He Humbled Himself

Philippians 2:5-8

JANUARY 5

We are specifically instructed to remember the death of our Lord on the cross during communion. Human beings are rather good at remembering facts; perhaps not as good at remembering the feelings or moods that accompany those facts. So, it is fitting that we start with the main fact: Jesus Christ died, on the cross, so that you and I might have salvation and forgiveness of sins. Such remembrance is necessary for the Christian faith; but it is not complete. It will benefit us to examine what led up to the cross. In particular, we may examine those actions which Christ took, in obedience to God the Father, which led to the cross. Paul lists these things for us in the Philippian letter:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:5-8 ESV)

I would have you note one thing to begin with: all these actions were voluntary on his part. There is no sense here of duress, or "I'll do it because I have to."

We may begin with the Incarnation. Jesus, in his heavenly form, was equal with God and considered this a normal thing. He gave it up voluntarily for our sake. He was born in the stable to a couple for Jews, Joseph and Mary.

Note that he did not come as the child of some great ruler, or rich and powerful magnate — but the child of two working-class people. He was born in a stable; if they had railroad trains in those days, the stable would've been on the wrong side of the tracks.

We proclaim that death every time we take communion. In the bread we find his body broken for us; and the cup, his blood shed for our sins. In so doing we remember that death. We also proclaim two other things:

· We proclaim his great love for all mankind. The offer of salvation is open to one and all, reflecting his perfect love.

· We also proclaim him as the perfect example of obedience to the will of God.

As a Child

JANUARY 12

Young children have no real understanding of how their parents truly love them. They take it for granted. More specifically, they feel

- their parents owe them this love. The child needs to worry about it not at all.
- Such love needs no long-term care; it's an obligation, not a relationship.
- It is embarrassing to have to admit that they love their mother and father. It often comes out rather forced.

When you grow up a little bit, the relationship with your parents is different.

- Your parents never get the privilege of "saving" you but they did choose you – and you acknowledge that.
- You recognize that the relationship may need some work on your part — your parents need a little help sometimes. It may just be a small thing, but it carries a lot of significance.
- One sure sign of being grown-up is that you can acknowledge your parents love for you without too much embarrassment.

Your relationship with God as your heavenly father also matures.

- You recognize the word "grace" as the foundation of your relationship with him. It's not something you did, or something you earned but something He gave.
- Regular communion is one way to help maintain that relationship, if only because it is at this time you examine yourself and begin repentance.
- At communion you recognize him as Lord and proclaim to the world that you believe in the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. No sense of embarrassment but a profound sense of belonging to God.

As you partake know that the element symbolized the death of Christ. The bread symbolizes his body; the cup symbolizes his blood. These enable you to be forgiven and maintain a relationship with God the Father which ultimately leads you home to him. Receive; take; contemplate and then participate.

Aliens

JANUARY 19

You see them on the street corners and in the parking lots. By their clothing, by their actions, by the look on their faces you conclude that they are aliens — illegal immigrants, who have no legal right to be in the country. Oh, you could be wrong. But you base your judgment on the fact that they are different. Different clothes, different language, different music — different.

Think for a moment how difficult that must be. You are in a country where you think things are going to be better, but still you encounter troubles and opposition. The temptation to envy the natives is constant. But wait; just exactly who are the aliens in this world?
"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.
(Joh 15:18-19)

That's right. You and I are strangers in a strange land. As the old hymn had it, "this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through…" Like many other strangers we are little bit different. We hold to a particular ritual, and we have for 2000 years. It marks us as being Christians. It is called Communion.

There is a modest amount encoded information in this ritual. If you really want to understand it, you need to know the Christ died for your sins on the cross 2000 years ago. The bread you take represents his body; the cup, his blood. It is offered to you so that you might share the message of his death, burial and resurrection — and thus be the ambassador of eternal life to those around you. By taking communion, you say that you are different. "Yes, I am different — greatly blessed, highly favored despite my imperfections. I am forgiven, and my Lord offers the same treatment to any and all — whosoever will."

The tradition, the ritual will continue until he returns. Until then, examine yourself before taking communion so that you might do so in a worthy manner.

One Bread

JANUARY 26

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.
(1Co 10:16-17)

Communion is somewhat similar to a play. There is an element which is called "suspension of disbelief." You learn to do this at an early age. For example, if you happen to be watching a Shakespearean play and a king comes onto the stage, you don't imagine that they found a real king and persuaded him to act in their company. No, that's just an actor up there with the crown on his head. But if you're going to enjoy the play, you need to see him as a king. You need to look behind the acting to the intent of the author. Far from being a disability, this is essential to understanding the play. The same is true with ceremonies such as communion. You need to look behind the physical elements and see the message that is portrayed.

Communion has many such portrayals. We often tell you that the cup represents Christ's blood; the bread represents his body. Paul, in this passage, gives us a further representation. We all take the *same* bread. We don't have a separate loaf of bread for elders, another one for deacons, another one for men as opposed women, not even a special bread for children. It's the same thing for all of us. There is a great significance in that.

It means that we are one. Despite the fact that each of us has a different function in the church, and that function may change with time, at a very fundamental level we are one. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek,..." Same bread, same body.

So let me encourage you today to look around you. Do you see someone with whom you are not in full harmony? Being one body requires us all to work together. That means each of us must be willing

to do it. Before you partake, resolved to settle any such disharmony with your brother or sister. Then partake, as one who is willing to be part one body for Jesus Christ. Perhaps we will see: one body can do much more than many busybodies.

The Samaritan Woman

February 2

Human beings generally prefer to live in a group of which they approve. We try to be one of the family; we try to be one of the clan; we try to be one of the tribe and then we try to be one with the nation. Life can get rather unpleasant if the group doesn't accept you. You will quickly try to figure out a way to get back into the group, usually by demonstrating some merit that the others don't have.

Consider, then, the Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well of Jacob. The Jews far outnumber the Samaritans to begin with. So Samaritan is an outcast to start with, but this lady takes it much further. She violates one of the sacred taboos of her society. And it must be admitted this is somewhat extreme; she's been married more than five times. A woman's status in those days was tied up very much with the man she was with. How does one get out of the swamp?

To her immense good fortune, as she saw it, she accidentally runs into a prophet. What luck! She can ask him the theological question of the day, and take the answer back to her family with the authority of a prophet. Her moral reputation is now rescued! Imagine the disappointment, then, when the prophet turns out to tell her that the answer is not the one she wanted. Worse, it's about to become irrelevant. Where do we worship? Jerusalem, for the moment. But soon, "in spirit and in truth." This man is not only thinking out of the box; he's thinking beyond the container ship.

She goes off to friends and family to proclaim the new Messiah. They come; they see; they believe. It's a side point for most people, but she is back in the good graces of her group.

The apex of Christian worship is in communion. Communion is the high point of Christian worship, the center of symbolic proclamation. If you are part of communion, you are in the group known as "The Church." The qualifications for that group are set by Jesus Christ himself; meet his qualifications and you are definitely part of his group, the church.

Ultimately, his group — his body — is the church. He opens that body to "whosoever will…"

The unity of Christ's body can be seen in communion. There is one bread; this implies there is only one body. If there is only one body, there is only one church — Universal, Militant and Triumphant. As you partake today, remember that you are taking is body and his blood, the bread and the cup, as a symbol of the fact that you are part of his family. Welcome to his table!

Who Is Man?

FEBRUARY 9

what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?
(Psa 8:4 ESV)

David, in one of his earliest psalms, poses one of those questions that has troubled the philosopher before and since. He examines the state of the universe around him, and finds that it is indeed majestic. Stars, sun, moon, hills, mountains, rivers, seas and all of nature sings of the glory of God. The creator's handiwork proclaims his majesty. In light of all this, it seems logical to ask: why does God pay any attention to man? Isn't he really more or less just one more insect on the planet? But not only does God pay attention to man, he gives them dominion over that nature. He has raised man up to the point of being a little bit lower than the angels. The mystery deepens; why does God care for man? David's only response to this question is to repeat his statement, "How majestic is your name in all the earth." (This makes a bit more sense if you think of "name" as being equivalent to "reputation".) David simply acknowledges the facts. There it is, folks, what man has received from God and the question remains, "Why?"

For all the problems this poses in the Old Testament, it becomes even more profound in the New Testament. For in the New Testament we encounter the explicit fact of the grace of God. In the Old Testament God created the heavens and the earth and put man in charge; in the New Testament he provided the grace needed to free him from sin and give him eternal life. As if that were not enough, in the prophecies of the New Testament we are promised even greater things.
We also get an answer to the great question. In the most quoted verse of the New Testament, John 3:16, John opens with the statement, "For God so loved the world…" Why? It is because love is the essence of God's character. He is the righteous God, but he is also the loving God. To reconcile those two he sent his son to the cross to die for our sins, that we might be forgiven and accepted as children of God.

This concept is so important that Christ commanded us to keep communion as a memory of his sacrifice on Calvary. Love, it seems, must be constantly remembered to remain fresh and alive. In communion, we do this with the cup and the bread. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood. As you partake, you hold in your hand the visible symbols of God's love for you. Think of it this way: the wedding ring on your hand reminds you of the person you love. Glance at it; see where your thoughts lead. The elements in your hands remind you of the God who loves you. Contemplate them, and follow your thoughts. Then partake in a manner worthy of the love giving you on the Cross.

will and memory goes back a few years will remember September 11, 2001. Christians in particular might remember what happened the Sunday afterwards; attendance in church was quite high. It seems there is a type of believer who, when things are going well, has much more interesting things to do on Sunday morning than go to church. But let the crisis — personal or national — come, and that believer is in church asking God for protection in favor.
The faithful believer understands the truth of the Scripture verse. The translators have chosen these words carefully. For example, the faithful believer does not "stay." He dwells. It is a word that implies a rather permanent residence, a deliberate decision to stay where you are. Similarly, the word "abide" carries with it the meaning of settling down. As much as a Christian sojourner can stay in one place for any length of time in his journey through this world, it is in the shelter of the Most Time. The word "shelter" in the original carries with it an alternate translation of "secret place." Put a bit more graphically, we are hiding out in God's cave. It's a normal place to be the typical Christian. We depend upon the protection of Almighty God. We do so routinely.

Communion is part of that routine. Where do you find this faithful Christian on Sundays? In church, often in the same pew each Sunday. If you asked him why, he would ask you where else he would be? Someone who gives his worries to God has no trouble in worshiping God. Even when the specter of death approaches, such a Christian knows the strength given by the Holy Spirit. As one Christian put it, "Doctor, <u>you</u> are going to die. <u>I</u> am going home."

The matter is pictured entirely in communion. In the bread we see his body; in the cup, his blood. These were sacrificed for us on Calvary as the price of our atonement. The result for the believer who takes his shelter in God is that he spends eternity with Christ. Spend your days in the shelter of his wings; let him take you home when you die. Live forever with him. He promised it; he paid for it; he will deliver it.

Bear Trouble

FEBRUARY 16

The Eaton fire in Altadena destroyed or damaged thousands of homes. The Los Angeles Times reports that one homeowner, returning to his burnt property, encountered something a little unusual. He had called the local power company to come out and restart the electricity in the house. After a visit to the site, the power company informed him they would be unable to return his power due to the fact that there was a 525-pound bear occupying the crawlspace under the house. (Houses in Altadena do not usually have a basement, but the crawlspace below the house is a good site to put electrical connections.) The Department of Fish and Game was called. Using a humane bear trap and whatever motivation works in that circumstance, the Fish and Game people were able to retrieve the bear and transport it to a remote area of the Angeles National Forest.

The newspaper article did not mention the techniques used to induce the bear to get in the trap, but it's usually a combination food to lure the bear and noise to make the bear seeks someplace quieter. The combination of positive and negative seems to have worked.

God has a similar problem with the humans he has created. He wants you to spend eternity with him, as one of his children. He uses your circumstances and troubles to prod you into turning to him. But that's not sufficient. You need both to be attracted to God and to desire to leave your current circumstances. More to the point, you have two questions:

- What has God done for me that I should pay attention to him?
- What will God promised to do for me in the future?

We will return to the second question in the moment. Communion gives us the answer to the first question. In communion, we are reminded of the sacrifice Christ made, becoming our atonement — the payment for our sins. In simple ceremony, the bread reminds us of Christ body on the cross, suffering for us. The cup reminds us of his blood, required by the Old Testament law for the remission of our sins.

But we will not do this ceremony forever. We are told that in communion we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." Here's the

answer to the other question. His death, burial and resurrection are not the end of things, but the beginning. He will one day return to judge the living and the dead, rewarding those who have followed his precepts and punishing those who stood against him.

As you partake this morning, let your memory and your feelings be stirred by the sacrifice which was given for you. Then gaze ahead to see the reward which is coming when he comes back. We don't know the day; we don't know the hour — but we do know the God who has promised it. He is faithful and true. He will return with his reward for us, just as he promised.

Break Bread

FEBRUARY 23

It is a musical oddity. Protestant worship is distinguished by the use of music. Congregational singing, choir performances and the use of musical instruments are all commonplace. This is exemplified by the fact that there are hymns for practically every element of worship. Interestingly, however, there are very few hymns which concern themselves with Communion. Those that do appear in relatively few of the hymnals in publication. It is likely that this is because communion covers the core events of Christianity, and therefore any hymn could be a Communion hymn.

One hymn is an exception to this. You will probably recognize it:

1 Let us break bread together on our knees.
Let us break bread together on our knees.
Refrain:
When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord have mercy on me.
2 Let us drink wine together on our knees.
Let us drink wine together on our knees. [Refrain]
3 Let us praise God together on our knees.
Let us praise God together on our knees. [Refrain]

the music and lyrics date back to the 18 century; it was originally an African-American spiritual. It has had a curious history since then. It achieved its popularity as a communion song during the American Civil War. Most worship services for both armies were held outdoors, and it seems somehow appropriate. It faded into obscurity afterwards, but was revived as part of a general fascination with African-American spirituals in 1926, when it was published in a popular collection. It has been a staple of hymnals since then.

The appeal is largely due to its simplicity.

- "On our knees" implies a plain humility, most appropriate for communion.
- The appeal for God's mercy is universal among Christians.
- The phrasing "face to the rising sun" reminds the Christian of the second coming of Christ.

As you partake of the "bread and wine", remember to do so with humility. You are the sinner, asking for mercy from God. After

partaking, thanking him for his grace. Remember, He suffered, bled and died — for you.

Nickel's Worth

MARCH 2

Many newcomers to the church have asked, "why do we have communion so often?" They see it as an empty ritual in a time where ritual has lost its meaning. There are many replies to this; here are five things that communion reinforces that are essential in the church.

First, communion is a regular opportunity for self-examination. Do you go to your doctors for an annual physical? This is the spiritual equivalent; self-examination which leads to repentance.

Second, it reminds you that you live in the body of Christ, the church. Your life is not a solo flight. God intends that his children should be a family, flocking together. Sometimes you help out; sometimes you're the one receiving the help. But the Christian life is not a lonesome journey, it is life in the body.

Third, communion reminds you of the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead. We know that the grave is not the final end of mankind. Christ walked out of that tomb; he has promised we will do likewise.

Fourth, there is the matter of forgiveness. Forgiveness is much easier to give when you realize what Christ gave him his sacrifice for atonement. If he can go to the cross so that you are forgiven of your sins, surely you can forgive your Christian brother. He might even forgive you!

Fifth, it is a reminder that you are to proclaim the good news of Christ. You are to tell others of his death which paid for our sins. But he rose again on the third day. Finally, you're to tell others he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Adolf Hitler did not get everything you deserve to in this life. But God isn't finished with him yet.

Therefore, as you partake this morning see beyond the elements of bread and wine. See his body and blood given for you so that you might live with him, redeemed forever. Take these elements in an altogether worthy manner.

Admissible Evidence

MARCH 9

Our first reaction to the first witness was this: he's the worst liar I ever met. That opinion prevailed until the second witness testified. We, the jury, were being asked to choose between two people who were obviously both liars. We thought we'd get some relief from the dilemma when the policeman who investigated the case was called to testify. He had, unfortunately, lost his notes the case and had no memory of the misdemeanor. So, we were stuck with two liars and an amnesiac. We had no choice but to find the defendant not guilty; the prosecution had simply not proven the case.

To our surprise, the judge asked us all to stay after the trial and talk with the attorneys on both sides. The attorneys — and indeed the judge — were astonished that we reached such a verdict. But as I put it to one attorney, we judged based on the evidence presented. What we found out was that the attorneys and the judge knew a great deal more about both defendant and victim. But we did not hear that testimony, therefore we could not make any judgment based on it. We could only judge by the evidence in front of us.

A parallel to the situation can be found in the Old Testament. The centerpiece of the Jewish Temple was the Ark of the Covenant. On top of the Ark was a gold cover, often called the Mercy Seat. Beneath the cover — out of sight — were the stone tablets that Moses was given containing the law. The picture is a clear one: even with two angels watching the Mercy Seat the law which accuses mankind could not be seen. Therefore mercy was available; God judges by the evidence in front of him. Just like our jury!

That cover was also known as the Atonement Cover. Symbolically, it's power came from the fact that the Jews offered sacrifices for their sins. That atonement kept God from destroying them. In the New Testament, Christ is our atonement. Sacrificing his life at exactly the right time in accordance with the law, he becomes our "Mercy Seat." His blood, interposed between us and the eyes of God, grants us a "not guilty" verdict. Of course, this was not without cost. Becoming our

mercy seat took the crucifixion. Our Lord was crucified; he shed his blood so that we might be forgiven of our sins.

Communion is the ceremony by which we remember that sacrifice. If you could memorize only one Bible verse, most of us would think of John 3:16:

> "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
> (Joh 3:16 ESV)

In communion, the bread represents his body. The cup represents his blood, shed so that we might have forgiveness of sins. This is the symbolic way we remember the truth expressed in John 3:16. So, as you partake this morning, do so solemnly. Remember what your Lord went through so that you might be saved.

Attitude ¶

MARCH 16

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3 ESV)

Paul did not intend these verses has instruction for communion, but he might as well have used them for it. Notice that he is a prisoner, in Rome, for the sake of the gospel. Instead of asking them for help in getting himself bailed out, he appeals to them to walk in a worthy manner. And what is this worthy manner? The unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He is concerned not with his station in jail but their station in life.

So how does he instruct them to get on with it? He gives them four attributes which we might well take as being necessary for communion which unifies the church. Specifically:

- *Humility.* So often we find our fellow Christians with an ego which is a barrier to the oneness of the church. We compare ourselves to others when we should be looking to compare ourselves to Jesus Christ.
- *Gentleness.* Often confused with weakness, gentleness is the attitude the strong man has towards a young child. If you are strong, you have the power to be gentle.
- *Patience.* We often grow impatient when we think of things that are to be done in the church. We forget that our timeframe is not "the rest of my life;" but until Jesus comes again. It is at once immediate and forever. Therefore, have patience with your Christian brothers and sisters.
- *Bearing with one another in love.* Sometimes the only thing you can do with your fellow Christian is to put up with them. Do so in the love which Christ shows for you. Imitate your Lord by loving your fellow Christians the way He does.

We are one bread and one cup; therefore, we are one body — the church, united. We are indwelt by the same Spirit; we are therefore the church, united. Put aside all your anger and thoughts of vengeance, and partake in the bond of peace. By taking the bread and the cup, you hold symbolically the body and blood of Christ — and therefore declare the sacrifice of Christ and therefore the unity of the church.

Rahab ¶
MARCH 23

Should you ever be perusing the ancestry of Jesus Christ you will find the name Rahab listed. If you dig back into the book of Joshua you will find her story. It is not a particularly sterling history.

To begin with, Rahab was a prostitute. She combined this occupation along with running an inn. Picture a seedy, cheap motel on the wrong side of the tracks. Joshua sent some spies to see how things were; they figured they'd be safe here. Rahab covered for them when the king asked where they were. She then admitted that she was scared stiff of their God who had done so much to the population in the area. She covered for them; they'd make sure she and her family got out alive. The spies agreed to commit Israel to this deal, but on one condition: she had to hang the scarlet cord from her window — so that they would know which house to spare from the slaughter. It was a tacky business transaction, but then again prostitution is a tacky business. It worked.

But notice that condition again. Hanging a scarlet rope out your window. Apparently the guards couldn't see it from their angle, but there's always the chance somebody would notice it and come asking questions. But she did it; she was committed.

The spies? They were prepared to bargain with anybody who could help them get out alive. In the process, they committed the nation of Israel to picking up some loose baggage — some non-Jewish personnel. Note that they didn't check with the board of elders. They did follow through, however. They rescued Rahab and her family.

That scarlet cord has fascinated scholars ever since. Scarlet cord has several uses, usually in holy fabric, or clothing for the rich, or as a symbol of royalty. As such, the symbolic use of this one is often proclaimed because the cord is the same color as blood — as in, blood of the sacrifices for atonement. It can be seen as a forerunner of the salvation of sinners by the blood of Christ. One reason for this is that the court must be tied to the window. You must make a commitment; the cord is either there, or it's not. You either are a Christian, or you're not. By your actions you proclaim the truth.

Communion is a similar sign. There is no secret as to the symbolic significance of the elements of communion. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood. When you take it, you proclaim the Lord's death every time until he returns. To proclaim his death is to proclaim his resurrection. To proclaim his resurrection is to proclaim your belief that he will return to judge the living and the dead. To proclaim his return is to proclaim your belief that he will judge wisely and well — especially for those who have made the commitment and followed through on it.

Follow through. It is not sufficient just to participate in the ceremony. You must walk the talk. You must be faithful to our Lord to make the symbolism real in your life. Do not be Deceived; the Lord knows the faithful.

Parkinson's Disease ¶

MARCH 30

Parkinson's disease is a neurological condition which is progressive, increasing its effect on the sufferer as time goes by. It is generally characterized by these attributes:

- It is incurable. There is no known effective cure for the disease, and no reasonable hope in the near future of finding one.
- It is progressive — meaning, it gets worse as time goes by. The effects are quite varied and differ from person to person.

The person suffering from this disease will notice a change in his relationship with others. Casual acquaintances tend to avoid you, as they don't know how to politely handle the problem of dealing with someone with Parkinson's disease. Those in your family — often also the caregiver — may take this to the point of extremes. The medical profession tends to shy away from dealing with you too . Doctors like to heal people; they don't like to tell people there is no hope. As a result, the sufferer begins to understand what it was like in biblical times to go around announcing, "unclean, unclean."

Humanity as a whole has a similar problem — it's called "sin." But unlike Parkinson's disease, sin does have a cure. The atonement — the sacrifice of Christ on the cross — produces this cure. Without Christ, there is no hope; it will just get worse. With Christ there is hope; ultimately the cure will arrive when he does at his return.

In the meanwhile, there does exist effective treatment for the symptoms of sin. It's one of the reasons we take communion. Communion reminds us of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The bread portrays his body, the cup, his blood. But we are also instructed that before we take communion, we are to examine ourselves. The first step in effective treatment of sin is repentance, and repentance starts with self-examination.

Reach into your memory and bring these things out:

- Remember what Christ did for you on the cross.
- Examine yourself; then remember what you should do about what you find.
- Remember that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead; your repentance prepares you for this.

In Christ there is hope — always.

Souvenir

April 6

The English language has long had a custom of borrowing words from other languages. The most predominant of those of the languages is French, due to the Norman conquest in 1066. One of the words that we borrowed from the French is the word "souvenir." In the original French, it means "to remember." It is a rather flexible term.

- Sometimes it is a simple, tangible item that we purchase. If you've ever been to an amusement park, like Disneyland, you can get all manner of souvenirs. My wife and I had, at one time, matching white sailor hats with our names embroidered on them. The hats are long gone; Disneyland is still in business, however.
- The content can also stretch to things which we used to trigger our memories. Favorite songs, hymns that bring up specific memories or people are in effect souvenirs too .
- Sometimes the souvenirs are things we just keep. Many a soldier has come home with a cap with a bullet sized hole in it.

Why do we keep souvenirs? There are many reasons; here are three.

- Sometimes we simply want to remember the good times or the bad times. The good times are happy; the bad times make for better stories. So we keep the souvenirs that life hands us.
- Often, it's a case of trying to remember some person, particularly one who has already died. We keep grandmother's crystal pitcher, dad's pocket watch and mom's recipe book.
- Particularly for those who might've been involved in such things, we keep souvenirs of great events. One lady of my acquaintance passed on to me a silver medallion commemorating Richard Nixon's visit to China — which established diplomatic relations with communist China.

Communion serves a similar purpose. We are specifically told that we are to do it in remembrance of Christ. Christians sometimes miss the impact Jesus of Nazareth had on civilization; but there is no question about it. Jesus of Nazareth is the cornerstone of Western civilization. It is fitting, therefore, that he be remembered on a regular basis.

Communion also serves to remind us of what he did on the cross. The selection of the bread and the wine was not accidental. Rather, they explicitly remind us of his body hung on the cross and his blood shed for the atonement of our sins. There is no greater event in history.

Finally, Communion reminds us of his promise that he will return to judge the living and the dead. For those of us who put our trust in him, this will be a joyous time. So, as you partake this morning, remember that you are commemorating the most significant person in the most significant events of history — who someday will return an end history as we know it. Do so in reverence, as is befitting this memory.

Easter

April 13-Easter

One of the curiosities of American civilization is the difference in the way we handle the two Christian holidays, Easter and Christmas. Christmas is a joyous time; if you think of the music that accompanies Christmas you'll see it. Easter music is mostly hymns. Christmas music is all over the map. We even have a song celebrating the privilege of having Christmas celebrations during a whiteout snowstorm (thank you, Bing Crosby.)

Look at the legends that surround the two holidays. Santa Claus is a derivative of a Christian saint, St. Nicholas. His main commercial application seems to be drinking Coca-Cola. But you can at least see the connection to the original holiday. Where on earth we got the Easter Bunny, I do not know. But search as you like there are no rabbits in the New Testament.

Perhaps more important is this: Christmas is a merry time. People have parties and celebrate. Adults can get into the swing of things just as well as children. But Easter, most of the celebrating is done by small children. The adults are quite sure what to make of it.

Why is this? I might suggest a few reasons.

- Christmas celebrates a birth, almost always a joyous occasion in human life. Newborn babies don't threaten anyone, but they are incredibly cute and adorable.
- Christmas requires no commitment. Go to church on Christmas Eve and tell them you'll be back next year at the same time.
- The centerpiece of Easter is the resurrection of Christ. It is not a frolic or a party, nor is it cute and adorable. It is the most important event in human history. It's hard to take it lightly.

As you partake this morning, remembering the body and blood of our Lord and Savior, remember what he has done for you.

- By his suffering he has paid the price for your sins. He is our atonement sacrifice.
- He died that you might be born again.
  By the power of the Holy Spirit, he rose from the grave — just as you will rise from the grave at the Last Judgment.

Convalescent Leave

April 20

During World War II the Royal Navy was accustomed to having some of its sailors finish their convalescence from wounds received in action with a stay at home. One such sailor, from HMS Dorsetshire, faced a problem in doing this. He would need several months convalescent leave due to an injury received from a torpedo hit. He had, however, no place in Great Britain to take him in. To his surprise, he was invited to spend his convalescent leave in Zululand, a province of South Africa. It seems that some British citizens there wanted to do something to help the war effort and so offered to take somebody in. The result was completely successful, and are sailor returned to duty in a few months.

The method is still applicable today. You don't need a torpedo; just the ordinary day in the world will get to you eventually. The world is a crazy place. There always seem to be something absurd knocking about — which is why you have a sense of humor to take it in stride. Sad to say, it is normal that the world makes no sense. As this is being written, we are officially advised that men can get pregnant. Right. Shellshock is real, even without the shells. We all need time away from the craziness of the world and in a place where the world makes sense. A well-ordered world helps the soul recover.

Communion is such a spot in time. It is a time in which remember that the "world is not my home, I'm just a passing through." Laugh at the craziness of this world; live in the world eternal. It is a reminder that God is sovereign, which is to say He is in control. Things look completely out of hand at the crucifixion until the resurrection arrived.
Communion is also a reminder of his love for us. The love of God is beyond our fathoming but not beyond our reach. We see in the body and blood of Christ, symbolized by the bread and cup, the great love which prompted the sacrifice of Christ. In so doing we also see his return, for he promised that he would not drink it again until he came back. So, take a deep breath, look at this world as if it were made by God and remember what he has already done for you.

Outside the Camp

APRIL 27

Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. (Heb 13:13 ESV)

The New Testament makes it clear that the suffering of Christ on the cross was not just a physical phenomenon. This was intentional; crucifixion included at no extra charge the emotional humiliation of being totally disgraced. You will notice that most of his disciples held back from the cross, not wishing to share the insults being hurled at him. The parallel in the Old Testament is interesting. On the Day of Atonement the sacrifices were not to be given to the priests for their food, as with most other sacrifices. Rather, they were to be taken outside the camp and burned to the point where they could not be used. The men who carried them were unclean until evening. Everything about the sacrifices showed that they cannot have anything to do with the clean and the holy. That was a very real pain to Jesus of Nazareth on the cross.

Why did God arrange it this way? Perhaps it was to demonstrate to us just how complete and thorough our sharing of the suffering of Christ might become. Many of us feel we can suffer almost anything, if we don't lose her dignity about it. Dignity left Christ early. It is a measure of complete commitment to God's purposes that Christ suffered through this.
There is also another possibility. Throughout the Old Testament, God shows a fondness for using the least capable, lowliest person to accomplish his purposes. It is his way of saying that he is so powerful that he cannot be limited by our lack of power. Nobody picked out David as the guy to tackle Goliath. Perhaps this was God's way of saying the world can do its worst — but God will overcome.
Finally, the crucifixion is the supreme example of obedience to God. "Nevertheless, not my will but thy will be done." If nothing else, it shows us the lengths to which our obedience should go.

Communion picks up many of these themes. When you partake of communion, you tell the world — and the church — that you are "on the team." You are not sitting politely in the bleachers and cheering; you are ready to go onto the field and block and tackle. You can always tell the real players after a football game;

their uniforms come out very dirty. The same is true Christians. The real ones have experiences that seem quite untidy.
If you're on the team with Christ, you're going to suffer with Christ. It's not a question of "if"; just a question of "when." By taking communion you say you're willing to accept that. With your eyes open, understanding that this is not a birthday party, you accept the suffering and pain that comes with being a Christian. How? The same way that your Lord did. You are following him.
It is a matter of obedience. If you are obedient to the commands of Christ, you will remember him by taking communion. You will remember his sacrifice, is suffering and his separation from all that he loved. You will tell the world the church that you are on the team — and you know the uniform is going to get dirty.

So, as you partake this morning, let your mind contemplate the bread and see his battered body. See in the cup is blood, shed for the remission of your sins. Then partake, honoring his sacrifice and being willing to share his sufferings.

Click Bait

April 27

I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."
(Mat 26:29 ESV)

One of the great wastes of time (mostly) which comes from the Internet arrives at our desktops from a site called YouTube. It is quite phenomenal to see the number of videos on an extremely wide variety of subjects. Everybody who has something to say about anything can apparently create a channel on YouTube to express his or her opinions. This is particularly true in religious subjects, as a YouTube apparently has no restrictions on what you can say in the name of religion. If you want a good example of this, go to YouTube and search on the title "Second Coming." You will be overwhelmed with selections. I need not point out that not all of them are worth your time; most of them disagree with each other as to how Revelation is to be interpreted. But by and large they are quite emphatic about the accuracy of their methods. But like any YouTube video channel, you need to be aware that there is such a thing as "click bait."

What is "click bait?" It is a provocative title but stimulate your curiosity or outrage to get you to watch a video that otherwise might not be noticed. A fine example of this comes with people who tell you that they know the exact moment when Christ will return. You can imagine the video from there on.

It's not that Christ doesn't tell us that he's coming back. He does. He does so in the form of metaphoric pictures in Revelation, and prophecy throughout the entire Bible. I suspect that if the apostle John had a way to do motion pictures, he would have used the technique. But one thing that we do have is the periodic reminder in communion. Our Lord specifically told us that he would not drink the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom arrived. The verse in question is much disputed concerning its Greek meaning, but this much is clear. He is coming back to judge the living and the dead. He made a point of mentioning it at the Last Supper.

Communion is, in many ways, a form of reminder notice. It's rather more formal than a telephone message, but it serves the same purpose: to remind you of something that's important. The bread reminds you that his body was given up to suffering for you. The cup reminds you that his blood was shed for the remission of your sins. Once you see these two, you can also easily see his death and his resurrection. After those, there is one more reminder: he is coming again.

As you partake, you should know that you are proclaiming that you are part of the universal church, all believers of all places and times. We will take communion until he returns; therefore, taking communion reminds us that he will return. It's a reminder to be ready. It is a reminder of our great hope of the resurrection of the dead. It is a reminder that God ultimately triumphs — and we will be there to triumph with him.

Measurement

May 4

According to one doctor, medicine made the transition from art to science starting in the 1930's. The key difference was this: measurement. You can look at it today and see instruments like blood pressure monitors, oxygen monitors, hard monitors and so forth. But did you ever notice that there is no such thing as a "love monitor?" Measuring love is extremely difficult.

Consider, if you will, the love shown to us by God at Calvary:
· Note first who died for us. Jesus was not merely a prophet, or a pious saint. No; Jesus is the author and sustainer of all created things. He is God himself. He became like one of us, taking on this flesh of clay, and walked the dusty roads of Judea. Those roads were the path of the King of Kings to Calvary.
· Next, please note that he died for us. It is a wonder indeed that he came in the flesh to be with us and teach us. We are taught that his specific purpose was to die for us. It was no ordinary death, either. There was no comfortable hospital bed; rather, an old rugged cross—the painful, brutal, shameful death of a criminal. Worse for Him: he was separated from God the Father to do this.
· Finally, note that this life was given while we were still sinners. He made no effort to separate the "worthy" sinners from the unworthy ones. Christ died for all, even though every sin we commit is first a violation of his law of love.

In light of these things, how should we approach communion?

- First, examine yourself and see if there is something you need to settle with Jesus. Is there something your conscience is nagging you about? Take it to the Lord in prayer before communion.
- When you partake, partake honestly. It's not a time for you to make a show of piety. It's time to remember what He has done.
- As you partake, remember that the cup represents his blood, the bread, his body. These were sacrificed for you so that you might be forgiven, and given salvation. These elements unite you with the rest of the church in all places, and of all times. Christ's body is united, never more so than at communion.

The Silver Blaze

MAY 11

In one of the more notable Sherlock Holmes stories, *Silver Blaze,* inspector Gregory asks Holmes if he has missed anything:
"Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"
"To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."
"The dog did nothing in the night-time."
"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.

The catchphrase, "dog in the night," has appeared in many writings since. For example, Barbara Tuchman, in her history of the opening of the First World War, *Guns of August,* uses it to describe the German High Seas Fleet . Sometimes you can learn a lot from what doesn't happen.

For example, look at Christ's prayer in the garden on the night before the crucifixion. It is a fervent plea that he would not undergo such suffering. Never is Christ shown to be more human in the garden, asking to be released from the ordeal. There is no sense of bravado in his conduct; he does not want to go through this. Yet in the same prayer you see is obedience to the Father, exemplifying the obedient servant of God. But did you notice that he never prays for the resurrection? He prophesies it; he even outlines the time for it — three days. But he never asks the Father for the resurrection.

That's why communion is primarily a memorial to his death. The physical elements of communion, the bread and the cup, are to represent his body and his blood. We see in them his atoning sacrifice, the price paid to save us from our sins. The resurrection is full of promise of things to come, when he returns. For now, however, we celebrate his death in this ceremony. So, as you partake, do so in remembrance of his death. The cruel death on the cross paid the price of our sins, so that we might have salvation.

Self-Examination

May 18

One of the most difficult parts of communion is the instruction to examine yourself. The full fruits of self-examination cannot possibly happen in the context of the ceremony, so let us understand what self-examination really means and how to do it.

First, let us recognize the fact that we are all sinners. Every one of us, at one time or another, will need to let self-examination blossom into repentance. It's not something that's just for you, or just for somebody else; it applies to all. Which is why repentance applies to all of us. It is also a reminder that we are not to judge others. We are a congregation of sinners, kneeling at the foot of the Cross.

Once you have settled that issue, and identified whatever might be the problem, there comes the step of confession. It is a requirement for repentance that you confess. Christians sometimes wonder why; after all, God knows that you did it. Yes, he does; he just wants you to admit it. More than that, he commands confession to each other. Obviously, some care must be taken in choosing the others — the church gossip is probably a poor choice. Choose wisely; perhaps you should choose someone who can help you with the problem. In rare instances this may involve the eldership of the church.

Then comes repentance. By its very nature, repentance seeks forgiveness. So you can see the benefit immediately; to repent normally involves being forgiven. This promotes the unity of the church and usually blesses both the repentant one and the forgiving one. Even better, it means the next time these things come around, you, as the forgiven one, are much more likely to forgive others.

So before you partake this morning of the body and blood of Christ, examine yourself. Before taking the bread and the cup, see if there is need of repentance and forgiveness, and seek it as Christ commands us. Some things require regular maintenance — like sinners, for instance.

The Veil

MAY 25

Hebrews 10:19-20

Several curious events occurred at the crucifixion. One of the most unexpected was this: the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. To understand the significance of this event, you need to know that the veil separated two areas of the temple. The outer area was reserved for the priests; ordinary people could not go there. The inner area, called the Holy of Holies, could be entered only once a year, by the high priest, on the Day of Atonement. Figuratively speaking, this was where the High Priest met God. It was no accident that the veil was torn; indeed, it was a supernatural event. It left the Jews with a great puzzle: why was it torn? It is worth noting that the system of ceremonial sacrifices stopped at this event. God was proclaiming that because his Son had been sacrificed for the sins of the world, the way to God was now open for all.

The author of the book of Hebrews tells it this way:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh,
(Heb 10:19-20 NASB)

It is clear from the book of Hebrews that the way for all people to reach God is now open. The last sacrifice has been made; sin has been atoned for. We now have a perpetual High Priest in the person of Jesus Christ. Not only do we have access to God, we have someone to intercede for us. We have, if you will, "a Friend in Court." (For further research, look up the word "Melchizedek.")

This access was not without a price. Indeed, the price of atonement is so high that only God could pay it, in the form of his only begotten Son. In communion, we are asked to remember the sacrifice. The first element is the bread, which represents his body. Curiously, he once referred to his body as "this temple." It is not a coincidence. The real place to go to meet God is the person of Christ. Beyond that, the cup represents his blood. The Old Testament tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. That blood, shed on the Cross, cleanses us from our sins. This was portrayed in the Old Testament by

the blood of sacrifice being used to cleanse the various elements of the tabernacle and other worship items.

Therefore, as you partake this morning, do so as one who is handling the symbols which God has ordained to show his love for you. Take the bread and the cup in a solemn and worthy manner, showing reverence and respect for the sacrifice of love made by the God who loves you.

Life in the Blood

June 1

Among the many dietary regulations that the ancient Hebrew was to observe, one in particular was repeated very often. If you sacrificed an animal, or if it was just simply preparing a meal, the ancient Hebrew was forbidden to eat the blood. In most circumstances it was poured out on the ground like water, and then covered up with dirt. The explanation given for this was that the blood was the life of the animal. It was therefore somehow sacred, not to be taken in as food. The penalty for violating this ordinance was to be excommunicated from the Hebrew people. It has been suggested that this practice help to prevent idolatry, as it was common in other religions to use the blood as a magic way to bribe the gods to favor your hunt. But two things are clear: first, you were forbidden to eat the blood. Second, it had something to do with the worship of God.

So imagine the distress of the apostles when Jesus told them this:
And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.
(Mat 26:27-28 NASB)

Jesus said this when instituting the Lord's Supper. But he's already been through this discussion with them once:
So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me.
(Joh 6:53-57 NASB)

As we know, the use of animal sacrifices was a forerunner to the sacrifice of Christ. Here, Jesus gives them the true sacrifice for sins.

This is not without theological difficulties either. As the Pharisees in John chapter 6 remarked, "how can this man give us his flesh to eat in his blood to eat?" Just exactly how do you do that? Remember that there is a big difference between what a thing *is*, and what it is *made of*.

The Lord answers this question at the institution of the Lord's Supper. His body takes the shape and form of unleavened bread. His blood takes the shape and form of the cup. An ordinary meal containing bread and grape juice/wine might be a rather casual affair. But this is no ordinary meal. It is the one memorial we are to repeat regularly. It was instituted by our Lord of the night which he was betrayed. From the earliest days of the church, it has been viewed as most solemn and sacred. As you partake, do so with reverence. As our Lord told the apostles, it is a matter of life and death — eternally.

Mercy, with Style

June 8

So you're sitting in your pew, thinking to yourself that you really ought to forgive that person. The Spirit has been nagging at you and you need to get it done. But you don't want to be the sour persimmon face of forgiveness, right? When you forgive, you want to do it with style and class. So, what is style and class for forgiveness?

Cheerfulness. (see Romans 12:8)

Think of it this way: if you were the one being forgiven, would you rather hear a pious lecture from a stern, long horse face — or something like, "hey pal, don't sweat it. It's history." So now you know how to do it.

Now, of course, some of the people you're going to have to forgive in your lifetime are going to be people who seem to be rather sketchy. But you don't need to add to their troubles by making forgiveness a painful experience. In fact, you should be glad you have an opportunity to forgive. After all, you could be the one on the receiving end. For most of us, that's happened more than once.

In a way, Christ set the example for us. One of the complaints the Pharisees made about Jesus was that he always seemed to be partying with the wrong kind of people. "Wrong kind of people" means people like tax collectors, prostitutes and other various sinners. To such people he brought the good news of the kingdom of God. Sometimes we forget that "Gospel" means "good news." Our Lord did not come to condemn the world but that through him the world might be saved.

He paid the price for that salvation on the Cross. As you partake this morning, remember the suffering of his body in the bread, in his shed blood in the cup. And if the Spirit puts it in your mind to forgive someone, hasten to do so. But as you do, be of good cheer — you are imitating the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Sometimes, grace really is amazing.

Mercy Triumphs over Judgment

June 15

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.
(Jas 2:13 ESV)

It is the World Series, 2024. It's the 10th inning of the first game. The home team, the Dodgers, is down 3-2. The bases are loaded, with two outs. Freddie Freeman comes to the plate. The broadcast announcer speculates that he might not be able to run out a base hit because of his bad ankles.

Freeman met first pitch with the textbook swing, driving a monster homerun into the bleachers. It was the first time in World Series history, more than 100 years long, that anyone had hit a walk-off grand slam home run. In a nod to the historic World Series home run by Kirk Gibson of the Dodgers, 36 years earlier, the broadcaster said, "Gibby, meet Freddie."

It just may be that triumph shows its most emotional side in sports. Dodger fans as far away as Japan celebrated all night. The measure of the triumph might be seen in the things:

- the reputation of your opponent. The New York Yankees have one more World Series than any other team in baseball. They were heavily favored to win this World Series.
- The difficulty of your task. The most difficult task in sports is hitting major league pitching. If you can hit a major league fastball three times out of 10 for a base hit, you're one of the best in the world. Home runs are even more difficult.
- The length of the struggle to get there. Major League Baseball starts with a season of a hundred 62 games. That's just to get to the playoffs.

In the Scripture quoted above, James tells us that "mercy triumphs over judgment." This applies to God's mercy as well as any other. It also triumph s over judgment, the judgment of God. Consider those three factors again:

- It is the triumph of mercy over judgment in which judgment is satisfied. The price is paid therefore God can be merciful.
- How difficult was it? The cost the life blood of the Lamb of God. Is the atonement done by the one sinless man who walked the planet.
- How long did it take to get there? It was planned before the beginning of time. It will not be completely finished until Christ returns.

In communion, we partake of the symbols of Christ's body and blood. The body is represented in the bread; the blood, in the cup. It is the sacred memorial of the triumph of mercy over justice. We are celebrating the great victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, victory over our sins. Do so solemnly, but joyfully.

Leavened Bread

June 22

One of the results of reading through the Bible every year is that the teacher will find that God is rather fussy about certain things. The Old Testament is full of instructions concerning bread. That's right, bread. In practically all cases bread presented as an offering or sacrifice must be unleavened bread. It therefore comes as a surprise to find that there are exceptions to this rule. Specifically there are two instances where you are supposed to bring bread which is leavened with yeast. Those exceptions are:

- A peace offering (Leviticus 7:13).. This occurs when you decided it's time to get right with the Lord God Almighty, so you bring an offering voluntarily to start that process. Since you aren't giving anything holy, the leavened bread is acceptable; indeed, commanded.
- The required offering at Pentecost. (See Leviticus 23:15-17). Pentecost, in its original formulation, is a harvest Festival. You're required to bring some of the fruits of your fields, including some leavened bread.

The bread itself is never offered on the altar but is given instead directly to the priest who is officiating the ceremony..

To understand this more clearly, we need to look at the symbolism involved. The basic rule is that leaven, in bread, symbolizes sin in the world. You don't sacrifice something which is sinful, but something which is pure. So it usually unleavened bread that you want. Leavened bread, however, has a good deal more to it. Christ frequently used it in a variety of ways. Remember "I am the bread of life?" You may also recall some mention of "give us this day our daily bread." In the context of Pentecost and Passover, leavened bread basically represents our ordinary, sinful life. It may not be important, but sometimes it becomes a bother.

There are parallels in communion today, particularly in the use of self-examination before taking communion. Like the ancient Israelites, you might be struggling with something that is a besetting sin, or some problem where your behavior has gotten you into trouble. The function of a peace offering was to move God to straighten out your relationship with him. In short, "I'm a sinner and in nature help, Lord." If you need help, ask him for it.
Once you've done that, bring your mind around to proper frame suitable for communion. It's something to be done with dignity and respect, even if some of the subject in question is not particularly pleasant. Focus your mind on the

facts. The bread represents his body (yes, usually unleavened). The cup, his blood. This was the sacrifice he made so that you and I could approach the throne of grace asking for mercy — and even a little help sometimes. You may be one of those people who are close to God in communion. He welcomes your plea for help, for he loves you to the point of grace.

In the Beginning

JUNE 29

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

The original Greek of this passage must be exceptionally clear. It is translated, word for word identically in all the following translations:

A Faithful Version
American Standard Version
Darby Bible
Douay-Rheims Bible
English Standard Version
English Majority Text Version
Jubilee Bible
Lexham Bible
Literal Translation of the Holy Bible
Literal Standard Version
Modern King James Version
Murdoch Bible
New American Standard – 1977
New American Standard Bible
Numeric English New Testament
New International Version
Revised Version
Tree of Life Version
Today's New International Version
Updated American Standard Version
World English Bible
Noah Webster Bible
Weymouth Bible
Weymouth New Testament
Young's Literal Translation

(This is by no means an exhaustive list — just the ones I had on my Bible study software.) Most other translations vary only by a single word, or some type of

emphasis. It is evident that St. John knew what he was talking about, put it clearly and his translators did likewise.

The passage reveals to us some of the most important concepts in the New Testament.

- It introduces the concept that Jesus is "The Word" — the one message God wants us to read and understand.
- It introduces to us the concept of the Trinity, indirectly.
- It clearly introduces the idea that Jesus is the agent of creation. As it says later, he created everything, and everything was created by him.
- Finally, it tells us clearly that Jesus is the light of the world. In Him there is no darkness.

It is an introduction to the most awesome human being ever to walk the planet.

Consider well, then, what this great and awesome person did.

- He went through the process of becoming a human being.
- He endured the ordinary suffering of such a human being. His suffering ultimately led him to the cross, an innocent victim of criminal justice.
- He endured the cross willingly — knowing the price he would pay.

He became our atonement sacrifice, paying the price to reconcile us with God Almighty while we were still in our sins.

Why? "No greater love…"

Communion

At His command, we partake in communion to remember. Just what do we remember?

- We remember Him – his teaching, and his example.
- We remember his suffering and death.
- We remember his love.

We do this in the ceremonial fashion. The unleavened bread in the ceremony represents his body. The cup represents his blood. This has not changed in 2000 years; we hope to pass it on to our descendants just as well. The ceremony is a solemn one, as befits its importance.

Therefore, with solemn dignity, and the proper respect due to the Son of Man who died for you, partake of this meal in a worthy manner.

Is He Mad?

JULY 6

Little Jimmy was a well behaved, well-disciplined child. His father being a career soldier, Jimmy had a fair amount of exposure to being "chewed out" in the military manner. He knew how to stand at attention and stare straight at his father for as long as father's lecture took. His father, therefore, decided that after his fifth birthday he was ready to experience the adult worship service at the church.
Things went well until the good pastor started his sermon. The pastor's method was the same each week. He would start out at triple forte (really, really, loud) and crescendo for 25 minutes. At the end of that time, he would ask a rhetorical question to dangle your soul over the fiery pit of hell in dread contemplation of your immortal soul. This lasted about 30 seconds, in which dead silence prevailed. He would then pick up where he left off, decrescendo back down to triple forte for five minutes. The choir would sing a hymn in the congregation will escape once more.

Jimmy's reaction to this was not quite what anyone expected. He squirmed during the opening part of the service, as five-year-olds will do. But as soon as the pastor began, Jimmy's eyes were locked on the pulpit, his body stiff. For 25 minutes he did not move from that position. Then came the great rhetorical question. Jimmy, it seems, had a question of his own. In a stage whisper you could hear all over the church in that dread silence, he asked, "Is he mad?"

Sometimes the Christian asks that question about God. Is God mad at me? Reading through the Scripture you tend to get one of two answers:

- Speaking of the wicked, God is indeed angry with them (Psalm 7:11).
- Speaking of those who are righteous, his anger is very short-lived.

So how does one know which category you are in? It's simple enough. The righteous are those who are trying to follow God's commands. They're not perfect; they make mistakes. But they're trying. The wicked? They're not giving it a thought.

As any parent knows, after the lecture must come the reassurance that the child is still loved and still wanted. It is just possible that this is the real reason for the existence of communion. God needs a way to remind his children of his love for them. The greatest example of that love came at Calvary, on the cross. The atonement sacrifice is the ultimate proof of God's love for the world. It is therefore no surprise that he wants you to remember it.

His reminder takes the form of a ceremonial meal. In that meal, the unleavened bread represents the body of Christ. The cup represents his blood. In so doing, you remember his suffering was in the body. You also remember that he shed his blood to cover your sins. As you partake, therefore remember: Jesus loves you. Smile; he is not mad.

Trouble Brewing

JULY 13
JOHN 3:1-20

If ever there was a manager who clearly showed the difference between leadership and management, he was the man. He was up on the executive floor one morning and went to get a cup of coffee. Taking the last cup, he put the empty coffee pot back on a hot burner. One of the secretaries saw this and admonished him that having taken the last cup, he was supposed to make the next pot. He lit into her viciously. He explained that he was much too important to be making coffee; that was a secretary's job. He was working up quite a rant when his boss walked in. He listened for a moment; figured out what happened — and proceeded to make the next pot. Leaders, it seems, know how to make coffee.

Similar opportunity occurred at the Last Supper. As the meal was being served, Christ prepared himself to wash the disciples' feet. This is a fact which is seldom commented upon during communion meditations, but it is an integral part of communion. The early church got the meaning of this quickly. They saw baptism as the initial cleansing of the Christian. The repentance which results from self-examination in communion they saw as the parallel to washing the feet. They drew two important conclusions from this:

- self-examination leads to repentance, and therefore is a necessary part of the communion service.
- Repentance must be accompanied by the cleansing that our Lord delivers. Only our Lord can wash the feet of the disciples. Self-reformation, using only your own strength, does not work in the long run.

Communion is necessarily a symbolic meal. We always recognize the bread as representing Christ body, and the cup as representing his blood. We should recognize our self-examination as a first step in repentance, ending with Christ washing this to be clean and pure. Therefore, before you partake of the body and blood of Christ, examine yourself to see If there's anything you're Lord needs to clean.

Preparation

JULY 20
RUTH 3

If you live long enough, you can become an old Christian. If that's you, I want you to think back to when you were young. Remember coming to communion and discovering that you were completely unprepared to meet your Lord? Thinking to yourself, "what am I supposed to do *before* I take communion?" There may be some of you here today having exactly that problem. May I suggest an example, taken from the Old Testament, that gives you some very useful ideas.

The example is taken from the Book of Ruth. In the third chapter, we see the story of Ruth going to her kinsman redeemer, Boaz, to ask him to perform the functions of that office. Ruth is an older woman; Boaz an even older man. We can see in Ruth's actions the way in which one approaches one's kinsman-redeemer. It's a good model for us in approaching communion.

First, please note that Ruth approaches Boaz alone. She's going to ask for help, but she doesn't need a crowd to help her do it. You approach your Lord in communion the same way; as the old hymn has, "Just as I am, without one plea."

Next, she goes in and lies down at his feet. It is a grand, symbolic gesture. It is the gesture of a servant. There is no sense here that she is approaching him as her equal, but that she is her servant. We sometimes forget the word "Lord" in our thinking about communion; he is our Lord we are his servants.

After that, she places herself under his protection. The reason is clear; she needs it. We too should recognize the fact that we need Christ's protection, particularly in the matter of dealing with our sins. We need to acknowledge the fact that he is our redemption; we cannot deal with our sins by ourselves.

She comes prepared. There are two things we may note. One is that she has anointed herself. It may seem as simple as putting on your makeup, but it carries the symbolic significance of being prepared in prayer. She is also wearing her best clothes. We are reminded that in Revelation fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. If your charity to all is obvious to Him, you are well prepared.

Finally, she lies down at his feet and — at his command — she does not leave until daylight. The reasons for this have been greatly debated by commentators, but I would have you see in it one word: obedience. She does what she is told.

So there you have it. Come by yourself, as His servant, seeking his protection and strength, prepared with prayer and righteous acts, and being obedient to his commands. Do this as you prepare to receive his body (the bread) and his blood (the cup) with the reverence needed to meet your Lord eye to eye.

Dishes

JULY 27

If you travel enough, you will find that different churches have different styles of serving communion. Take, for example, the cups. Some churches use paper cups, others use plastic. Some use individual cups, one for each person. Others use one cup for all of the people in the congregation. But that one cup may be extremely ornate and quite valuable, or it can be a simple, plain chalice. If they use individual cups, they may be served from a tray that is silver, gold, or plated to look like those. It may also be that the plate on which the bread is arranged is similarly varied. Materials used might include pottery, metal, plastic, paper or even perhaps something more exotic, such as a bamboo mat. Now, if you ask the leadership of that congregation whether they are serving communion in the "right" way, they will tell you that of course they are doing it exactly the right way. But they will usually admit as well that they hadn't really thought about that; they got the utensils from someplace else, they work, and they aren't important to the ceremony being conducted.

Consider, first, the bread. It sits on the plate and there are some specifications for it. It is usually unleavened bread, after the custom of the ancient Jews in celebrating Passover — from which communion is derived. The power in the bread comes from Christ's statement, "This is my body." It is a forceful and powerful statement.

- It tells us of the unity of the church; one bread, one body.
- We break bread together; this is fellowship, a symbol of our love for one another.
- Finally we cannot miss the implication that the church is the body of Christ, and the bread of communion unifies that body.

"This is my blood," said Christ. There has been much debate as to what liquid is to be used, whether wine or grape juice. In rare instances there have been other fluids substituted. The symbolism for this liquid, however, is the same in all instances. It is taken from Passover again. We may see in it these things:

- Blood is used to represent the life of anything living, therefore this is the life of Christ.
- Blood is used to make atonement, paying for the sins of the members of the church.
- Blood is also used in the Old Testament represent cleansing, as in cleansing us from our sins.

The blood, as represented by the cup, means to us a restored relationship with our Lord. We get this restoration through his forgiveness; like the prodigal son, we are welcomed home whatever the price might be. Only God could do this.

As you partake this morning, consider well what this ceremony means — and what you are saying by participating in it. Take it in a worthy manner; do it like it is the most important thing of your day. Because – it is.

Jerusalem 19 17

August 3

The study of prophecy can often lead to strange coincidences and the appearance of the student of prophecy who understands everything. Such was the case on December 8, 1917, in Jerusalem. In accordance with the theories of certain messianic Jewish congregations, that was the day that Great Britain was supposed to rule over Jerusalem, displacing the Muslims. Sure enough, Gen. Allenby and the English Expeditionary Force marched in and took the city. Gen. Allenby was aware of the prophecy and its influence. Somewhere in there the prophecy people have said the message would come from the sky, so Allenby sent airplanes over the city to drop messages encouraging surrender.

However, Allenby was not a particularly enthusiastic student of that school of prophecy. It was clear he was supposed to come through the Eastern Gate. He didn't; he deliberately went through the Jaffa gate. This caused minor revisions in the prophetic literature.

Prophecy is capable of a great number of interpretations. The specific prophecy in this instance is an Ezekiel 44:1-3. The Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage is, however, that it is the only Old Testament prophecy of the perpetual virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus. As one of my old friends used to put it, "prophecy is very difficult — especially when it concerns the future."

Do the same thing with Passover, for instance. It's clear that Passover foreshadows communion; indeed, communion was derived from Passover and was initiated during the Passover meal. The act of placing the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the lintel posts of the door has been interpreted in various ways with respect to communion, for example. But despite the prophetic implications, our knowledge of Passover is rather complete. One might take communion the same way. You can find prophetic implications in the meal. However, the only known prophecy associated with communion is Christ's comment that he would not take it again until he did so in the kingdom of God. This is usually interpreted to mean that he will do so when he returns.

Communion is usually interpreted in the present, rather than in the future. We see the bread, just as it is used in Passover — and we refer to it as the body of

Christ. We partake of the cup and refer to it as the blood of Christ. The pictures are clear; the interpretation, however, are rather varied. It is sufficient for the Christian to know that it is the body and blood of Christ that he is using. At its core, communion is that which unites the church, the body of Christ.

So as you partake this morning, do so in a manner prepared for the future, living in the present. Know that Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. Know that you are one who is forgiven, whose salvation is assured — one of God's children. The future holds the Judgment; the present holds salvation.

Means and Metaphors

August 10

Since the earliest days of Christianity, the parable has been an excellent teaching tool for the church. Even those who are illiterate can understand the parable. You just need to know who is who. So, we present for your edification the list of characters in the most famous of all parables, The Prodigal Son.

The title character, The Prodigal Son, is fairly obvious. He is the unrepentant sinner. In the Scriptures you find such people as tax collectors, prostitutes and as here the rebellious son. If you've never met such a person, you are indeed fortunate — or very hostile to the human species.

The father in the story represents our Heavenly Father. It's possible to stretch the metaphor a little too far, but most people understand that it's just that: a metaphor. Look at it this way: Heavenly Father in disguise.

Finally, we come to the older brother. He represents what I call the "sour persimmon" Christian. Someone who is intent on making sure that no real sinners ever get in his church. Only the perfect need apply.

From this mixture we may extract a few principles concerning our Heavenly Father. In particular we may ask the question, "Does God really love us?" Consider the following as your answers:

- He seems to have spent his daylight hours standing at the gate of his property, looking over the horizon to see if his younger son is coming home. He genuinely wanted that.
- When he saw the boy, he ran towards him. This may not seem significant to you, but it is the only passage in the Bible in which God is portrayed as *running.* Picture it: he picks up that overgrown bathrobe, tightens up the sandals and off he goes!
    - The kid has come home with his apology speech carefully memorized. He is waiting for dad to give them the thunderous looks like and start. Dad doesn't. He ignores the entire speech; his child is home!

How much does God love us? The earthly father in the parable killed the fatted calf; our Heavenly Father sacrificed the Lamb of God.

Now you know the metaphoric elements of this parable. Communion is similar. It has metaphoric, or symbolic, elements in it, also. The bread symbolizes Christ's body, sacrificed on the Cross. The cup symbolizes his blood, shed the so that we might be forgiven of our sins. And like the feast of the fatted calf in the parable, it is open to any repentant sinner. All you must do — come home.

signs of the Times

August 17

One of the favorite pastimes of many Christians is trying to determine when Jesus will return to earth. This subject has started many arguments, and there are several different theories as to approximately when he will come. Of course, much of this depends upon your specific theory for interpreting Revelation. But there are a few things that are known as "signs of the times" that we are encouraged to look for. For example:

· The return of the Jews to Palestine; in particular to Jerusalem. Virtually all theories agree that the return of the Jews to Palestine and Jerusalem is in fact a sign that the coming of Christ is near.

· Another sign is that given in Daniel: the "abomination of desolation." This may require the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Such a Temple is described, prophetically, in the book of Ezekiel. Not all theories hold to this sign of the times. But if it does occur, it would be very highly visible.

· The preaching of the gospel to all the nations is also such a sign. There is some dispute about what "all the nations" means. The original in the Greek seems to indicate all the Roman Empire. In our day we might look at it that this means every people group on the planet.

Let me interrupt your thinking on this for a moment. As Thomas a Kempis once asked, "suppose you knew the right answer. What would you do differently?" Would you call your stockbroker and set up some good financial moves? Probably not. The truth is, you're supposed to be ready for his return at any time. It's nice to be warned that it's coming. But it's like earthquakes in California: you don't know when they're going to happen, but you know they ***are*** going to happen. So, you must be ready.

Communion can give you some guidance on how to be ready. To be specific:

- It's best to keep the main thing, the main thing. The central fact of Christianity is the resurrection; the central doctrine is salvation by grace.
- Community is a common meal given to all Christians. It therefore underlies the unity of the church as it commemorates the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Keep the unity of the church foremost in your mind as you work with your Christian brothers.

- In dealing with the outside world, remember that your first task is to make disciples and teach them what Christ has taught you. It's the main thing that we do outside the church

as you partake this morning, think on these things. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood. As you take this spiritual nourishment, you become more like Him. Therefore, do this in solemn reverence at your Lord's commandment.

Groucho Marx

August 24

It is a curiosity of the legal system that there are 3 kinds of testimony. There is expert testimony, usually from some scientific expert. There is what is called lay testimony — not based on expertise, but upon being an eyewitness to something. Curiously, it is also possible to have celebrity testimony. This involves asking someone prominence for an opinion and being influenced by it.

It is much more common in the advertising world than it is in the legal world. One example, from the early 1960s, was Groucho Marx endorsing Skippy Peanut Butter. The account states that Skippy offered Groucho a 5-year supply of Skippy peanut butter or the equivalent in cash. "I'll take the cash," said Groucho, "the peanut butter wouldn't even amount to one jar." Skippy promptly backed up a few trucks full of cash and persuaded Groucho the easy way.

Most of us will never be asked to endorse Skippy peanut butter. We're not going to be as famous as Groucho Marx nor as quick-witted. But there is one instance in which we will be doing it: we are celebrity witnesses to those that we know personally. It may be your wife (or husband), your children, your friends or someone who wandered into the church unexpectedly. They can hardly deduce your testimony from the way you sit in the pew — but you will be taking communion. It is a form of testimony.

What do you testify to?

- You testify that you believe in the atonement, that Christ's sacrifice on the cross brought about your forgiveness.
- You testify that you believe in the resurrection of Christ.
- You testify that you believe in the judgment to come.

These things, and more, are the testimony given by communion. Why do you testify? Because you believe.

Communion is a form of symbolic communication. We use the symbolism of communion to proclaim certain truths. The bread represents the body of Christ, which suffered for you on the cross. The cup represents his blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sins. Do this in a worthy manner, with reverence, so

that all who observe you will understand just how important this is. A solemn dignity is often louder than words.

Least Commandment

August 31

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach *them,* the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

(Mat 5:19)

Like most of us, you have never given any thought to what the least of the commandments might be. There are well over 600 such commandments. It would seem reasonable that no one could tell you what the least is. But as it happens there was general agreement among the rabbis as to exactly which one was the least.

"If you come across a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long.
(Deu 22:6-7)

When you look at it in isolation it appears to be somewhat trivial, or perhaps fussy. But I would have you note that the least of the commandments promises blessings from God as well as long life. It may be the least, but it is not trivial.

I bring this to your attention today as part of the preparation for communion. We are commanded in the Scriptures to examine ourselves. Will you look to see if there is some besetting sin within us, and if so to take action to remove it. It's very easy to see the major sins contributing to this. Honesty might compel us to admit, however, that some of the more trivial sins in our lives never get discussed during self-examination. The commandment to do so is part of the instructions for communion. But if time presses, or we just don't feel like it, we say "oh, that's too trivial." But consider:

- Where do you draw the line between the serious and the trivial sin? Christ never made such a distinction.
- Particularly if you are a mature Christian, you must consider yourself to be somewhat of an example to others. It's not something you can put off till later.
- Sin give Satan handle with which to maneuver you. Just because it's a small handle doesn't mean it's not an effective one.

Finally, for the mature Christian, there is a virtue in being obedient to the commandments of God — even if you don't understand why he's giving them to you. Obedience is the bedrock of faith.

Therefore, I encourage you to examine yourself in this communion time, even for the most trivial of sins. Repent, or make arrangements to do so. In an ultimate sense, communion is sacred, and the sacred belongs to God. As Paul tells us in the first Corinthian letter,

> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
> (1Co 10:16)

The word translated as "participation" is the same word which is often translated "fellowship." Communion is a form of fellowship with Christ. It uses his body and his blood, as portrayed by the bread and the cup, to keep you fellowship with him. Prepare yourself for fellowship; get right with your Lord. Then partake in a worthy, solemn manner. The bread is his body, the cup, the blood of the new covenant. Do this in remembrance of Him.

Cup of Demons

SEPTEMBER 7

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. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?
(1Co 10:21-22)

It is often Interesting to talk with the missionary returned to the United States. During several such encounters, it has been made obvious that the American view of demon possession is very weak compared to the foreign view. The first world sees Christ triumphant — which may explain why it is the first world.

The Roman view was very similar to the 3rd world view. The worship of Roman gods and goddesses carried with it certain advantages. Since the god or goddess you were worshiping was a rather limited god, you were in a position to bargain. A few sacrifices here, a worship Festival here or there — always lots of fun — you could get from the god or goddess whatever it would seem to be reasonable. There were certain ceremonies to be attended, rituals to be followed, but all in all this God was much more reasonable than the real God of the universe. The petty demon spirit can be bought; the God of the universe cannot.

Notice one similarity, however. Both the demons and the God of the universe have a meal they want you to participate in. The temptation is to participate in both meals — hedge your bets, in other words. Sauced on Saturday nights, sanctified on Sunday mornings. The method has a name: hypocrisy. The worship of demons in our society has vanished, but the hypocrisy continues. Paul puts the matter to you quite simply. If you worship the demon — or the things of this world, or the flesh or your pride — you think you are in control. If you worship the Lord God Almighty, you know you are not. So, think: which of these 2 methods is going to work? Simply put, is the creator of the universe going to be angry with you and try to straighten you out? Are your arms long enough the box with God?

So how does this affect communion today? I submit that God has provided us a ceremony which has 3 significant advantages.

- It is simple. What the demons want from you is a party; what God wants is a simple meal.
- It is symbolic. The cup represents his blood, the bread, his body.

- It is sacred. It's not something we invented here, but he gave it to us.

As you partake, remember his sacrifice on the cross, his suffering for you. Remember that the suffering brought to you your salvation — the atonement of Christ. Finally, remember that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Those who partake honestly the sacred meal will welcome his coming.

Timeline

SEPTEMBER 14

Communion is timeless, and a sense. It looks to the past; speaks to the present and contemplates the future.

Looking to the past
Communion looks to the past most prominently, for it celebrates these events in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- *Death.* Most important of its meetings, communion celebrates the death of our Lord. By this he achieved our atonement, paying the price for our sins and opening heaven to us. It is of first importance.
- *Resurrection*. It also portrays to us the resurrection on Easter Sunday. It is the proof test of Christianity. No one else has ever prophesied that he would walk out of the grave — and then did it.
- *Ascension*. A ghost may vanish, or fade in and out — but a real body, such as Christ had after his resurrection, must go somewhere. The ascension tells us that he has left for his heavenly home, and we are assured that he is going to return.

Speaking to the present
communion is not just a look backwards. It speaks to us in the present tense. First, it engages a present memory — all the things of the past come up. Contemplating a memory is not done in the past tense, but in the present.

It is also a form of fellowship with your fellow Christians. First and foremost, it is the fellowship of the local church, the people in this room. By taking communion declare your fellowship with them. More than that, you declare your fellowship with all Christians in all places in all times — the church United.

To do this effectively, you must start by examining yourself. It is a non-trivial exercise. See if there is something within you which is contrary to God's will and begin your repentance. Take it to God in prayer, then bring it into your life.

Looking to the future
communion also points us to the future. First, it points us to his return. He said he would come back the same way he left, at the same place. He won't come alone, however — the angels of heaven will accompany him in glory. All the world will see it together.

He will come to judge the living and the dead. There are those of us who think that Adolf Hitler, for example, did not quite get what he deserved in this life. The books are not yet closed on Mr. Hitler; they will be, that day.

Finally — in every sense of that word — we will see the new heaven to earth promised in Revelation. He will make all things new, and each of us will be a part of that.

Past, present and future — communion speaks to each of them.

Contemplation of Heaven

SEPTEMBER 21

C. H. Spurgeon put it this way: "The way to liberate our souls from the bonds that tie us to earth is to strengthen the cords that bind us to heaven."

It is a curious fact: our ancestors considered that the time spent in contemplating heaven was well worth it. Over time, this thought has become unfashionable. But it is no less true. Christ frequently brings his disciples to attention over the subject. We might ask why.

- The contemplation of heaven changes our view of death. The world looks at death and says, "that's the end." The true Christian looks at distances, "that's when I go home." Even in the simplest view of heaven we find that we are present with our Lord. Imagine; we get to meet Jesus face-to-face.
- The contemplation of heaven also focuses our thoughts on the rewards that our Lord promises us. Particularly in times of stress and suffering, it is comforting to know that the Lord is not going to ignore your suffering but will use it to strengthen you on this earth and reward you in the heaven to come.

Perhaps most stunning of all is this: when you look at the entrance to heaven, it is not a complicated procedure making sure you have checked off all the spiritual rituals and good deeds required. It is simply a matter of accepting the grace of God as the sinner that you are. From there, you need only endure until the end.

Our Lord himself as become the forerunner of those headed to heaven. He has blazed the trail for us. He has returned to assure us that he knows the way, that he knows us, and that he knows the Father. The trials last only a lifetime; the reward forever.

This is why the church has always taught the physical death of Christ on the cross and his physical, bodily resurrection from the grave. He is the one man in history who said it would happen — and showed that it did. In communion, we commemorate what he did. In the bread we see his body, broken for us on the cross. In the cup we perceive his blood, so necessary for atonement. Before you partake, take the time to examine yourself. Accept the grace of God, his forgiveness, with all gratitude and humility. Then partake in the solemn and worthy manner.

Clean up Your Act

SEPTEMBER 28

Among the many conveniences of modern life one of the most useful and least noticed is that of the lens wipe. For those who wear glasses it is an essential item. If you use one of these regularly you will have noticed that there are two kinds of grease and grime on your glasses. One of them is the grime that clings the edges of the classes. The other is right in the center, usually a thumbprint. The first comes from the oil on your face. The second comes from picking your glasses up with your thumb and forefinger. The impact these two is somewhat different. The outer ring prevents peripheral vision from being clear. The inner thumbprint is — well, it's a thumbprint. If you want to see what you're doing, you need to clean up both.

One might say the same thing about the grime of life. Many of us have a clear vision spiritually as long as were looking down the center of life. We miss, however, what might be the peripheral. For example, are you always polite and courteous to the "invisible people" — those who must be nice to you or else lose their job? Of course, a thumbprint in the middle of your spiritual glasses can be much worse. If you don't think so, ask your spouse.

It's important to pay attention to this, because these things just accumulate on your glasses without being noticed. Likewise, the minor sins of life accumulate without being noticed particularly. So, it's a good idea to regularly clean your spiritual vision. That's why communion has time for you to examine yourself. You are about to commune with the Lord God Almighty. Think of it this way: if you were going in this meet the president of your company, when to stop at a mirror to straighten your tie before you went in? How much more important is a meeting with the Lord God Almighty?

Therefore, take the time to examine yourself before communion today. See if there is something the Lord would not want for you. Make plans to correct it. Commit to the Lord that you will do it. Then with a clean heart remember your Lord sacrifice on the cross. The bread represents his body. The cup represents his blood. See them being sacrificed for you, so that you might meet the Lord with gladness rather than terror.

Sacrifice of Praise

Hebrews 13:15

October 5

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation there has been a controversy about the authorship of the book of Hebrews. If you consult the ancient writings of the church, back during the days of the Roman Empire, you will find the unanimous opinion to be that St. Paul wrote the book of Hebrews. Modern scholars are equally convinced that he did not. The author, they say, is anonymous. But one thing is quite certain: whoever he was, he was deeply versed in Jewish writings of the time. That would fit St. Paul, but perhaps someone else as well.

Hebrews chapter 13, in particular verse 15, gives us an indication of this. Ancient Jewish scholars and rabbis held that when the Messiah came, the system of animal sacrifices would be done away with. Although would remain of sacrifices would be these two things:

- The sacrifice of continual praise to God from his grateful people.
- The sacrifice of charitable good works, the good deeds of God's own people.

As we know, the Messiah has come. The animal sacrifices have ceased. They have been replaced by praise and good deeds.

Perhaps you might not have seen this way, communion is a form of praise. We remember our Lord sacrifice on the cross in communion.

- That sacrifice was motivated by his great love for us. When we take communion, we remember, proclaim and praise the greatest love ever shown.
- We honor that sacrifice by recognizing that through it the atonement was accomplished. Our salvation came from that sacrifice.
- In remembering that he promised to return to judge the living and the dead, we honor him for his righteousness and for his forgiveness.

It is important to do this in the right spirit. Don't just go through the motions. Think of it as you offering your praise to him for what he has done.

- Begin by examining yourself to see if there is some sinful way about you that need to reform. Take that to your Lord in prayer first.
- As you partake, discern the body of Christ in the bread and the blood of Christ in the cup. Do this in whatever way makes most sense to you.
- Finally, offer your praise and gratitude to him for your salvation.

Picnic in the Park

October 12

It is a curious but solid fact: a communion service is rarely held in a public park. There are some good reasons for this, but it is not beyond the reckoning of the human mind to consider what might happen if we did hold a communion service at a public park.

- We would lose some of our elected members because of this. Those with certain disabilities might find it impossible to navigate the public park. Others would get there and be distracted by (for example) chasing their children all over the park to get them to behave in the adult worship service. Others would find the contemplation nature to distraction." Some members would find it too hot while others felt too cold.
- So others would mumble that we have a perfectly good church building with a perfectly good air conditioner/heater, which is completely out of the rain and generally proof against snow, blizzards, and other natural phenomena with the exception of earthquakes and tornadoes.
- Others, citing the distractions, would argue that the service in the park is not as meaningful as the one in our church building.

Of course, many things about the communion service would remain completely untouched. We would begin by pointing out to those who might not know that the bread in the green service represents the body of Christ, suffering and dying for us and our sins. Likewise, the cup represents his blood, without which there is no salvation from sin. To those paying attention, these things will be much more important than the distractions of four-year-olds running around. Probably, the service would look very similar to what we normally do, and this should encourage our members in the art of self-examination. It is likely enough that once the service starts, our people would pay very close attention as always.

Each of us would take the same communion is always. The bread would look the same. The cup would look the same. That sameness, coupled with the fact that this is communion and the memorial of Christ, would bring about the common result of uniting the church.

There is no reason to go looking for a park. That union of the church is performed every time we partake of our Lord's Supper. It's importance is found in its

meaning, not in the style that we happen to give it. It's our park; but it's His church.

Suffering

October 19

The word "suffering" meets with an unusual reaction from human beings. It happens to each and every one of us, but we really don't want to talk about it. It is rather unpleasant. I suspect this comes from the nature of suffering. Suffering is always worse when you do it by yourself. Being alone in your suffering forces you to confront your own weaknesses. Often enough, you discover you are not capable of handling this by yourself, so you seek the company of others. There is a reason that hospitals want visitors for their patients. Suffering is worse alone.

Suffering may be distinguished from mere pain by one important factor. In suffering, there is the question of HOPE. If you know the nurse will be by in a few minutes with another painkiller then you can hang on for a little while longer. But if the doctors are unsure what's going to happen, things are a bit more sober. We urgently look for an answer from the medical profession that says, "everything will be just fine in a few days." An answer that says, "there is a 20% chance of…" Is much less comforting…

There is a comforting side effect of this., you are well placed to comfort others who are doing the same. The person sitting at your bedside is much more comforting when you know that they have been through the same thing — and survived. Often such a person feels the obligation to make the hospital call. It's just possible they remember going through this without the same kind of comfort.

We may examine suffering of Christ in this light. The sense of being alone is very intense; think how Christ must've felt during these events.

- He went to the process of several trials. These established a judicial permission to execute the man without the petty difficulty of proving him guilty.
- At each step, he was mocked. Nothing makes you so much an outcast as having everyone in the group laugh at you.
- All this followed the fact that his disciples abandoned and in one instance betrayed him.

And what about hope? That must've died in the garden of Gethsemane when the Father said "no." Jesus must've seen the impossibility of being both the

conquering King and the sacrificial lamb at the same time. Any human being would've reacted the same way: it's hopeless.

But with such suffering comes the ability to comfort others. You are never alone as a Christian; Jesus is only a prayer away. You are never without hope. Only the nuts Christian can be sure of this, for we are destined for eternal life as well as God's care on this earth. Short-term hope and long-term hope!

In partaking of communion, we see the symbols that reflect the suffering that Christ had. The bread represents his body, physically abused to the point of death. The cup represents his blood, shed in accordance with the Old Testament law for the remission of sin. At first it appears a picture of suffering and despair. But the Christian knows that Easter comes after Good Friday. He is Risen! He is risen indeed.

In your contemplation of communion today, take the time to receive what comfort he has for you. Grow closer to him in prayer. Then, take the comfort you have received and pass it on to someone else in their suffering. Be the bringer of hope to those who have none.

Ice Block

October 26

Pope Leo the 14th, Bishop of Rome, God's Vicar on Earth, recently performed a most unusual action. He pronounced his people blessing upon a block of ice. Not just any block of ice; a block of ice cut out of a glacier in Greenland which is estimated to be about 20,000 years old. He did this in preparation for a conference on the environment being held later in October.
As you might imagine, the action in question was criticized by some people and praised by others. This was done even inside the Roman Catholic Church, where it met with a great deal of objection from the conservative elements. It also met with a great deal of praise from those who are "woke.". One might wonder, however, whether this is the papal equivalent to a cheap publicity stunt. It certainly has attracted attention to the conference in question.

Have you ever noticed that Communion is singularly missing such publicity elements? In most churches you can hardly tell this week's communion service from last week's. The ceremony is not flashy; the elements of communion are simple and easy to understand and its place in our worship service is quite secure without the slightest bit of publicity. There is a simple reason for this, of course. Christ commanded it; as loyal Christians, we do it in obedience to him. One could imagine going on forever like this — at least, until Christ returns.

That's a reflection of the fact that Communion is as close to eternal as we could possibly get ceremony. Simplicity in the ceremony makes it easy to give to our descendants. It takes a little to learn that the cup represents his blood, the bread, his body. It commemorates his actions at the cross and therefore brings to our mind the eternal markers of communion:

- God's unconditional love for us.
- The fact of the atonement, leading to salvation by grace.
- The coming again Christ, with its resurrection of the dead and last judgment.

In this simple ceremony is found the core of Christianity. Therefore, as you partake this morning do so reverently, and with gratitude. Your Lord love this you so very much.

Two Men

NOVEMBER 2

Suppose you are a missionary in a foreign land. Two men present themselves to you, asking to become members of your church.

The first man is a scholar of religion. He is a graduate of the most prestigious school in the country, noted widely for his belief and exposition. He is respected by all the religious community and the civic authorities as well. He looks to be a gym to be added to your collection of believers. Surely, many students of religion will follow his lead into your church.

The second man is also prominent — he occupies what would be our country in a position known as "district attorney." One of his major occupations over the past few years has been to restrict your church from growing. He has filed false charges against people in the past and sent them to prison. He now shows up as a repentant sinner on your doorstep.

What do you do with these two men? I submit that the temptation is to give the first man a prominent place and a copy of every commentary you can find. As quickly as possible, you want him instructing others in the faith. He will be a respected teacher and a useful asset. The other man? Not so much. It would be well to give him advice that he should stay at the back of the church and not make waves.

It sounds like a reasonable approach to the problem. But look again; both men are personified in St. Paul. A great scholar, sitting at the feet of Gamaliel — but also a great persecutor of the church. You can well imagine the early apostles having some difficulty with his presence. They resolve the difficulty by remembering one thing: the mission of Christ on the earth. What did Jesus come to do? He came to seek and save the lost, the sinners, the worst as well as the best of this world. And as Paul put it, he came to save sinners — of whom Paul considered himself the worst. On that principal, baptized both and introduce them to the act of communion.

Can you imagine what Communion would mean to these men? First and foremost, it would mean to them that they had been accepted to the church.

They were now brothers to those who are already Christians. They were in the fellowship. Both are new learners, baby Christians. Both will spend some time waiting for the Holy Spirit to reveal to them what tasks they will perform.

Communion would be very meaningful to these men. In the cup and in the bread they would see the blood and body of Christ, the atonement which purchased their pardon. At first a mystery, later familiar path, they would see their salvation in front of them in physical form. They would meet their atonement in person. Let us remember that no matter who comes the front door the church to ask for entrance, Christ wants them to be saved. We must share the central fact of the faith with one and all. Judge not, but welcome all.

Daisy

November 9

Many and varied are the duties of a cowboy. But one consistent aspect is that most of them are performed starting with a horse ride. This particular horse had an unusual habit. She would cheerfully submit to being saddled, but before the cowboy was allowed on the back of the horse there was a ritual to be performed. The cowboy would produce from his backpack or pocket a large carrot or a shiny Apple. Daisy-that was the name of the horse-would receive this with what appeared to be gratitude. Not until the treat was consumed would she allow the cowboy to mount up. She would turn her head slightly away from him until she had finished the treat. It was as if she had something to contemplate, alone.

What was on the horse's mind? No one knows. But you can observe a similar behavior in the Christians when taking communion. At some point during the ceremony, they seem to withdraw within themselves with an air of contemplation. It is a solid practice. Most Christians doing this are contemplating the greatest sacrifice ever made — and made for their benefit. The sinless man, God in the flesh, was sacrificed so that they might be given the grace of God. The perfect man and perfect God died on the cross so that we might be forgiven.

"Do this in remembrance of me." When you take the bread in hand, remember his body twisted in agony on the cross. When you have the cup, remember his blood, shed for you. The greatest sacrifice, producing the greatest benefit for all of mankind. Remember it well.

Verbiage

NOVEMBER 16

One of the many things the student learns when taking a foreign language is that the English language does not contain nearly as many verb tenses as do most foreign coaches. This has some interesting implications concerning translation. There are certain passages in the Greek which are almost completely untranslatable just due to the difference in the structure of the verb tenses. Often, there is a good deal of information in the verb tense which is not easily translatable into English. This explains why many different translations have slight differences in their wording. The poor American who speaks only English is left to wonder why the differences exist. We might take an example this.

And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake *it,* and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.
(Luk 22:19)

My commentary (I speak no Greek) explains some of the trouble in translation of the last phrase in this verse.

- It's in the present tense — which means that when it was delivered to the apostles they were supposed to do it now.
- The language also indicates that this is a command which is to be repeated regularly.
- It is addressed to 1/3-party group — meaning that it was addressed to all of us, not particular individuals among us. But we are to execute the command individually.

A curiosity exists because this. Most other religions in the world have several rites. Christianity has exactly to that are required: baptism and the Lord's Supper. There are others that are optional, of course, like marriage and funerals but only communion and baptism are required. We might well ask why that is so.

- It is most essential for the unity of the church that it's entrance ritual and its membership affirmation apply to all its members. Both rituals reflect the fact that all of those are one in the eyes of God.
- Communion is given so that we might remember the most important things that the greatest of human beings, God in the flesh, did for us.
- Communion is also given so that we might examine ourselves on a regular basis and perform such repentance as is required. In so doing, we keep going toward heaven.

So as you partake today of his body, the bread, and his blood, the cup, do so remembering what he did for you on the Cross. Do so with your fellow Christians

in mind, knowing that you are not alone but a partner in his great adventure, the church. Examine yourself and see if there is something in which you need to repent. Then partake in the worthy manner, one day closer to our eternal home.

King of Glory

Psalm 24

NOVEMBER 23

This may seem to be imprudent or impertinent, but it is statistically almost certain that one of us in the room has the problem. You go to God in prayer, and you don't receive an answer. You pray for all the "right" things and good people. You just don't get an answer. It's as if God had ended the conversation along the way, and you didn't get the memo.

At the same time, there is something in your Christian life which is not quite right. Something you're not exactly sure that God would want to approve of. It's not something major — you haven't committed murder. But it is bothersome. You've been meaning to get around to it for some time now.

That's why the Scripture clearly prescribes a time of self-examination during communion. Take that problem to God and ask his guidance. Be willing to repent and change your ways. It's likely enough you know the right answer, you're just waiting for a chance to do it when it won't hurt so much. Today's the day; now is the hour. David tells us this in Psalm 24:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

(Psa 24:3-4)

Take the time to repent and purify your heart before you take communion. As you purify yourself, you take on the righteousness of Christ via the

atonement. You may then approach God with clean hands and a pure heart. David gladly tells us what comes next.

He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

(Psa 24:5)

Depend upon it; you will receive his forgiveness and probably some help in dealing with the problem that otherwise has perplexed you.

Just in case you needed some additional help, David reminds you of what will happen at the end of time.

Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! Selah.

(Psa 24:7-10)

Communion looks backward to the atonement, to the present in repentance, and to the imminent return of our Lord in glory and power. Atonement paid for our sins; repentance keeps us in right relationship with God in anticipation of his return in glory. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood — to be taken with a pure heart.

Jingle Bells

NOVEMBER 30

Have you ever noticed that the song, "Jingle Bells", which we sing as a Christmas Carol every year, never mentions anything about Christmas? None of the lyrics mention Christmas or Christ, or anything about anybody's birth. So how did this get in our book of Christmas carols?

James Lord Pierpont wrote the song in 1857. It was originally performed by children in his church at their Thanksgiving festival. So it was never intended to be a Christmas Carol. The reason for all the words about a fast one-horse sleigh came from the fact that his local town held races for snow sleighs. Now you know!

Holidays seem to get their own style of music. Christmas carols celebrate the incarnation of Christ — the "supreme miracle" as CS Lewis described it. It is a joyous occasion. Caroling is perfectly appropriate; if you will recall, heaven sent angels to celebrate the birth in song. Many Christmas carols have a soaring melody line, appropriate to the grandeur of arrival of the great King.

But have you noticed that hymns that are selected for communion are musically quite different? The soaring "Gloria" that is found in *Angels We Have Heard on High* would be completely inappropriate at a ceremony which celebrates the great atonement. God is the author of both Christmas and Easter, and our musicians seem to have rightly used a different style for each.

Communion hymns tend to be somber and slow in rhythm. They are designed to get you to think, not rejoice. And what sorts of things should you be thinking about?

- The enormous sacrifice Christ made on the cross to be the atonement for mankind.
- The great suffering that he endured to do this.
- How his grace is both undeserved and unpaid for by us.
- The self-examination needed for a sinner to approach Almighty God.

That last is important. When you take the bread and the cup, the symbols of his body and blood, you are claiming the forgiveness of Almighty God. Do so with an honest and earnest heart. As Rudyard Kipling put it in his poem, Recessional,

"Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice, An humble and a contrite heart".

Alone

DECEMBER 7

It is a curious thing; despite the command written in the Scriptures, it is a rare church that has a prison ministry. Those in prison are generally not on the minds of those who are not. In many congregations the attitude is that no Christian would be in prison, so there is no sense in going to prison to visit them. The prisoner is ignored. This is made worse by the fact that many Christians come to the faith while they are in prison. As such, they have no "home congregation" to whom they can appeal. They are inmates; they are invisible.

Consider for the moment how these people must feel.

- They feel alone. Their friends, their families are all outside the walls. Their were relatives have daily lives to live, with no time to think of those in prison.
- They feel not just ignored but completely forgotten. It's common enough for families to erase their page in the family history. As far as the people on the outside are concerned, they don't exist anymore. And there's nothing the inmate can do about it.
- They feel hopeless. They feel miserable, and they know there is no possible way this will ever change. Once a prisoner, always a convicted felon. Even if released, they have no route to acceptance in normal society.

But there is one person who does understand what their problem is. That's Jesus. He sees them where they are. He hung on the cross alone. His disciples had disappeared; had they forgotten him? Crucifixions only end one way; He knew it was hopeless. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

So what does one do to bring the prisoner back into fellowship? Churches that have an active prison ministry almost invariably have communion as the center of that service. The reason is quite simple; if you want to welcome somebody back into the congregation, having them share a meal with you is a good way to do it. If you partake of communion, you are one of us.

The symbolism of communion — the bread his body, the cup his blood — tells you that this is not just any meal but the most important one for the body of Christ. Not just prisoners, but anyone who is alone, forgotten and hopeless is welcome in the church. Which means of course they are welcome at the Lord's table. His death on the cross was given to establish the church and bring grace to the world. That grace still reaches out after 2000 years, even to the prisoners of this world. Grace — amazing as always.

Music

DECEMBER 14

In no field of human endeavor does fashion reign supreme as it does in the art of music. Even within the church the latest fashion in music must be obeyed. It is not my intention to get into an argument about old hymns versus new choruses, but to point out one thing that does seem to have gone away: music specifically designed for communion

In the 19th century the instruments of choice for the human voice and the organ. Today, guitars and electric keyboards are required. There was a wide variety of music specifically for communion; entire collections of such hymns were available. Often, such pieces had no words; simply notes for the organist to play. We should note that music for communion was almost universally slow and almost mournful.

By the time 21st century rolled around, it was guitars and backbeat that was predominant. This style of music did not lend itself to communion, and as a result there is much less communion music today than there was 150 years ago. [Note, please: this is not a critique of your worship service, but a general observation of the stated this kind of music in the church as a whole.]

This has had the interesting effect of removing communion from the center of worship to something which is almost an afterthought in many churches. Think of it this way: communion music had its themes in such things as suffering, the atonement and grace. As it involved the crucifixion, it was hardly upbeat music. The result is that the music drives worship, not the other way around. The contemplation of communion, however, has not changed. The attitudes that were appropriate in the 19th century are still appropriate today. It's just the accompaniment that has shifted.

So what are the important things in the worship service? Some of them do not involve communion directly, such as public prayer, songs of praise and the proclamation of the gospel. It is quite arguable that these things should be

accompanied by upbeat music. The Good News is just that: good news. It should not be announced with a dirge. But we get communion, the themes change. We are contemplating the suffering of Christ, the price of the atonement and the grace which he so freely offers to us. To contemplate these things takes a somber mood.

Therefore, as we approach this solemn part of our worship service let us adjust our attitudes so that would properly reflect the seriousness of what Christ did for us. Let us consider his suffering as a model for our own. Let us contemplate the atonement that he purchased such great price and the grace which he offers to us so freely. As you take of the bread, remember his body hung on the cross for you. As you receive the cup, remember that its contents represent the blood that he shared on your behalf. Do so in a manner worthy for Christian who understands the complete seriousness of the occasion.

"This is my body; take, eat." "This is my blood; do this in remembrance of me." There is no greater love than this.

Christmas Eve

DECEMBER 21

It's a funny thing. One of the features of Christmas is the story of the Star of Bethlehem. Scholars have debated what this might be for many years. It masks another discussion. These "wise men." Who are they, and whether they really come from?

You know it is more than a little bit strange that only these wise men could see the star. There were several societies on earth at the time who kept track of the heavens. None of them reported any phenomenon even remotely like what is described in the Bible. We don't even know if there were three of them or 30 of them. How do we know that somebody should just stick something in Matthew's gospel to fit some traditional story? Think about it; the Jews in Herod's palace never saw the star. The shepherds apparently didn't either. So how do we know these people really came and brought these gifts?

Easy. They stopped in Jerusalem for directions. The rest of the pageant looks picture-perfect, but when the whole caravan must detour to Jerusalem to ask the route to Bethlehem (about 2 miles away) you know you're dealing with the real thing. Only real human beings forget to bring the map.

"Real." It is essential to the faith that the birth of Christ is something that really happened. One songwriter called it the "Glorious Impossible." CS Lewis called it "the supreme miracle." It is known as the incarnation — where God took on human flesh and was born in and amongst those of us who reside on this planet. He has physical reality; he is completely human. Therefore, his blood can wash away our sins — and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Also, his body can be offered up as the atonement sacrifice.

Early Christian writers frequently connected the physical reality of the Lord's Supper with the physical reality of the body of Christ. They were fighting the Gnostic heretics who said that Christ's body was not real; in

effect, he was a ghost. Their reply was that he was just as real as any of the rest of us, and when you take communion, it is something which is physically, tangibly real. It is no empty cup we lift.

So, as you partake this morning, remember that physical reality is with us. Our Lord left us with a tangible reminder of his sacrifice on the Cross. His body, his blood make up the materials of our atonement and saving grace. Do this in remembrance of Him.

Understanding

DECEMBER 28

Have you ever come to the end of a conversation only to realize that, while you heard every word, you didn't understand what was said? You get the feeling that you should understand, you don't understand, and you don't know why you don't understand. Which, of course, if you did understand, you would understand. But you don't, so you don't. Understand?

Christians sometimes get this feeling regarding communion. So, let's lay things out in simple fashion that makes it clear to all who are here. First, there are two universally accepted rituals in Christianity. You need one of them to get into the church and begin your walk with Jesus. That ritual is called baptism; you do it only once. It's the starting point of the Christian life — but it is not the entirety of it.

Baptism is the ritual which starts things the first time. The other ritual is one which keeps you going: communion. That ritual has several objectives:

- You do this on a regular basis, so that the corrections you make in your understanding of the faith grow in a continuous manner. You don't wait until your ship sinks before you patch the hole in the hull.
- The ritual brings to your mind, on a regular basis, the most important things about the faith.
- The ritual encourages you to correct yourself in small measures — so you won't have to use large ones later.

That ongoing ritual is, of course, communion. Each time you partake, you are reminded of what Christ has done and what you need to do.

- The bread reminds you of Christ's body on the cross, suffering and dying for you.
- The cup reminds you of Christ's blood — shed so that your sins might be forgiven.

Taken together, these constitute the Atonement, the sacrifice of the one sinless human being for the sake of the rest of us.

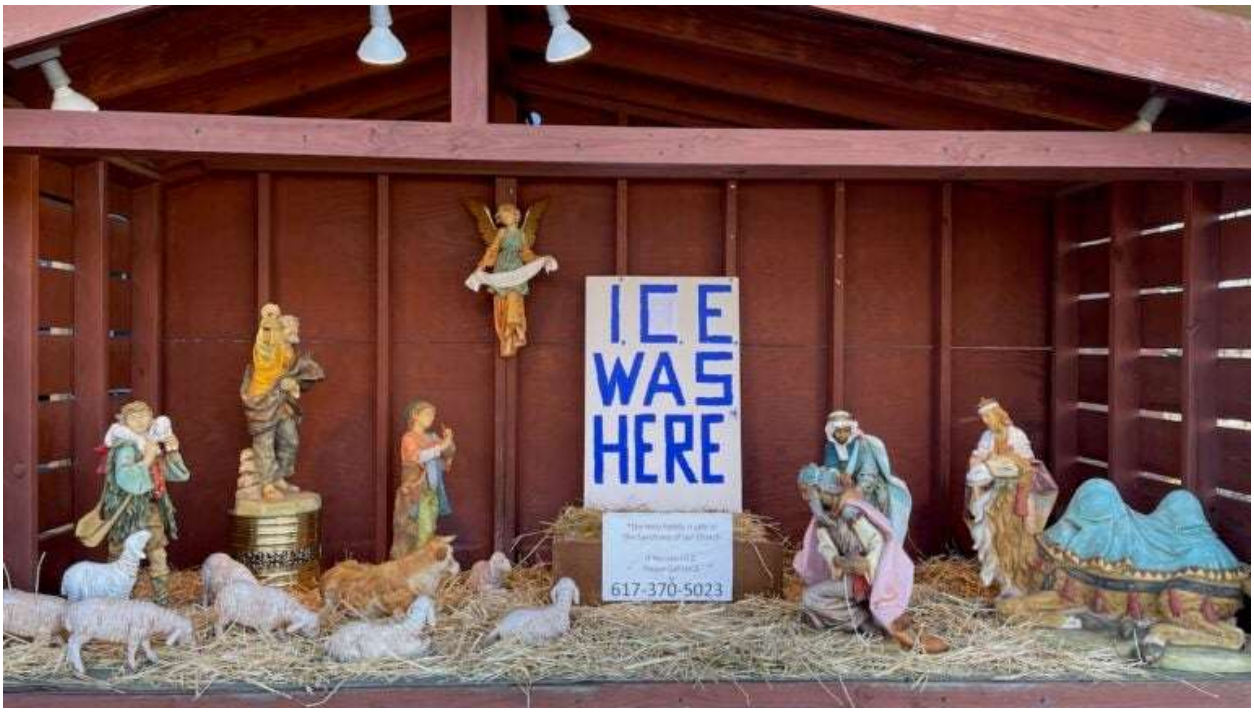
Finally, you are encouraged every time you take communion to examine yourself. The point is rather simple; you're not going to get through this life being perfect. You're going to have temptations attract you; you're going to have sins that beset you. You are reminded in communion of this fact. You are then asked to do something about it — taking it to your Lord in prayer, asking his forgiveness and assistance. Christ knows you are going to have this problem — and want you to take it to him directly.

Do not be surprised if each of these things brings forward in your mind and emotional reaction. This is extremely important. The symbolism of communion is simple, yet deep. When you partake correctly you should feel that you have touched your Lord one more time. Use the time provided to do this with honesty and humility. The contrite sinner is always welcome at the table of our Lord.

Nativity Set

JANUARY 4

What would you think if you went to your local church and found the following scene presented out on the lawn?



This happened at a Catholic parish in Boston. The riposte from the archdiocese was quick and to the point:

The Archdiocese of Boston reportedly slammed the Nativity scene at a Dedham church that replaced Jesus, Mary, and Joseph with a sign that said "ICE was here" to protest federal immigration action.

"The people of God have the right to expect that, when they come to church, they will encounter genuine opportunities for prayer and Catholic worship —-not divisive political messaging," the archdiocese said in a statement to CBS News. "The display should be removed, and the manger restored to its proper sacred purpose."

"Proper sacred purpose." Ignoring the issue of immigration, we might ask just exactly what makes something sacred?

- First, the object in question must've been deliberately set aside for the use in God's purposes. It must have a sacred purpose.
- Second, it must have associated with it a proper way of using it — a sacred procedure, if you will. It doesn't have to be specified in the Bible, but it does need to be agreed upon.
- Finally, there must be some way of distinguishing the sacred from the ordinary. Not all pictures of Jesus are sacred.

Communion, in particular the elements of communion, follows these criteria.

- We deliberately set aside communion trays and other utensils for this purpose. You can easily walk up and point at something and say, "that's a communion tray."
- We also prescribe a method of serving communion. It's different between churches, but quite recognizable by its own congregation.
- We can easily distinguish the elements of communion from ordinary grape juice and bread.

These actions and elements carry with them the sense of the sacred. Christ didn't tell us to use trays, but he did say to do this in remembrance of him. We are to remember his body in the bread, and how his body was broken for us. We are to remember his blood in the cup, shed for us in the remission of our sins. Sacred doesn't necessarily mean complicated; just purposeful. Do this in remembrance of Him.