaurant in our neighborhood, near a local hospital, which is decorated profusely with teddy bears. There are big ones and little ones; bears in wild colors and bears in discreet brown; on the backs of the booths or hanging from the ceiling from a trapeze. Teddy bears — everywhere.

The teddy bear itself dates back to 1902. On a hunting trip, former President Teddy Roosevelt declined to shoot a bear which had been trapped. The incident became the subject of a political cartoon, which was greatly repeated — the bear becoming smaller and cuter in each repetition. Eventually a couple toymakers got the bright idea to turn this cute little bear into a physical object, and the teddy bear was born.

It is perhaps not quite a coincidence that the restaurant in question is near a hospital. One of the reasons that people like teddy bears has to do with the human need for love. Teddy bears are warm and fuzzy, and they are always good for a hug. More than that, no one has ever been condemned or judged by his teddy bear. Teddy bears are made of fur, fluff and love — and those who visit hospital patients, perhaps more than the rest of us, are always in need of love.

Human beings are always in need of love, especially the kind you get from a teddy bear. That love is unconditional, and unconditional love is hard to come by. The greatest example of unconditional love the world has ever seen was shown at the cross. There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends, and that is exactly what our Lord and Savior did. The Scripture puts it this way:

"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

(John 3:17 NASB)

Communion is the physical sign of that great love. It is the love that does not judge or condemn us, but the love saves us. The cup is the symbol of his blood shed for us; we know from the Old Testament that the shedding of blood is necessary for the forgiveness of sin. The bread is the symbol of his body given for us — that we might be nourished spiritually. For those who believe, there is no condemnation in Christ.

Teddy bears are made of fur and fluff – but there is a difference between what something is, and what it is made of. Communion is not just a pair of ingredients – it is the reminder of our Savior's unconditional love for all those who believe in Him.

Self Examination

August 11

We are told that all Scripture is profitable. We may therefore look at today's example seeking for our own benefit.

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

(1 Corinthians 11:27-32 NASB)

This passage addresses a common fallacy among Christians. We often think that communion is "just a ritual." We think of it as a Memorial — but with no potential impact on our lives. Paul, in this passage, such as right. If you think that you can take communion with no effort at repentance and self-examination, you are wrong in a most deadly way. If you can remember the sacrifice of Christ and yet let it have no effect on your life, then I would question whether or not you have a working example of hypocrisy. You most certainly have a working example of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. In his words:

> Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

We might look at it this way: suppose we could hear the inner thoughts of people as they approach the Lord's Supper. We might here in one man's mind what appears to be a grateful recitation of his blessings, including the fact that he is a righteous man, with nothing to confess or repent — and very happy that this is the case. Another man might simply be saying, "Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner." We know which of the two is going to be forgiven.

That's the choice in each of us has to make every time we approach the Lord's Supper. We have to decide whether or not we are going to politely say, "it's only a ritual" or that it is a ritual in the face of Almighty God. Ritual in the face of Almighty God is never meaningless, and is very likely to provoke him to divine action. Paul points out here that illness and death may result from the wrong attitude towards Communion. Whatever else that means, it means that Communion is not "just a ritual."

So therefore we must serve proper and timely warning: examine yourself. See if there is something in your life which needs to be brought before the cleansing blood of Christ. Do not fear to bring it to your Lord; he knows your needs, he knows your weaknesses. He wants you to bring them to him. He longs to forgive you and to make you whole — but you must ask for forgiveness. That starts with the process of self-examination. Lord, be merciful to us, the sinners.

A Few Laws

August 18

In one way or another, various politicians have pronounced that the United States is just a few laws away from becoming a utopia. For those not familiar with the word, a utopia is a society possessing perfect qualities. The politicians vary, of course, on just what laws those might be. Some want to regulate ecology, others economics. If politics won't do it, we have the options of religion and science and technology. Utopia dreaming can be conservative, or liberal or just plain weird. It goes back as far as Plato, and there are no signs of utopianism letting up.

The Christian view is that this is not going to be successful. We live in a fallen world; each of us is a sinner. In a sense, we had utopia in the Garden of Eden — well, Adam and Eve had it. Being what we are, we ruined it quite promptly. That's the problem with utopia; as long as man is sinful, utopia won't last. It's also a pretty good bet that utopia cannot be man-made; can you make something perfect with imperfect implements?

The problem is sin; the answer is the Cross. Only in the atonement of Christ do we have the cure for sin. That is why we celebrate Communion. It is a reminder to us each and every time we partake of the sacrifice our Lord made so that we might be free from the curse of sin. It is by his body (the bread) and his blood (the cup) that we are saved. It is therefore very fitting that we should remember such a sacrifice.

Utopia? There is one specimen of utopia given to us in the Scriptures. In passages in the Old Testament, but most especially in the New Testament book of Revelation, we see described for us the New Heaven, New Earth. This is the ultimate expression of utopia. This one will work, because it is not man-made. God will make this one; perfect implements making a perfect utopia.

When will this happen? When Christ returns, of course. That is why we celebrate Communion "until he comes." Communion looks back to the sacrifice of Christ at the cross, but also looks forward to the coming of the New Heaven, New Earth. We take it not only in memory, but in anticipation.

Return Address

August 25

One of the features of modern times is that families are now often separated by great distances. This is particularly troublesome to grandparents who dote upon their grandchildren. The only people who benefit from the separation, as far as I can tell, work for the United States Postal Service. Grandparents can send a lot of packages.

One feature which is always included on such a package is the return address. Since post offices began, they have required a return address — or at least recommended it — on everything they send. This is a humble admission on the part of the Postal Service that they sometimes are unable to deliver your package to the correct address. Sometimes things go astray. When that happens, it is convenient to get the package back and try the process all over again.

So the procedure is simple: if you can't deliver it as addressed, send it back to the sender. Then you can start over again. This simple bit of sense is paralleled in our life experience. People make a decision about which way they want their life to go — and then find out that the destination is the wrong one. For example:

- Sometimes you decide that you need a new spouse. Often enough, this comes from not having an appreciation for antiques. We'd rather get a new one than fix up the old one.
- If not a new spouse, then a new house might be our desire. We might feel that living in a new neighborhood with better schools, more parks and shade trees is just what we need.
- Often enough, we think we need new toys. That might be a new car, a new boat or — if you have money – a new airplane. We usually find that it's not new very long.
- Once in a while it turns out that what you really want is a new church — perhaps a place with the preacher more to your taste.

Maybe what's really needed is a new "you." So often we make the mistake of thinking that we can change everything else before we need to change ourselves.

Communion is a time to examine the need for the new you.

- It is a time of self-examination. You are look at yourself, and in all honesty decide whether or not you need to change.
- It is a time of repentance — a time to say that I need to make amends, mend fences and rebuild relationships.
- It is a time when you can ask for help to do just those things.

Communion is a reminder that Christ has provided the means to make your repentance and self-examination effective. It is by his sacrifice that God forgives. This is the help you need to make your repentance effective.

Therefore, when you approach communion you do so in memory of Christ's sacrifice. Sometimes the way to determine whether or not you're on the right path is to look backwards and see where you've been. If the light of Christ is no longer shining on your path, you've taken a wrong turn. Examine yourself, repent and then remember what he has done for you.

Control Z

September 1

Those of sufficient antiquity might remember taking a course in high school or college on the use of a drafting board. For those of a younger generation, this is the analog equivalent of Computer Assisted Design. One actually made marks on paper with a pencil!

The kit that came with a drafting board included a number of items; a T-square, a pair of triangles, something called drafting tape (which held the paper on the board) but probably most useful of all was the assortment of erasers which came with it. There were several sizes and types of eraser; a large gummy one, a short hard one, one that looked like a wheel with a brush attached and another that resembled nothing more than the rosin bag used by a baseball pitcher. Each of these had its own particular use.

Drafting is a precision art, and therefore you are also given a piece of aluminum with a number of cutouts, called an eraser shield. Even fixing your mistakes was to be done precisely. And one thing was very certain: you were going to make a lot of mistakes.

It must be admitted that the computer method of doing this has its advantages. Most computer users are familiar with the key sequence "control Z." It means simply, "undo that last mistake." It takes less effort than the eraser, and it is more precise.

But we might wish to point out to you that you can hit control Z more than once. The computer stores a large sequence of your previous mistakes so that you can undo more than one in a sequence. Even in the computer age, the computer knows that you're going to make multiple mistakes. But there's one thing both methods have in common: in both methods you correct as you go. You don't wait for a finished product and then go back and fix all the mistakes; you fix them as you go along.

The idea that you fix your mistakes as you go along is well known to Christianity. It's called repentance. Like the drafting board, like the computer, repentance depends upon your recognizing a mistake. This goes by the name of "self examination." That's the way you're supposed to start communion; examine yourself. Once you've done there are two other things required:

- The first is to get the eraser out; be willing to repent.
- The second is to do so quite precisely. A general feeling of repentance does little good; repenting of the sins you know precisely does a great deal.

Note, too, that Christ prescribes frequent Communion. This is nothing less than the sense that you should "correct as you go." Later is not nearly as good a time to repent as now.

As you do this, remember who made this possible. His body, the bread, was hung on a cross for you. His blood, the cup, was shed so that you might examine yourself and repent — and be forgiven by God himself.

Garden

September 8

Have you ever noticed that human beings are absolutely addicted to gardens? If you take a look at a typical suburban home, you'll find that it is fairly well landscaped. Some people are absolutely addicted to gardening, and their houses are showcases. Others of us are a little more casual about it; if we can keep the grass growing in a green color, that is sufficient. But most of us do appreciate the sense of living in a garden.

Those who rent office space are well aware of this. If you notice, the more expensive a building is, the more likely it is to have very creative gardening. The cheap building is content with the lawn, or perhaps one or two palm trees at the entrance. The expensive building will have exotic greenery and places for people to sit down and eat their lunch.

It seems we like living and working in the garden. It may be because of the common stress of our time; gardens are soothing places. It may simply be that we take pleasure in a well ordered bit of greenery. Who can really say?

We find gardens in the Scripture; in particular, there are two which are very prominent.

- The Garden of Eden is the first. We still use the phrase today to describe a paradise. It was a place which was pure and had no sin — until we introduced it. The garden of paradise can contain no sinners.
- The Garden of Gethsemane is the other. It is a garden of this sinful world, but like many such gardens it is a place of comfort. If we left Eden because of our sin, Christ entered Gethsemane for the same reason.

Christ went to Gethsemane to pray. It would seem the gardens are somehow connected with our deepest needs.

In the scene in the garden of Gethsemane we see Christ as he prepares to be our sacrifice on the cross. In some ways this is very comforting to us because it shows us that Christ is human, as we are. He is human because he sought out the comfort of the garden in the night of his greatest need.

He is human also because of his prayer; he asked his Father that the agony before him might not arrive in that he be relieved of it. He prayed, "let this cup pass from me." I think most of us would ask the same thing.

He is human because he sought comfort and courage, and did so in a place where he thought he would best be heard by the Father — in a garden.

We are often encouraged to remember the suffering and agony of Christ. Much of that suffering was in anticipation of the next day's events. So I will ask you to remember the agony of the night before the crucifixion suffered in the midst of the beauty of the garden.

We may see the comfort that God gives to those who suffer in the fact that Christ suffered beginning in the garden. When you partake today, remember that God does limit your suffering and grant you comfort, just as he did for Christ in the garden.

Solutions to Sin

September 15

One of the most common characteristics of the human race is our intense desire to solve problems. We certainly have our share of problems to solve; but the fact is we enjoy solving them and feel very good about ourselves when we do. One of those problems to which we have produced a multitude of solutions is the problem of sin.

Some of the solutions are ancient ones.

- Perhaps the most common is this: "I'm a better man than…" As long as we can find someone who is a more miserable sinner than we are, we somehow feel justified.
- Another ancient solution is legalism. If we can only define a code of laws that sounds very strict we think keeping that code makes us righteous. There are codes that prevent you from drinking coffee; other codes prohibit eating meat on certain days. We feel righteous when we can keep a detailed code of laws.
- There is always the method of Pontius Pilate: "what is truth?" We can always pretend that we don't know whether or not what we just did really is sin or acceptable. There is nothing like dishonest doubt to make us feel better.

You'll notice one thing about all those ancient solutions: they're designed to help you with the feeling of guilt — not the fact of sin. The modern world has come up with some new solutions.

- We can simply change the definition of what we're doing. Everyone approves of marriage; so you and your dog can get married and we have to approve. This is somewhat like renaming bank robbery to be "self-service income redistribution." It sounds good, doesn't it?
- There is the modern psychological approach: guilt is just a feeling. Your problem is that you're feeling guilty, not that you're a sinner. So let's deal with the guilt; take these pills.
- What might be the most modern and clever approach is simply this: let time pass. If you wait long enough everyone will forget about it.

There's only one thing wrong with each of these solutions, ancient or modern: they don't work. They make you feel better, but they do not deal with the fact of sin. The only solution to sin comes in repentance and asking forgiveness. If you're going to deal with your sin, you're going to have to deal with God.

Fortunately, in his love he has provided a way for us to do that. This is what Christ did on the cross for us; he made the atonement price of our sins. Thus, by following God's prescription, we can be forgiven of our sins. It is precisely this sacrifice that we celebrate and remember in keeping the Lord's Supper. As you take the cup, remember the blood which flowed from your Savior's side. As you take the bread remember his body hanging

on the cross. Your forgiveness, your salvation — both depend on what he did at Calvary. Contemplate this, and then take in a manner worthy of the sacrifice he made.

Stunner

September 22

One must suppose that it happens to every young man at one time or another. Usually without warning a woman walks into a room and utterly silences the young men by her beauty. She is stunningly good looking, and suddenly the men are silenced. We need not point out that to judge the woman by her appearance alone is unfair. It is simply the fact that there are a rare few women who are so stunningly beautiful that when they walk into the room men are tongue-tied.

The moment is very revealing of a man's character. The natural instinct of an honest man is to think that a queen belongs in a castle — and what is woman who looks like that doing here?

There is a similar situation described in the Bible. You will recall the prophet Isaiah who is suddenly given a vision of the Living God. Isaiah knows his Scripture; he knows that no one can see God and live. He also knows why. Sin cannot survive in the presence of the holy God.

Isaiah's reaction is rather logical: he recognizes that he is toast. Like the moment with the pretty girl, it is his tongue that causes his troubles. He is a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips — and he knows this is not acceptable to the holy God. With such awesome power surrounding him, he has no hope of survival. You will recall that St. Peter had the same reaction once.

But the living God has other plans. An angel takes a coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips with it. He then pronounces him forgiven, and thus fit to stand in the presence of Almighty God.

There is a principle at work here which we should learn. If you want to come close to God, you the sinner must be forgiven first. Here, at the Lord's supper, you come closest to God in all of worship. So it is good for us to ask how we might do this.

- First, we need to examine ourselves to see where we have sinned — for sin is the barrier between man and God.
- Next, having identified the sin, we need to repent of it. If there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness from God.
- Finally, we must then ask for forgiveness from the God who gives it richly and generously.

The sense of awe which accompanies and utterly beautiful woman is trivial compared to the sense of awe which should accompany the site of the living God. You come before him now; do so in a manner worthy. Remember that that forgiveness was paid for at the price of the life of Jesus Christ. His body, his blood were used to create your salvation.

Thieves

September 29

In Luke's account of the Crucifixion we are reminded that there are three crosses on the hill of Calvary that day. Two thieves were crucified along with Jesus. The contrast between the two is instructive. Both of them, if you recall, recognized that Jesus is the Christ. The first thief is a very recognizable person in our time: he's the one who's mad at God. After all, he's right next to the Messiah — you would think that being so close he could get Jesus to take care of his little problems, just by demanding it. His focus is entirely upon himself; the dying Christ is simply a means to an end, in his mind. What he wants is simple: he wants Jesus to get him out of this mess, right now, so he can go back to being himself. He puts himself first from start to finish. Such a man is often surprised by the silence of God.

The second thief is a more noble person. To begin with, he admits his guilt. In the context of punishment of that time, he knows he's getting what he deserves. It's not God's fault; it's his own fault. He knows it and he admits it. Most of us will eventually get to that point, but he goes beyond it. He also acknowledges the righteousness of Christ, which we often fail to do. It is not just that I am a sinner; it's that I am a sinner and he is God.

In that context he makes a simple request: "remember me." This shows us a profound, even eloquent trust in the Lord. He makes no specific request. He does not pretend to know what is best, but rather he trusts that God will provide what is best for him. Our Lord, in reply, tells him that "today you will be with me in paradise."

It is a paradox. If you start out by looking out for number one, letting God know that you expect him to take care of you and follow your good advice, you'll wind up with nothing. If you turn your problems over to God, stating your heart's desire but submitting to his will, you may be surprised at how much God will do for you. This is particularly true if you approach him with a contrite heart.

Therefore, as you approach the Lord's Supper, do so with that contrite heart. Admit your sins; acknowledge his righteousness; repent of your sins. Then commit your ways to him, and trust in him with all your heart.

The two thieves had an advantage over us. They saw the price that Christ had to pay for the redemption of mankind. It was played out right in front of their eyes. Even then, one of them did not trust nor repent. We cannot see, except with the mind's eye, the crucifixion of Christ. Yet it is real, the price paid for our salvation. We cannot see, except with the mind's eye, the paradise that is waiting for us. Yet it is real, for those who accept their salvation. Remember these things, and take this communion in a manner which befits the pure and contrite heart.

Treasure Map

October 6

It is a staple of Hollywood fiction: the pirate treasure map. The movie version owes much to its original incarnation by Robert Louis Stevenson, and usually has these characteristics:

- Somehow, the treasure is always on an island. It's as if pirates just can't possibly bury their treasure anywhere on a continent. It seems they have to put it on an island, and then go away and die or something.
- Inevitably, "X" marks the spot of the treasure — but pirates always seem to include some other clues as well. A favorite is to use a dead body pointing to the spot.
- Likewise, when you get to the island (after much swashbuckling) you find that there is some additional mystery to solve.

The whole point of the map, of course, is to let the hero get the treasure. Let's suppose that's you with the map in hand. Just what's going on here?

- As a Christian, have you considered that you have absolutely no right to this treasure whatsoever? It really belongs to some poor soul who worked hard to get it.
- By any test, it does not belong to you. Not only are you taking it, you'll probably have to stick a cutlass in somebody to get it.
- Which, of course, implies that you will have opposition in getting this done. The opposition will have no scruples whatsoever about preventing you from getting the treasure.

Your objective, of course, is then to live happily ever after — on somebody else's money.

But… Isn't that just like salvation?

- It's not something you worked for and earned; it's something that Christ earned for you.
- It's not yours by right; it's yours by gift.
- Even at that, you will encounter opposition in getting it; and opposition with no scruples whatsoever about preventing you from doing so.

But the objective is very much similar — you want to live happily ever after (that is, eternally) on the fortune that was given you.

Communion is the memorial of that gift. The bread and the cup are to remind you of the sacrifice Christ made so that you might have salvation. It reminds you that your salvation is a free gift of God, given at the price of the life of Jesus himself. Take the time to contemplate the greatness of what you have been given and the cost paid for it.

Naughty or Nice

October 13

Surely it is a paradox: some people think they are far too naughty to be allowed to become Christians, while others think they are much too nice to need it. Both of these extremes have been used as an excuse to avoid meeting Jesus of Nazareth.

The person who thinks he has been far too naughty to become a Christian usually reasons it this way: how could anyone forgive what I have done? Not, you understand, that I'm going to discuss it with you; that would simply be embarrassing. But I'm such a wicked and evil sinner that God would have nothing to do with me. God's view is quite different. He looks at a person like that and sees what he sees in the rest of us: a sinner. Amazingly, it appears that God makes no effort to determine the point at which a sinner becomes too unworthy to be saved. You can see the difficulty if you examine it in detail. Just where would you draw the line between an acceptable sinner and an unacceptable sinner? Just to make the attempt would be a great deal of work and likely to produce a very legalistic mindset, which has its own problem. He solves the difficulty by simply making the proclamation that anyone can become a Christian.

It's a bit more difficult with the person at the other end of the spectrum. You usually hear something like the idea that anyone can be a nice person without being a Christian. This is quite true; but what's the point? Why would you want to be a nice person instead of being one who is saved? So you usually get this idea that I am nice enough to be saved without going through the formalities of becoming a Christian. In short, I am good enough. But that brings us back to the same problem of judgment. If it is difficult to determine the dividing line between those who are unacceptable sinners and those who just barely make it, it is equally difficult to draw the line between those were almost good enough and those were good enough. It is interesting that Christ never tries to draw such a line. His answer is always the same: "whosoever will."

Communion reflects this. While the exact composition of the elements varies between the various denominations it is a fact that we all partake of the same thing. However those elements are composed, however those elements are distributed, we are all getting the same thing. His blood covers all of us; not just the worthy, not those who really know they need it, all of us. The truth is that we all need it. The truth is that Christ died for all of us. That's why all who claim the name of Christ partake.

So as you partake this morning, give thanks that God gave his son for all of us, not just the worthy among us. Give thanks that no matter how nice you are, perfection can only be attained through the body and blood of Jesus Christ — which he offered for you. Do this in remembrance of him.

Earthly Gain

October 20

Great-grandfather did not go to church expecting to gain anything more that he already had; he went there to give thanks for it.

-Eric Sloane

Much has changed since great-grandfather's time. The contentment of his age has given way to the idea that the church is a source of material gain the Christian. The most visible aspect of this is what is referred to as "prosperity gospel." The idea is that God wants to bless you; but you have to trust him with your money first — so send in a large contribution. This should raise suspicious eyebrows.

But prayer in the ordinary sense is often used the same way. Often enough, our prayers consist of a long list of wants and desires, clearly indicating that what I want comes before "thy will be done." We seldom ask what it is that we should ask for. Just what is it that we should desire in life? May I suggest that that question is best put off until we have answered what it is we should do first in prayer.

How often we skip over thanksgiving to go to our list of wants and complaints. The truth is that, materially speaking, Americans are extraordinarily blessed. One student complained to this author that all those fellows with cardboard signs along the road side were fakes — they all made a good earning out of the donations of passersby. If you believe that, then when you go home today I suggest you go into your bedroom, alone, get down on your knees and thank Almighty God that you live in the United States of America. America — the land where even the beggars are rich. Give thanks for this; then give thanks for the abundant blessing you have.

But their greater things than these which we should be thankful. At communion we celebrate the greatest of our gifts.

- We should be thankful for the incarnation of our Lord. It is an astounding descent for him to come from heaven to earth that we might live.
- Of course, at communion, we should be thankful for the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord — the basis of our faith.
- Finally, we should be thankful for the promise that he will return, bringing with him the saints gone before us.

Communion is the time we should examine ourselves and give thanks for the greatest gifts ever given to mankind. Thanks be to God, from whom all blessings flow.

Razzle Dazzle

October 27

Throughout military history, people have been using the art of camouflage. We might take a little bit of a review of this, for Christians are in the business of making sure camouflage doesn't work.

- One form of camouflage is this: you know that the object you're looking for is not there – even when it's hiding in plain sight. If you can't see it, it doesn't exist. But this is not the only form of camouflage.
- Another form of camouflage is that you do in fact see it — you just don't identify it correctly. You see a house where they put a cannon.
- Perhaps a bit more subtle is this: you see it, you recognize it correctly but you miss the direction in which it is headed and how fast it's moving. That was the purpose of what was called "razzle dazzle camouflage" in World War I. Ships were painted in the most outrageous blotches and splotches of color to confuse the fellow looking through the periscope.

All these forms of camouflage have one thing in common: they are intended to deceive you. You trust your eyes; your eyes are lying to you.

In communion the church attempts to tell the truth — in the deepest and most profound way possible. The elements of communion are simple and visible, to prevent camouflage.

- One purpose of communion is to exemplify the real existence of Jesus Christ. As the elements are real, so Jesus of Nazareth was a real human being, not a legend.
- Another purpose is so that you will identify correctly the intent which Christ had at the cross: the sacrifice of atonement. We are to identify correctly what it is that is being portrayed.
- Indeed, we are also to identify correctly the direction in which Jesus the Christ is headed. Specifically, he intends to return at the time chosen by God the Father. Direction? He's headed back to us.

True Christians know the Truth — and they live like it.

At communion we are taught to examine ourselves. We need to find out: are we really living the truth, or just going through the motions?

- Is Christ real in our lines — or is he just something for Sunday only?
- Is your life changed by the power of the resurrection — or do you live pretty much like everyone else does, unaffected by the fact that Christ rose from the grave?

- Do you act like he’s returning again — and soon? Or do you act like you have all the time in the world?

You proclaim the truth in communion; do you live the truth in the rest of your life?

Gold Mining

November 3

Many years ago a local amusement park in Southern California offered — for an additional charge — the experience of panning for gold, just like the 49ers did in the nineteenth century. The experience is long since gone, the price of gold having climbed so much as to put it out of reach. There was a sluice with flowing water in which gold bearing sand had been placed. You were given a gold pan — which resembled nothing so much as a pie pan — and such assistance as might seem necessary depending upon your age. The result was a small vial of gold flakes, less than 100^{th} of an ounce. But it was gold, so you took it home and put that vial in a safe place. Somewhere, in the clutter of this house, there is a small vial with a microscopic amount of gold in it.

Have you ever wondered why gold has remained a commodity of such great value over the years? We find it used as a source of money and value in biblical times, and it continues to be so to the present day. What's so special about gold that he keeps this position?

- Gold does not corrode or decay with time. This is a property almost unique among metals. So if you stash it away today it will look the same a hundred years from now.
- Curiously, gold's value depends on its rarity but also on its availability. It is rare enough to be valuable, but common enough that it can be found in most areas.
- One other valuable characteristic gold is this: it is easily shaped into objects which meet the tastes and needs of differing human beings.

I bring this to your attention because of its parallels to the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ.

- Like gold, the atonement is eternal. Christ's sacrifice was made once and is applicable to all of mankind. Its value does not change as the years go by.
- Gold is both rare and common. Salvation has the same characteristics. It is rare because it can be found in only one place — the atonement of Christ. There is no other name by which we can be saved. But it is common, also: Christ died for all. The entrance criterion is, "whosoever will."
- Just as gold is easily shaped to individual needs, so it is that all types of sinners can be shaped into saints. The power of repentance and being born again overwhelms whatever particular sins you may have committed and turns you into a child of God.

In communion we celebrate and remember these things. His sacrifice is shown to us in the body and blood, symbolized by the bread and wine. There is only one atonement, but

it is open to all for salvation. It does not matter what kind of sinner you are; what matters is what a Savior he is.

Manasseh

November 10

Most Protestants are unfamiliar with a section of Scripture entitled the Apocrypha. These works are recognized by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches as being useful in instruction, but are commonly ignored by Protestants. One such work is the Prayer of Manasseh, in which a King of Israel, in captivity, prays for his forgiveness and release. His prayer ends this way:

I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I acknowledge mine iniquities: wherefore, I humbly beseech thee, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me, and destroy me not with mine iniquities. Be not angry with me for ever, by reserving evil for me; neither condemn me to the lower parts of the earth. For thou art the God, even the God of them that repent; and in me thou wilt shew all thy goodness: for thou wilt save me, that am unworthy, according to thy great mercy. Therefore I will praise thee for ever all the days of my life: for all the powers of the heavens do praise thee, and thine is the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

(Prayer of Manasseh 1:12-15 Brenton)

Manasseh identifies God here as "the God of them that repent." It is an encouraging thought. It means God does not separate out the repentant from those who need no repentance. As long as repentance is offered, God is still the God of the repentant. This, no doubt, comes from the fact that it is his will that all might be saved. The attitude is touchingly expressed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. When the boy came back, the Father ran to him. He is truly "the God of them that repent."

Indeed, God the father is incredibly merciful to us. What does he ask from us in order that we might repent and be saved?

- He asks that we confess our sins. He knows what we've done; he wants us to acknowledge it.
- Then, to be explicit, he wants us to ask for forgiveness. He's not asking us to present our sins and our excuses; rather our sins and asking forgiveness for them.
- In so doing, we must acknowledge that we believe that he is God and is both capable and willing to forgive.

And after that, what should we do? Have you ever had the problem of repentance followed by I don't know what to do? The answer is simple: praise. Praise him for being the God he is; the God of them repent.

Did you know that you do this in communion? In taking his body and blood, you acknowledge that his sacrifice on the cross was not just a meaningless gesture, but rather the source of your salvation. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin,

the Scripture tells us. So when you take the body and blood, you are proclaiming that his sacrifice was necessary for you. He is your God; the God of them that repent.

Therefore, take this communion seriously. Examine yourself, and repent as you need. Then partake, acknowledging that his body and blood are given for you.

Voodoo

November 17

Most of us are familiar with the voodoo doll – if only in a humorous sense. There aren't too many people in America who actually believe in voodoo. But the idea of a voodoo doll is a pretty simple one: the doll represents an actual person. By some magic act the voodoo practitioner stabs of the doll and thus causes pain to the individual represented by the doll. This must be done with a great deal of incantation and magic ceremony — otherwise the customer paying for it isn't going to think it's going to work. And voodoo priests want to get paid for their work.

We might call this "representational magic." We use one simple thing to represent something else. In that sense communion is also representational — but the resemblance ends there. Communion is not magic; it is not there to manipulate things but to cause us to remember. The object of the voodoo doll is to cause pain to someone else. The object of communion is quite different. Its first object is our forgiveness; the Lord wants us to bring ourselves to communion so that we might repent and be forgiven. There is no sense that taking communion somehow allows you to manipulate God into doing what you want him to do. But there is a sense that tells us communion brings us closer to God; we are in communion with Him.

The voodoo doll is approached with frantic mysticism. A great deal of energy must be expended so that the customer will be convinced. Communion is to be approached with reverence, not mystic frenzy. It is the symbol of the very body and blood of Christ, worthy of all respect. Indeed, it is a more powerful thing because in taking communion you embrace the sacrifice which Christ made on the cross as being effective for the forgiveness of your sins.

So just how does one approach communion? A voodoo doll needs frantic energy and a collection of pins. Communion requires something much greater: a contrite heart. So I urge you today to examine yourself. Repent as you need to; seek forgiveness from those you have wronged. Bring to God the sacrifice of the contrite heart in honor of the sacrifice of his body and blood.

Steps in Communion

November 24

There is popular set of books available on the market these days with titles like *Brain Surgery for Dummies*. The authors of these books break down what appears to be a complicated process into simple steps with the hope that you will buy the book knowing that even a dummy can do it. The method is fairly simple: break things down into simple steps. Communion has its simple steps as well.

Recognition

It begins with the recognition that each and every one of us, as an individual, is a sinner. If you don't do this, you are in essence denying that there is a problem in your life with sin. If there is no problem, you don't take steps to fix it. So this part is very necessary.

We must also recognize that everybody else is a sinner too. That carries a couple of implications as well. Since we know that we are both sinners, we have every reason to refrain from judging the other person. Your mother taught you that the pot should never call the kettle black. More than that, there is an aspect of "do unto others" that we must practice. We must be ready to forgive those who have sinned against us — because we are sinners just like them.

Confession

You might as well confess your sins to God; he knows all about them anyway. He just wants you to acknowledge it. It's an aid to humility; more than that, it means that you don't think God is so stupid that he doesn't see the obvious.

You are also required to confess your sins to others. This has two beneficial effects. The first is that the others get an honest opinion of who you really are. The second is, now that they have that honest opinion of who you really are, they are much more willing to help.

Finally, it sometimes occurs at the confession must be made in public in church. Let me give you an example: if a member of the staff of your church has an adulterous affair, confession is necessary for forgiveness. Public confession is necessary so that the church will not conclude that adultery is permissible.

Repentance

Faith without works is dead. If you change your ways in repentance, the Lord is disposed to look upon you with kindness and mercy. If you don't change your ways, he's inclined to look at you as a hardened sinner. So follow through on recognition and confession; repent. You will find that this is an excellent cause of humility and fosters a right relationship with God.

Well, there’s the summary. Do you have anything to think about today before you take the cup and eat the bread?

After 8 Days

December 1

Most of us are familiar with the story of Doubting Thomas. You might want to look it up; it is found in John 20:24-29. Pay particular attention to verse twenty-six, please. The story is so familiar that we often skip over the details. Did you notice that Christ did not immediately appear to Thomas? In fact, John tells us that he appeared to him after eight days. So Thomas was left for a period of a week to stew over the fact that his fellow disciples said they had seen the living Christ — and he just wasn't going to believe it. I do not believe that this delay is due to Christ having other things on his agenda. I think it's deliberate. It seems to me that this is an example of God being in no hurry to meet your criteria for his performance.

Many of us would like God to be somewhat like a tame lion. He needs to be a real lion because, after all, we have real problems. But we'd like to have an answer our problems at our command. How often have you thought to yourself, "if only I could see one real miracle…" But think about it: how many people in the Scriptures saw miracle after miracle and maintained their doubt? Seeing a real miracle has, at best, a temporary effect.

More than that, many of us would like to be able to prove the existence of God by going into some scientific laboratory and repeating some particular experiment. It would be very convenient. But do you not see that if this were so than the existence of God would be a part (not a whole) of the universe? And it is impossible that part of the universe could be the creator of all of it. God has deliberately chosen to base his relationship with you not upon scientific proof, but upon good evidence. This is because of the nature of the relationship he wants to have with you: not a relationship of power and oppression, but a relationship of love.

Thus it is that God provides us with powerful evidence of his love. Indeed, he commands us to remember this love at its most powerful, in the sacrifice of his son on the cross. Note that communion calls us to remember the sacrifice, not the resurrection. This is the way of love; sacrifice is greater than performance. So it is that we remember the sacrifice.

Doubting Thomas did eventually receive his evidence, and it restored his relationship with "my Lord and my God." But the evidence he brings before the Christian every week for his memory concerns not the power of the resurrection but the love shown at the cross. God has chosen to portray to us that which is most important to him: his love for us.

Adjectives

December 8

Your author writes a communion meditation each week. As such, the research required often puts me in contact with various writers of previous centuries. There is a curious pattern which has emerged. Certain adjectives are used to apply to communion in a very routine way. We might take a look at these adjectives, for they tell us much about how people think about communion.

The first type of adjective might be described as “controversial.” By that I mean that the adjectives in question are meant to promote or settle (or both) a controversy.

- For example, communion is sometimes described as “open”, or “mixed” or “closed.” Some churches welcome anyone who describes himself as a Christian. Others are willing to tolerate those from another congregation which practices the same rules and regulations. And some churches are unwilling to serve communion to anyone but registered members of the church. There are long and weighty arguments in favor of each of these options; but I hope it would stress to you that communion is not something which is taken trivially. It is a great and weighty matter about which people care deeply — and should.
- Another example of the controversy will is something called “primitive” communion. As far as I can tell this means avoiding the little plastic cups, ignoring the possibility of bacteria and using a common cup and common source of bread. There are those who insist this is the only valid way in which one may have communion. There is a sense here of attempting to connect the church from its very beginning. It tells us that we belong to the same church Christ established almost 2000 years ago.
- In some churches there is a celebration particular to the time when a person takes their first communion. Whether or not this is formally recognized varies, but it is of course a most important occasion.

A second type of adjective might be described as “possessive.” We hear communion described as being the “communion of the Saints” and even more commonly as “the Lord’s Supper.” Both of these stress the fact that communion is not something that we invented; it does not belong to us, in that sense. Rather it is handed down from the Saints and the apostles of old, at the command of Jesus, our Lord.

A third type of adjective describes the sacred nature of communion.

- It is described as the communion of peace. By sharing this symbolic meal we promote peace within the brotherhood of Christians.

- And most commonly, it is described as holy Communion. To be holy means to be set apart for the purposes of God. The great purpose of God in coming in the flesh was to be the sacrificial Lamb that brought our salvation. It is that sacrifice we remember in communion.

Whatever adjectives you use, communion is not to be taken lightly. All these things are weighty matters; therefore, examine yourself and take this meal in holy remembrance of Christ and his sacrifice.

War Souvenirs

December 15

Mention the word “souvenir” to most people and they begin to think immediately of something they purchased at a place like Disneyland. Souvenirs, in this context, share some common characteristics:

- We purchase them to remind us of good times. That’s why Disneyland has a large number of souvenir stands and the local municipal traffic court has none.
- We often purchase them to remind us of good times we had with friends. Souvenir is not so much a souvenir of Disneyland, but of the friends we took with us. After all, no one goes to Disneyland alone.

Sometimes, however, our souvenirs are not purchased but picked up along the way. Sometimes they are war souvenirs; these serve the purpose and jogging the memory but in a very different way.

What kind of war souvenirs do we keep?

- Some souvenirs are simply reminders of the war itself. We might keep a jacket or some trinket we picked up along the way.
- More commonly we pick up souvenirs that remind us of those who suffered with us during the war. The jacket will often have a unit patch on it, reminding us of our buddies.
- More rarely, the souvenir will remind us of something extraordinary which happened during the war. More than one soldier has come home with a hat which has a hole in it.

Communion is, in a sense, a souvenir of the war between good and evil.

- It is reminder that the war exists. Many of us would like to believe that there really is no such thing as evil. This reminds us that this war has been going on for a long, long time.
- Is it a reminder that this war has been won; it is a souvenir of Good Friday.
- Is also a reminder of the suffering needed to win that war; the suffering of Christ on the cross.

So as you partake today , remember: it was to bring his suffering, sacrifice and victory to your mind that he instituted the Lord’s Supper.

Pigeon Point

December 22

On the coast of California between Santa Cruz and San Francisco stands the Pigeon Point Lighthouse. It was first lit in 1871, and is still in use as a lighthouse today. The original equipment has been replaced several times (the light originally burned pig fat for the main light; it's now electric, of course.) But what might interest you about Pigeon Point is that it is now a state park. Thousands of visitors come to see the lighthouse each year. The station was automated in 1972; some time later the lighthouse keeper's house was converted to a youth hostel. In short, Pigeon Point is mostly known today as a tourist attraction. But it's still a working lighthouse.

Sometimes things do change purpose. Around the world there are castles which, when built, were meant to be strong fortresses for times of war. Today they are tourist attractions, complete with military ceremonies staged for the tourists. While this is no doubt good for the national economy – tourists spend money, you know – the castle no longer serves its original purpose. Many lighthouses have also had this happen; Pigeon Point is an exception – it's still a working lighthouse.

Communion is vulnerable to the same process. Your author once attended a church which served communion on a weekly basis . But you could see that they were just going through the motions, "to keep the old people happy."

- There was no communion meditation given; but to prevent anyone from examining himself they did play loud rock music all through it.
- Curiously, they did not use either wine or grape juice. They used pomegranate juice cocktail – it's about the same color and it's cheaper.

It seems that communion was just there to mark a little break in the service. The objective seemed to be to cause as little thought or disturbance as possible.

Yet – such is the power of our Lord – the original function of communion was still there. The elements served still represented the body and blood of our Lord. For those who had been brought up to understand its true meaning, the time of self-examination was still required, even if the music tended to distraction. Like Pigeon Point, it was still there to guide you along the way.

Perhaps we might look at it like this: it is pleasant that people come to the lighthouse to use it as a park. But the mariner on the sea still knows its real value. The service of communion may seem stale or hurried – but the meaning has not been lost. Not for those with eyes to see.

Jalama Beach

December 29

Are you looking for a different sort of experience for this year's New Year's Eve festivities? You might try camping out at Jalama Beach (pronounced "ha-LA-ma" – it's an old Chumash Indian word.) It's located near Vandenberg Air Force Base in California – just go to the middle of rural nowhere, and it's fourteen miles further in. The sounds are a little bit different. There's a train that rumbles through about nine o'clock; usually, some of the younger kids will perform imitation wolf howls about then, too. Mostly, however, you will hear the sound of the surf. It's a quiet time at a quiet place – perfect for contemplation.

It being New Year's Eve, you might ask what you should be contemplating. Let me make some suggestions which have been fruitful in the past:

- Contemplate your trials and troubles. You may find that some are the kind you should "count all joy" as they confirm the fact that your faith is troublesome to others. Other types may be preparing you for what is to come.
- Contemplate your sins. We make New Year's resolutions for a reason.
- Contemplate your blessings. It's a good time to look back and see just how good God has been to you. Then remember that his mercies are new every morning.

Most of you won't be at the beach this New Year's Eve. But you should take a little "beach time" as you take communion; the Scriptures tell us that we should examine ourselves at this time.

- Examine your trials and troubles; is there something you need to turn over to God's care?
- Examine your sins; is there something you need to confess?
- Examine your blessings, especially the sacrifice that makes salvation possible.

Then, as you partake, give thanks that Christ gave his life as ransom for you. The New Year is a time to look forward – and for the Christian, to look forward with hope.

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