

# First Footfall

*Originally scheduled for January 5*

“Whoever romanticized the first footfall on new fallen snow never had to make it at 5 AM on the morning after Christmas on his way to work.” — Bob O’Connell.

There is a certain reality to the day after Christmas. It marks the transition away from the holidays and back to the ordinary, workaday world. Of course, on your way out the door to work you have to step over toys, Christmas wrapping, assorted empty boxes and other paraphernalia. It reminds you that when you get home from work tonight there is still a lot of cleanup to be done. But December 26 announces to you that the routine has returned.

One of the difficulties with communion is that it, too, is routine. There are differences between the various denominations on how often communion is to be served, but it is a routine thing. Some churches serve it every day; some every week; some every month and a few serve it once a year. But please note this: we do it the same way every time. It is routine. To the best of my knowledge no one has ever tried to liven it up with flamenco dancers.

Perhaps more to the point, we think that doing it in a routine way is important — and it is.. If there is a right way to do something it makes no sense to try a wrong way just for the variety of things. We think we have the right ceremony, and we use it. Have you ever asked yourself why?

Perhaps the answer is found in the fact that men need not so much to be taught as reminded. Think of it this way: when you were teaching your young children good manners, did it involve a lot of repetition? Of course; it took you years to inculcate your children good manners. You reminded them over and over again how they should behave.

Communion is repeated over and over again to remind you. Its purpose is to proclaim the death of Christ, and the salvation which resulted from it. It is there to remind you, every time you take it, of these things:

- The sacrifice which Christ made for you; the agony of the cross. We often value things by the price which was paid for them, and this was the greatest price possible.
- The salvation which that sacrifice brought. We are sinners; there must be an atonement for sin — and there is only one atonement that works.
- It also reminds us of his motive for doing it: his great love for the world. It is the very nature of God that he is love, and this is the greatest reminder of that love.

# January

## *Originally scheduled for January 12*

The names of our months, like those of the days of the week, are sometimes named after ancient gods. Wednesday, for example, was named for the Norse god Wotan; Thursday was named for Thor. March was named for Mars, the Roman god of war. January is named for Janus, the Roman god of transitions, doorways and gates. He is traditionally represented by a figure of two heads, looking in opposite directions. One head was held to look backwards, the other forwards.

It's a useful ability to be able to simultaneously learn from where you have been and still look forward to the future. Contemplating the future sometimes comes with anxiety; knowing where you've been and how you managed to get there can help with that. Looking at the past sometimes produces a feeling of hopeless regret; the future may solve that. You may get a chance to fix some of the problems of the past.

Communion also looks both ways:

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

## **Backwards**

Communion looks back to the death of Christ. By taking communion, you are accepting to yourself his death as the atonement for your sins. You are saying, in unmistakable symbols and ritual, that Christ died for you, your sins are therefore forgiven – and you are now a child of God. You are not saying that you are perfect (let a man examine himself) but that you are forgiven.

You are also *proclaiming* his death. This tells us two things: first, it is Christ's accomplishment, not our own. We are saved by grace, not cooperation. Second, you proclaim it – you announce it to the world. If someone asks you why you do it, you should be able to explain it. If they don't, you should tell them anyway. It's called evangelism.

## **Forward**

You do this “until he comes.” That implies you believe in the return of Christ, as he prophesied. He is coming back, and that has at least two major implications:

- First, there will be a time of judgment. Justice is coming, both as punishment and as reward for those who have done what is right.
- Second, in some way not understood, there will be a new heaven and earth. The curse of sin will be lifted; death will cease and a new order of things will come.

In short, we know the ending of the story – God wins. And we believe it!

# Return to Sender

*Originally scheduled for January 19*

It does take some time for the Post Office to decide on these things. But most of us – especially in the senior citizen category – see at least one or two every year. Your carefully crafted Christmas card and letter are returned with a pale yellow label that starts with the phrase, “Return to Sender.” It then usually contains a less-than-helpful message like “Insufficient Address” (what? It worked that way last year when you delivered it) or “Not Deliverable As Addressed” which is then followed by “Unable to Forward.” The Post Office, it seems, has lost track of your friend.

Of course, you then try Google, Bing, Facebook, Twitter and who knows what else on the internet, on the assumption that they simply moved and didn’t mention it to anyone. One of our missing ones lived in Michigan and now seems to live in Florida, so perhaps we can understand the change – blown southward by the polar vortex, it seems. But the postal folks still insist on a specific address, and we don’t have one. We’ve lost a friend, apparently.

You ask yourself how this happened. Often enough the answer is simple: they died. The post office doesn’t necessarily know this, of course. It’s usually the elderly, but the world holds its surprises too. Once in a while the disappearance is simply the fact that they moved early in the year, and the postal forwarding address expired. You scurry through your collection of cards received, hoping to find the envelope, or a Christmas letter, or something with a new address. It’s possible, of course, that they were abducted by space aliens. But that’s rather unlikely; most of the people I know are far too dull to be of interest to space aliens.

Isn’t it interesting, though, that we will spend a fair amount of time searching out what happened to someone at the other end of a Christmas card – but if someone is missing from Communion this morning it doesn’t really seem to bother us? It’s as if we invited our entire extended family to a holiday dinner – and then paid no attention to those who didn’t come.

- It might be something simple, such as a minor illness. It might be a major one.
- Perhaps they are upset about something – or someone.

Could it hurt to call and find out? Communion is the family meal of the church. People know who the real Christians are by the way they love each other. When there is an empty chair at the table, we ought to ask the reason. We build the fellowship of the church by caring for each and every one of our brothers and sisters. Christ died for each and every one; we can at least watch after them on his behalf. As you partake, think of those who are missing. Then this week seek to bring them back to fellowship.

# Washing the Feet

*Originally scheduled for January 26*

It is a rare denomination which engages in the ceremonial practice of washing the feet. But it is a fact that at the Last Supper Christ did wash the feet of his disciples. There are some important lessons in this for us.

First, it is worth noting that Christ, the Servant King, was the one who did this. He did not ask one of the other disciples to do it for him, though he was their teacher and their Lord. He did it himself. To understand why this is important, we must know how people bathed in those days. One did it by going to a public bathhouse. There a large pool of water, heated by fire, was kept for this purpose. You most of the dirt from your body by covering it with oil and then scraping the oil off. The rest you washed off in the bath. But then came the trip home; remember, everyone wore sandals in these days. So your feet got dirty. In a rich household the lowest slave would be tasked with washing your feet as you came back in the door. It was a job not just for slaves, but the lowest of the slaves.

Please also note that Christ did this in silence, until he was interrupted by Peter's question. Like the end of the rest of the disciples were mystified by this too, but until he was asked Christ provided no explanation. This would be the behavior of the lowest slave. We can at least conclude from this that communion is to be taken in all humility.

We also learn from the fact that Christ washed the feet of all twelve disciples — including Judas. This is a ray of glorious hope, for it means that there is no sinner so vile as to be beyond salvation. But you cannot conclude that Jesus was honoring Judas by washing his feet. No; Christ was serving God the Father in doing that. If Christ can wash the feet of Judas, surely we can tolerate and even welcome the worst of sinners.

Perhaps the most important point about this is what this washing symbolizes. As Christ explained it to Peter it is a symbol of the repentance Christian must have after baptism. This is most important; it is why we are taught to examine ourselves before taking communion. In communion you are in touch with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, however you might see that. Would you approach the body and blood of Christ with filthy hands? Confess your sins; repent and renounce them; then partake.

You can see now why humility is necessary at communion. If you take it in pride you will not confess and you will not repent; rather, you will attempt to justify yourself. It is so much better to let Christ justify you by the blood of his sacrifice. Do it his way — in humility, with confession and repentance.

# Safe Surrender

*Originally scheduled for February 2*

California, like many other states, has what is referred to as a “safe surrender” law. Under this law, a newborn child may be surrendered at a hospital, fire station or other designated site with no questions asked. If, as is usually the case, the mother is surrendering the child she will be asked to fill out a medical history questionnaire. This assists in giving proper medical care to the child. But the surrender is anonymous – and final.

It is intended as an alternative to abortion. As such, it has not been much of a success. California has about 100,000 abortions every year (the state does not report the number); last year there were 45 babies surrendered under this program. Being a child surrendered in this way has its problems, though; it is being “sentenced to the system.” California’s bureaucracy is not a very good substitute for loving parents.

What is it that a child really needs? Of course, the needs for food, shelter and clothing have to be met. More than that; a child needs instruction, guidance and discipline along the way. Most of all, though, a child needs love and hope. Can you imagine what it does to such a child to know that they were discarded at birth?

But – take heart, child. There is One who loves you more than anyone else could. Christ went to the Cross for “whosoever will” - and that includes you. At communion we remember the sacrifice that Christ made for our sins; our atonement. We can measure his love for us by the price he paid – his very life. He did not do this just for the “worthy” sinners; indeed, trying to figure out who’s worthy and who is not is so difficult that he never bothered with it. No matter how many times life has kicked you down the stairs, he’s at the bottom waiting for you.

As you partake of communion this morning, look with the eyes of your heart at the bread, his broken body. See in the cup his blood, shed for you. It is the price of atonement; it is the proof of his great love for you. Take this in; become like him – and go out and show the same unconditional love to others that he has shown for us. Freely you have received; freely give.

# Ending

*Originally scheduled for February 9*

Human history has been going on now for a fair amount of time – at least by the standards of human lifetime. We are a blink of time to the geologist, but the average human being thinks we've been at it a while. So while we should know where we've been, it also helps if we have an idea where we're going. There are three ideas that float around in human heads about "what happens next."

The first is that history just sort of repeats itself. It's a catalog of human failure and misery; the names and the technologies change but the results are the same. Life is futile, and the best you can hope for is that you live in one of the less miserable times and places.

That's depressing. It's so depressing that we often encounter the thinker with the "idea whose time has come!" How he knows that its time has come is usually a little vague, but the enthusiasm – indeed, the dedication to the idea – can be overwhelming. One thing that often gets overwhelmed in this is the truth. I once had a devout communist tell me that the reason the Soviets invaded Hungary in 1956 was "the people wanted them to."

There are also those who are convinced that everything is going just fine, thank you. "We're just a few regulations away from utopia." We have at last stumbled upon the right theory, and all we need to do is enforce compliance to provide everyone with true happiness.

The Christian has a different view: history has an end in sight – the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that, history is not just a random collection of events, but is providentially provided by God for the purposes of his church. This, of course, requires a bit of amplification. We are not just to sit back and watch; in fact, our Lord makes it clear that we have a part to play.

- At the very least we are called to share in his suffering. The world reject Christ; it therefore rejects his followers.
- This, at the least, requires courage, the foundation of all virtue. Anyone can suffer if restrained sufficiently. It requires courage to stand for the truth knowing that suffering will result.
- But it is not just what we withstand that counts, but also what we do as positive acts. We need an alternate method to the world's compulsion. That method is called love.

When we partake of communion, we acknowledge ourselves to be his followers. We therefore proclaim his death when we do this. If we proclaim his death, we proclaim his resurrection and our salvation – and invite one and all to join us. Communion tells the world who you really are – and who He really is

But it also proclaims his return. We are commanded to do this "until he returns." That means we believe in the return of Christ and thus the judgment to come. This should provoke us, every

time we take communion, to ask ourselves if we are ready to hear the trumpet sound. Examine yourselves, then partake.

# Cleaning Your Glasses

*Originally scheduled for February 16*

For some of us it is astonishing just how dirty our glasses can get. It happens a little bit at a time – a fingerprint smudge here, a little oil from the face there, the occasional bit of flying dirt or even a touch of whipped cream from your super-grande size café mocha latte. But have you noticed how little you notice these things? It has to get pretty dirty before we usually do something about it. It's also interesting that the first step in cleaning them is to hold them up to the light – to get a much clearer picture of the dirt.

Christ's forgiveness works in much the same way. The sin in our lives rather creeps up on us, usually. We don't notice the difference from day to day. It's like your glasses – you have to hold yourself up to the light to notice the problems that add up little by little. Your Master can cleanse and forgive those sins, just as you clean your glasses – but it starts with holding yourself up to the light.

That's why communion is a time of self-examination. Christ gave us the Lord's Supper so that we might put our lives into his light and see where the dirt is. Then we need to do these three things:

- First, confess the sin. Confess it to God; there is no reason not to – he already knows about it. But as the occasion arises, confess it to other Christians. If you have sinned against someone, confess it to them, and ask their forgiveness.
- Next, repent. If you know it's wrong, stop doing it. This is not just a mental exercise. Christ knows that this is difficult, and you may be repenting of something which keeps recurring in your life. No matter; repent anyway.
- Then, accept the forgiveness of God, seeking the forgiveness of others as you can.

Communion reminds us that our sins are paid for at the Cross. As we partake, we remember the body hung on the cross and the blood shed for our sins. It is our reminder that sinfulness is not hopeless; God's grace is freely available. When you partake, you are telling the world of Christ's death and the atonement it made for us. You need to remember that "us" includes you.

# Duck and Rabbit

*Originally scheduled for February 23*

Most of us should recognize the name Chuck Jones. For those of you who don't, it is sufficient to tell you that he was the creator of several cartoon characters for Warner Brothers. His version of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck are the ones that stick in most people's memory. Bugs, in his cartoons, was always in control, clever enough to control the wildest of events so that he always came out ahead. Daffy, on the other hand, simply thought he was clever enough. Chuck neatly expressed the human condition this way: "Bugs is who we want to be. Daffy is who we are." Comedy and tragedy are the same art, and should be written (or drawn) by the same cartoonist.

He's right, you know. We are all, spiritually, Daffy Duck. You don't think so?

- How often in your prayers have you given God specific directions on how to fix some particular situation in your life. Thy will be done – but according to my directions, right?
- How often have you started a major change in your life – and only afterwards sought God in prayer. My will be done; I just want God to bless it.
- How often have you discovered sound advice in the pages of the Scripture – shortly after having done something to the contrary. But you were sure it was a good idea at the time, right?

Why is this so? Perhaps it is because the human heart longs for the "happy ending." It doesn't matter if you're Bugs Bunny or Indiana Jones, you want the end of the picture to come out right – for you. But have you noticed that only perfect people get that result – which is to say, no one ever gets everything they hope for. We can't be clever enough to manipulate everything to come out the way we want it. Things are going to go wrong. One reason they go wrong is that we are sinners; we want to do it our way rather than God's way. That's the real human condition.

God has provided us with a way to have a happy ending – at his expense, but not through our cleverness. He paid the price of our sins on the Cross, not so that we could have everything we want – but everything he knows we need. We need forgiveness; we're not perfect.

Communion is given to us for a simple reason: God wants us to remember that truth. He wants us to remember that no matter what we've done, forgiveness is available. So he gives us Communion. It helps us focus our minds not on what we've done wrong, nor on our clever schemes to recover from that, but on his atonement. The happy ending is coming – soon, Lord Jesus, soon – and we shall see it. In the meanwhile, remember what Christ has done for you – and partake with a grateful heart.

# Turn the Other Cheek

*Originally scheduled for March 2*

It is one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

(Matthew 5:38-41 NIV)

You know, this sounds rather difficult – if you haven't tried it. If you have tried it, you KNOW it's difficult. But our Lord appended no "ifs", "ands" or "buts" – this is not an extra credit exercise, it's part of the required course.

So why would a Christian behave like this?

- You are a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ – and it is his command. It is a question of whether or not you really consider him Lord.
- You are a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ – and therefore you are an imitator of Jesus Christ. You may not be able to walk on water, heal the sick, give sight to the blind – but you can imitate your Lord in this.
- You are a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ – and therefore you are His witness before the world. To see Christ, the world looks at us. What should they see? Vengeance – or love?

Communion is the reminder of the greatest example of loving your enemies – the Cross. We must remember that Christ did not die to atone for the sins of the "good people" (whoever those might be) but for all of us. He did not die with a snarl, but with peace and love: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Communion reminds us of the reality of that sacrifice. In the cup we perceive his blood shed for us; in the bread we perceive his body, broken for us. "Love your enemies" is not "just theology." Indeed, you may be thinking that this must be some complex bit of doctrine that you just can't understand. Just remember: when you can't understand the doctrine you can still follow the example. As you partake, then, examine yourself and see if you find a true disciple of Christ.

# Education

*Originally scheduled for March 9*

One of the difficulties new Christians sometimes encounter is the concept of revelation. We are quite accustomed to the idea that truth is something we discover; so how does one go about proving Christianity in the laboratory?

Most truth is indeed discovered – and not always by scientific methods (history, for example.) But some of it must be revealed by God directly, for we could not discover it by ourselves – and we need to know it. But notice this: however the truth is acquired, it is usually taught by authority. Your high school physics teacher didn't have you construct an atomic bomb as a lab experiment. Most of what we know was taught to us by authority.

This is the source of the teacher's greatest problem: getting you to remember, especially after the class is over, without direct experience. Even Christ had this problem; he wants you to remember his sacrifice on the Cross. May we take a look at how he goes about keeping things in your memory? It's a familiar list:

- *Repetition.* He has implemented communion, the Lord's Supper, as a memory device – and asks you to repeat it regularly. How often depends upon the denomination, but whether you do it daily, weekly or monthly you are engaged in repetition – so that you will remember.
- *Mnemonic.* In case you're not familiar with the word, it means an aid to the memory. Musicians remember "Every good boy does fine" – the first letters tell you the notes on each line of a treble clef in music. Mechanics remember "righty tighty, lefty loosey." You are taught by the symbolism of the bread for his body, the cup for his blood.
- *Test.* Every student knows you always prepare for the test. So it is that Christ tests you in communion by asking you to examine yourself. You are grading your own test – so you have reason to be honest with yourself.

But Christ extends his training of your memory beyond that. Where two or more are gathered in his name, there he is with them. His Holy Spirit indwells us. It's like having a coach in athletics. You not only have a coach for practice, but he's there during the game as well. The Holy Spirit will bring to mind that which you should act upon. Notice: "bring to mind", not "force you to do."

So I encourage you today: examine yourself. See if the sin in your life stands between you and a pure hearted relationship with your Lord and Savior. Let the Holy Spirit bring to mind that which troubles you; then commit your ways to him who is able to save. Examine yourself, and remember the truth.

# Don't Knock

*Originally scheduled for March 16*

One of the most accurate measures of how close you are to someone is your front door. It's the guardian of your home; how people gain entrance tells others just how close they are to you.

- Some knock and ask permission to enter. This might be a salesman; but if you let them in they are usually someone who has a good reason to be there. The Avon lady always knocks.
- Some knock and are instantly let in. You're glad to see them – maybe surprised, too – even if they only came over to borrow a cup of sugar.
- Others have a key to the house. They don't knock; they just come on in. These people usually have refrigerator privileges. If your name is "grandpa" then you know that these are your grown children. They are always welcome at home – particularly if they have the grandchildren with them.

The privilege of being the adult child is indeed marvelous. Mom and Dad are always happy to see you (did I mention bringing the grandkids?). Whatever was going on when you arrived is put on hold. Your parents share their space with you, their food and their fun. That's the light side of it. Sometimes, when the times are sad, those adult children share the work to be done and even share the sorrow that must be born.

If you will look at it that way, communion is such a family meal. Thus, we know that all of God's children are welcome at his table. Indeed, he asks you to come. Communion signifies our family's blessings – and burdens.

- If you understand communion, you know it to be a symbol of your great blessings – the blessing of eternal life; the blessing of the love of God and his care for you. This family lasts forever, and you are part of it.
- It is also a symbol of our burdens here on earth. We are the imitators of Christ. He suffered; we should expect no less. The servant is not above the master. You are to share these burdens one with another – like family.

So there it is: welcome to the family of God. Don't knock; just come on in. The Father is expecting you.

# Three Gardens

*Originally scheduled for March 23*

It appears that the Almighty is rather fond of gardens.

The story of man in Genesis begins in a garden – the Garden of Eden. The phrase is still used to describe a paradise on earth; indeed, it was intended to be the home of sinless man. It was the place where man and God talked face to face, without shame. But as the prophet Ezekiel tells us, Satan was in that garden too (Ezekiel 28:13) – in splendor at first, but then in shame. It is strange that we use the phrase to mean a paradise. Gardens are known by what they grow; this one grew sin and failure.

The next garden (there are several others mentioned in the Scripture) we might consider is the one named Gethsemane. Eden was a garden of delight; Gethsemane, a garden of anguish. Here the savior went to pray on the night of his betrayal. Like Eden, it was the site of man's failure – the closest friends Christ had on earth could not keep their eyes from closing in sleep. But it is recorded that Christ triumphed; "not my will but yours be done." Gardens are known by what they grow; this one grew courage.

The Gospel of John tells us (John 19:41) that there was a garden at the place where Jesus was crucified; likely enough, Jesus could have seen it from the cross. In that garden, John tells us, there was a new tomb – the one in which Joseph of Arimathea laid the body of Christ. At communion we remember the death of Christ. In the bread we see his body; in the cup we see his blood. From that tomb Christ arose, and the history of the world was forever changed. Gardens are known by what they grow; this one grew the church.

Gardens must be tended. Adam was appointed this task in Eden. One of the things Christ asked us to do until he returns is to remember his sacrifice. This is one way in which the garden of the church is tended; it is given to us to do this. So one might ask: what is the garden of your life growing? Gardens are known by what they grow.

# Whittling

*Originally scheduled for March 30*

Some things in this life are taught. Others are passed on from generation to generation. Whittling is one of those things which is passed on.

Truth to tell, it appears highly likely that whittling is something that is passed on by grandfathers. It is as if God made grandfathers with more time than fathers, and thus allows them to teach their grandsons to whittle. Teaching a boy to whittle takes time and patience, and this seems to be the special province of the grandfather.

It starts with a tool – the jack knife. My grandfather gave me mine about 56 years ago; it was one that he had for quite some time himself. The jack knife is a lifetime tool – indeed, it is common for a jack knife to have come from a different century. It must be kept sharp; that skill, too, is handed down. He never told me who gave him that knife; it was handed down, you see.

Perhaps communion should be handled in the same fashion – passed down, not taught. The young should not be left to their own thoughts to figure it out; they should certainly not have to figure out how to react to it. Of course, this is going to require patience:

- It requires patience to teach it. Communion comes infrequently; we are all so anxious for instant results.
- It requires patience to learn it. How often have you said, “never again” and then had to repeat it the next time you took communion?

So what should we teach them?

- First, they must see beyond the pictures. The cup is not just a dark liquid; it is the blood of Christ. The bread is not just a flat wafer; it is the body of Christ. These were given for you that your sins might be forgiven. Over and over again, if need be.
- Next, know what you’re carving. If you’re whittling a bird house and it comes out as a letter opener, you need to try again.
- Look inside yourself; it’s personal. Communion is not for show; it’s to help you grow closer to Christ.

So as you partake this morning, be grateful for the one who passed on communion to you – and be prepared to pass it on yourself.

# Jesus Christ - Superhero?

*Originally scheduled for April 6*

Man, it is said, is the creating creature. One of the things we have created in great abundance is a set of separate worlds in which there dwell superheroes. By now there must be thousands of them.

One author put forward a list of criteria that make someone a superhero. It's interesting to see how Jesus of Nazareth fares on these criteria.

**Superhuman powers** – Superman can fly; Jesus of Nazareth can heal the sick, raise the dead and walk on water. Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Codename** – Superman, Batman, Green Hornet, The Lone Ranger – and Messiah. Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Distinctive Costume** – Jesus never wore the cape and tights, as far as we know. But you might look at the description of him given by John the Apostle in Revelation 1:13-16. Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Extralegal Status** – Batman works *with* the police, not for them. Christ told us, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36). Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Extranormal opponents** – Batman never bothers with ordinary bank robbers; only the most extraordinary villains merit his attention. Jesus clearly identified his opponent as Satan. Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Dual Identity** – Superman is Clark Kent; the Son of God is the Son of Man. Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Difference** – superheroes are somehow different from the people around them; they are extraordinary. Jesus is God in the flesh; that's a very real difference. Jesus Christ, superhero.

**Alignment with Good** – perhaps the most important of all, the superhero is aligned with what is righteous. Jesus was the sinless man. Jesus Christ, superhero.

Tie a towel around a small child's neck and you get an imitation superhero. We naturally want to imitate those we admire, even if they're fictional. Communion is our reminder of why we imitate the very much real Messiah. He came for one task – to atone for our sins. He asks us to remember the great things he has done by partaking in communion. We remember that the cup represents his blood; the bread his body, freely given for us. Men create superheroes; God gave us a Savior. As a small child imitates his superhero, so we should imitate our Lord.

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(Readers interested in where I got this list may review it at  
<http://themarksblog.blogspot.com/2011/08/superheroes-we-never-dreamed.html>)

## 30 Pieces of Silver

*Originally scheduled for April 13*

One of the great mysteries of the New Testament is this: why did Judas Iscariot betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver?

We know the number of coins as the price of a slave in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:32). Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and so this price is appropriate. It appears again in Zechariah 11:12-13, as the wages of a shepherd – and Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Interestingly, Zechariah was told to throw the money to the potter in the house of the Lord. Judas returned his 30 pieces of silver – which were used to buy a potter's field in which to bury Gentiles. The thread winds thinly through the Scriptures, but it appears that those 30 pieces of silver – the value today is debatable, but it's not a tremendous fortune – are the price of the Suffering Servant.

In those 30 coins there is a riddle: we know that the betrayal was prophesied, the price already known – so what Judas did was necessary to bring about the crucifixion. It had to happen – and yet Christ tells us that it would have been better for Judas if he had never been born. Christ knew what Judas was doing – he even tells him to do it quickly. Did Judas walk out of the Last Supper thinking that he was doing something that was necessary – even something which was good?

Some of us may feel like that on occasion. We reason with ourselves that because of our sin, God's grace has the chance to abound. If we hadn't offended that someone, how could we experience the joy of reconciliation? Since things turned out well, surely God won't hold it against us, right?

God's grace does abound in such situations – which is to God's credit, not yours or mine. That is why in establishing communion, at this very same Last Supper, we are taught that we do not justify ourselves. Rather, communion should be a spur to confession and repentance.

Therefore, as we partake of communion, let us turn our hearts and minds towards confessing our sins and repenting of them. Examine yourself, and whatever you find sinful, renounce it. Accept God's forgiveness for it, and give him the glory for the grace you have received. His body, his blood were given so that you might become righteous in the eyes of God. Remember his sacrifice; repent of your sins.

# Even On the Cross

*Originally scheduled for April 20*

If there was any moment in Jesus' earthly life in which we could understand him as not caring for someone, it would be those hours on the Cross. Crucifixion is a horribly painful way of death. Most of us understand that when a person is in great pain, they tend to get a bit on the snappy side, at least. So if they snarl a bit, we are usually quite forgiving.

But even on the Cross we see the care and love Christ has for others.

- He cared for the church. Many of the people who were jeering him that day would, seven weeks later, become charter members of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem. He could have prevented this in anger, but instead he asked, "Father, forgive them..."
- That forgiveness extended not only to those who would become his disciples but to those who would not – the Pharisees, the Roman soldiers and no doubt many standing around.
- In one of the most touching moments of the Gospel, Jesus assigns the care of his mother Mary to his best friend, the Apostle John. Jesus had brothers [1\[1\]](#) who were not yet believers; they would have been obliged to care for her. But Jesus would not put his mother in the care of those who did not believe. Rather, he assured her a warm welcome.

Communion reminds us of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross; therefore it reminds us that even in the most trying of circumstances, Jesus cares for those He loves. His love extends to those who are now his enemies, but one day might become the children of God. It most especially extends to those whom Jesus loves – which is to say, us.

As you partake of communion today, think of the care of Christ in your life.

- The cup is his blood, which is given for the forgiveness of your sins. This is love in the highest form and greatest degree.
- The bread in some ways symbolizes the sustaining of your strength, feeding you as you would feed your children.

Let both of these remind you of his care and comfort for you, for the greatest lover of your soul cares for you in the fullest measure of love.

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[1\[1\]](#) The point has nothing to do with whether or not Mary had any other biological children after Jesus (a great controversy between Protestants and Catholics.) There were other family members who would have been obliged to assume the responsibility. The difference is care by cold duty versus care from a warm heart..

# Buying A Communion Table

*Originally scheduled for April 27*

The chances are pretty good that your church is not in the market for a communion table. It's something most churches buy once in their existence, unless they have a fire. The styles have changed over the years, but the general parameters are about the same as always. But if you do happen to be looking for a new communion table, let me recommend a supplier. Their name is IPI; you can find their website on the internet. As of this writing you can get what they describe as an "ornate" communion table for about \$2,200. A simpler and cheaper version is available.

Now, you might well ask, why am I telling you this? It's pretty simple, really. IPI stands for Iowa Prison Industries. As you might guess, this means that the table is manufactured in a prison in Iowa, by prisoners.

There is something rather satisfying about that. Those who work in prison ministry will tell you that the typical prisoner is a ripe subject for conversion – he's had plenty of time to contemplate his sins, and how little his own efforts at reform have achieved. (They'll also tell you to watch out for the con artists who fake repentance). It's satisfying because communion is for sinners.

Communion is something that sinners do to remember the sacrifice of the Sinless One. It commemorates the Atonement – something we couldn't do for ourselves, for the atonement sacrifice had to be perfect, and we're not. Indeed, it's worth remembering that the only known qualification for becoming a Christian is that you have to be a sinner first. Some of us (blows on fingernails, polishes on shirt) are quite well qualified, too.

There it is: you, like the prisoners in the prison, are a sinner. It is no matter; Christ died for sinners, in or out of prison. He did so at the will and command of God the Father, so we may safely conclude God thinks that those prisoners are worth saving – and so are you.

So as you partake of the bread today remember that his body was broken for the worst of mankind as well as the best. His blood was shed to cleanse the sins of the foulest offenders, in or out of prison. As you partake, give thanks the He included you when He said, "Whosoever will..."

# Open to All

*Originally scheduled for May 4*

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is the center point of the Scriptures – and of human history. It's important for us to know some of the characteristics of this sacrifice:

- First, it is *final*. The sacrifice was made once, and there is nothing left to be sacrificed. This is the sacrifice which cannot be improved upon, for it is perfectly effective.
- Next, it is *open to all*. The issue of salvation does not depend upon whether or not God is willing; rather, he has made it clear that salvation is open to “whosoever will.”
- Finally, there is no list of “acceptable” sins. The only qualification for becoming a Christian is that you have to be a sinner first – and Christ is not picky about which type of sinner.

Communion proclaims these truths.

- Communion is a *reminder* of the sacrifice of Christ – not a new sacrifice. It points our minds to what Christ did at Calvary; it's not a sacrifice on our own.
- It is open to *all who believe*.<sup>[1](#)[1](#)</sup> In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female but all are one in Christ Jesus.
- Surprisingly enough, there is no special form of communion for the really wicked. That tells you that sin is sin – and Christ is not picky about that either.

This should be a source of joy to all Christians; consider it.

- There is no need – indeed, no way – to work your way into heaven. You arrive by the grace of God, which is both free and infinite.
- Your social or economic status is no barrier. Those who take communion together are the church – the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.
- No matter what you have done, you are one of the “in crowd” – forgiven at the expense of Christ.

So, as you partake this morning, be reminded of the Cross – which brought your Savior pain, and brings you great joy.

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<sup>[1](#)</sup> <sup>[1](#)</sup> This is not a point concerning “open” or “closed” communion. The point is that the church is “open” – or it's dead.

# Taking Together

*Originally scheduled for May 11*

There seems to be no particular specification in the Scripture for this. Some churches allow their members to take communion at their own pace, separately. Others insist that partaking be a group activity, all members participating at the same moment. Some use both methods, as might seem reasonable to them.

If you are one who is truly in fellowship with Christ, taking the communion synchronously has certain advantages:

- You can't just "hurry and get it over." It's there in front of you; you have to contemplate it until the time comes. It requires at least some meditation and thought.
- It demonstrates – both to those in and out of the church – the unity of the church. Taking communion in public tells the world that you belong to Christ; taking it in unison tells the world you also belong to his church at this location.
- It makes it clear that communion is not optional for Christians. There is no sense in the idea that you might not be ready to repent and confess your sins; you have accepted the Lord and repentance, like communion, is obedience to his command.
- Likewise, it makes it clear that the grace of God is intended for all. There is no secret layer of Christians who are sufficiently pious that they, and only they, can take communion. We are the pardoned ones.

But – it is a sad truth – there are those who should not take communion. They face the temptation to do it because everyone else is. They are living with an abiding sin. To take communion without repentance is a grave error; communion is designed to surface that abiding sin, bringing it out of the closet. It does so by reminding one of the sacrifice made by Christ, proclaiming his grace available to one and all. Don't just go through the ritual; meet and know the mind of Christ. Your sins are not so great that you cannot be forgiven.

So, if you know that taking communion would be just an empty ritual to you, please – don't. Instead, take the time to confess the sin you are hiding, and repent of it. If possible, reconcile with any injured parties as soon as you can. Prepare yourself for the next communion by confession and repentance – and acceptance of the grace of God.

# **Born Again - In Zion**

*Originally scheduled for May 18*

The story as told to me went something like this. In the 1930's Hitler's persecution of the Jews drove the storyteller's father to announce to his family that they were emigrating to America. The storyteller, being about ten years old at the time, thought America to be much too far away. There were plenty of other countries much closer. Why America? "Because," his father answered, "We are Americans. We were just born in the wrong country."

Christians are like that. We are all born into Satan's world, born into the kingdom which will someday be cast into hell. But Christians don't emigrate; they're reborn. They are reborn into God's kingdom.

That's us: born again. How do we do this?

- There is the outward symbol of rebirth: baptism. It is a picture of death, burial and resurrection – and the start of a new life.
- Inwardly, we are born of the Holy Spirit. When we allow that new spirit in, we are reborn spiritually.

One songwriter put it this way. He pictured Jesus at the last judgment, picking out one of his children and saying,

“This one was born in Zion;

Make no mistake, this one is mine.”

That's us: born in Zion. There is no mistake; we belong to Christ.

He asks us to remember that rebirth by remembering what He had to do to obtain it for us. Think first of the tremendous humbling He went through: born into our world, as a baby, just like us. The Incarnation is indeed a supreme miracle, and without it we could not be born again.

The price he asks us to remember is his crucifixion. The bread is his body; the cup is his blood. Taken together they tell us the story of his agony on the Cross. This is the price – the nail scarred hands, the pierced feet, the wounded side – shown to us each time we take communion. Remember that you are indeed born again – and remember the price he paid for it.

# Sodom and Gomorrah

Genesis 18:23-32

*Originally scheduled for May 25*

God announces to Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah; Abraham begins to plead with him not to do it. You've probably heard the story often enough; frequently, it is cited as an example of the mercy of God. *But it's not.*

Abraham begins his plea by appealing to the righteous nature of God. "Far be it from you..." to destroy the innocent along with the wicked. He begins asking for the sake of a hypothetical group of 50 righteous. God concedes that if he can find that many, he won't destroy the cities. So Abraham asks for 45; then 40; then 20; and finally ten. But on each revision the appeal is not to God's mercy but his righteousness.

There is a good lesson in prayer in all this. Appeal to one or more of the attributes of God; it shows you know him and may have perceived his will. Note what Abraham didn't do:

- He didn't argue the fitness of the death penalty with God. You might think that the death penalty is too severe for homosexuality (which was, in fact, their sin). But to argue the point with God is to tell him that you know better than he does.
- He didn't tell God this was an "alternate lifestyle." Look at it from their point of view! To do that is tell God that righteousness is self-defined, not God given.

In fact, Abraham does not plead for the unrepentant wicked at all. He pleads for the righteous not to be swept away with the wicked. That's not asking for mercy; it's asking for justice.

But then consider our advocate with the Father: Jesus Christ. He too pleads for us, just as Abraham did – and on the exact same basis. The Christian is one who has already received mercy, saving grace. We are "washed in the blood of the Lamb." So when Christ pleads for us before the Father, he does so on the basis that we are the righteous, covered by grace.

But that plea comes at a price: Calvary. For this to be true Christ had to suffer and die as our atonement sacrifice. He asks that you remember the price paid that you might appear as righteous before the throne of grace. The cup is his blood; the bread, his body. Remember this today: your righteousness before God came at his expense.

# Memorial

*Originally scheduled for June 1*

It is a curious fact that in the there are several mentions of the word “memorial.” In the New Testament, however, there is only one mention. [\[1\]](#) This occurs in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, and concerns the centurion known as Cornelius. Startled by the angel’s appearance — the usual reaction — he is told that his prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering to God. In the Old Testament memorials tend to be either offerings at the altar of the Lord or collections of stones. They were there to remind the Israelites either of events that happened or the goodness of God. For Cornelius the memorial is a good example of how we should combine the practical with the spiritual.

Let’s take a look at that:

- The spiritual side is shown in prayer. From the world’s point of view prayer is an exercise in a closet. We know better, of course. But it is something that is largely spiritual. The spiritual, however, should prompt us to the practical.
- The practical side is shown in his gifts to the poor. As James points out, works without action mean that your faith is meaningless.

In the New Testament there is only one memorial: communion. In and of itself communion is purely a spiritual exercise. But like all spiritual exercises it should prompt us to the practical work of the church. We see in this memorial the character of Christ. It should prompt us to the imitation of Christ.

So I ask you:

- Does the blood of his sacrifice move you to sacrifice for Him? Are your days marked with the gift to the poor, the helping Hand to the needy?
- Does his body on the Cross move you to work for Him? Each of us should have a particular task, no matter how humble, and do it well.
- Do you cover all these things, the practical side, with the spiritual exercise of prayer?

Communion is a reminder of what Jesus has done for you. Perhaps it should also be a reminder of what you need to do for Him.

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[1 \[1\]](#) In the NIV or NASB.

# Inseparable

*Originally scheduled for June 8*

In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans – a soaring cathedral of thought – Paul ends with these words:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38-39 NIV)

Consider these barriers:

- Life and death? What are life and death to the one who has conquered the grave?
- Angels or Demons? What are they to the one who has been given all authority in heaven and earth?
- Present or future? What are these to the creator of time?
- Powers? What do they matter to the one who created all things?
- Height or depth? These are barriers to motion, not to love.
- Anything else? Just in case Paul missed something, he puts this in. Christ is supreme in all things.

So what could separate us from the love of God? Christ himself has the power and authority – but we know he will never do that. How do we know that? Greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends – and Christ voluntarily laid down his life for us at the Cross.

We often speak of “celebrating” communion. It is a celebration; a celebration of love. It is the reminder of the great love Christ has for us. In the cup we see portrayed the blood he shed. In the bread we see the pain suffered by his broken body. Together, they portray the death of Jesus Christ. The Lord of all things did this, voluntarily, for you.

Therefore, as you partake, remember his sacrifice – and the proof it offers of his love for you, so great and powerful that nothing nor anyone can take it from you. This is his body; this is his blood – freely given, out of his great love, for you.

# In Common

*Originally scheduled for June 15*

In the ancient church there was no concept of bacteria and infection, as we know it. They saw no reason whatsoever not to use a common cup and common loaf for their communion. Some of the things that Paul says about communion assume this — and we may draw some conclusions which would have been obvious to them but not so clear to us.

First, they used a common cup. In that common cup was, by the statement of Christ, the blood of Christ. It contained the very forgiveness granted to all believers – at least in a symbolic way. They would have seen it as a sign of unity; for each of them had the same Holy Spirit. The common loaf would, to them, have been an obvious sign of the unity of the body of Christ — the church. One loaf would mean one body to them, because Christ said “This is my body.” So you see that the early church would have viewed communion not just as a memorial of the sacrifice of Christ but also something which binds the church together.

We can see this today by the method in which we invite people to take communion. Some churches practice “open communion” in which they invite all who believe to participate, whether or not they are formal members of that congregation or not. Other churches practice “closed communion” in which only legal members are allowed to participate. But all those churches agree on one thing: communion is for the Christian only. Communion is common among Christians, but exclusive of all others.

Today’s methods of using an individual cup and a small piece of bread tends to make us focus on the relationship of the individual and God. But the original intention was not “God and me”; the original intention was “God and us.” By taking communion you are proclaiming that you are one of us.

Therefore, it is important to remind you not to take communion lightly. Christians are the most persecuted religion on the planet today; that persecution takes many forms. Just being a Christian will bring trouble; there seems to be no way around it. Worse yet, those who would like to sit on the fence find that the fence is composed of very sharp spikes. So you have to decide: are you with Jesus, or not? By partaking of communion or refraining, you tell us.

# The Light Has Come

*Originally scheduled for June 22*

There are a number of people who are quite certain that their imagination of the truth is greatly superior to any truth revealed to us. They don't need Scripture ; they have things all figured out with nothing but their own brilliance to guide them.

Take, for example, the question of who's going to wind up in heaven, and who's going to wind up in hell. (Ignore for the moment where they got the idea of heaven and hell.) They usually start out by telling you that God is love (where'd they find that?) and that a loving God would never send anyone to hell. Of course, that is subject to some debate. Usually someone will come up with the name Adolf Hitler as a possible exception to the rule. So we have to make some exceptions, it seems.

But how do we know what exceptions to make? Note that the question isn't, "who's good enough to go to heaven" but "who's bad enough to go to hell?" The normal response is some form of the Cosmic Brownie Points system: if you do more good stuff than bad stuff, you go to heaven. And, conveniently enough, without the slightest assistance from the Savior who taught us most about heaven and hell. I don't need a savior; I have brownie points.

Satan lies by twisting the truth.

- God is love – which is why He sent His Son to die at Calvary.
- The wicked – defined as those who won't repent and be saved – do go to hell.

We should note that God both cherishes and rewards the good works of those who love him. Indeed, it seems a fair test of whether or not you do love him. Faith without works is dead. But we get to heaven because of the Cross, not our good deeds.

So why do some people persist in inventing their own road to heaven? It comes down to this: the Light of the world has come. Those who cherish the light – even as it reveals their faults – come to the light. Those who love darkness run from it – if not literally, at least intellectually.

In communion, we are reminded that we are in the light solely because the Light came to us. It is a reminder of what he has done so that we might be saved. We remember the agony of Calvary, endured by the sinless man for our sake. The cup is his blood, the bread his body – and together they opened the narrow way to heaven for those who love Him.

# Dovecote

*Originally scheduled for June 29*

One of the ways that farmers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century supplemented their diets was to keep a dovecote. It's a fairly large box, usually on a pole, which allowed several families of doves or pigeons to nest. It also included a rear access door for the farmer. As the eggs hatched, the farmer would reach in through the back door and tie a string to the leg of each hatchling. When they were large enough to fly, they were still tethered to the dovecote. Large enough to fly also meant large enough to eat.

The method is apparently a very ancient one, for we find in the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus the rules for bringing a sin offering.

- If you were rich, your offering was proportional to your wealth. You were to provide a lamb from your flocks.
- The middle class – no flock, but land enough to support a dovecote – were to bring two doves.
- The poor – no dovecote, I suppose – were to bring a tenth of an ephah of flour.

(Don't ask me what an ephah might be. One of my references cleared things up this way: "Twelve logs to one hin; six hins to one bath. One cab and four-fifths to one omer. Three omers and one third, one seah. Three seahs to one ephah. Ten ephahs to one homer." Makes the metric system look simple, now doesn't it?)

There is a divine principle at work here: God always provides a way for each of us, no matter how rich or poor, to have atonement for our sins. This, of course, implies that we all *need* such atonement for our sins. God is no "respector of persons." But please note that specific instructions were given for this; atonement is made effective through obedience. You get it God's way, not your way.

Of course, animal sacrifices were only a forerunner of the true Atonement: Christ, the Lamb of God. The reality of atonement was given at Calvary. But it is still true that atonement is made effective through obedience. So it is that we are commanded to examine ourselves in taking communion, so that we might recognize our sins and repent of them. The body and blood of Christ are not to be taken lightheartedly, but in a worthy manner. Examine yourselves, repent and thus let your obedience make his sacrifice effective for your atonement.

# Umpire

*Originally scheduled for July 6*

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

(John 5:26-27 NIV)

Have you ever wondered what it takes to become a qualified baseball umpire? Little League coaches often ask themselves that, especially when they see some umpire make a boneheaded call. Here are a few things we'd like to see:

- First, he must have played the game of baseball – and not just once or twice. He has to control the game, and he should know how the players feel.
- Of course, he should have an outstanding knowledge of the rule book.
- He should also be a man of commanding authority, one whose very presence engenders respect.

There are some things we'd like to see absent, too:

- We don't want to see an arbitrary dictator; we expect him to use that rule book properly.
- We also want one who is not inattentive – or worse, blind.
- It helps if he is not inconsistent (especially calling balls and strikes).

These are the same kind of reasons that God the Father has for giving authority to judge to the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Just to mention the two most obvious points:

- He was tempted just like we are, but is without sin. He knows what it's like to go through the human experience.
- More than that, he has experienced the ultimate fate of all of mankind – death. He knows what it is to suffer and die.

When we partake of communion, we proclaim His death – and therefore we proclaim Him as the Son of Man. We thus proclaim Him as fit to be the judge of the living and the dead. So, when you take the cup and the bread, remember that the judge of all the earth will someday return. You will face him, hoping to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Examine yourself, therefore, and see if you are indeed the good and faithful servant He seeks. You proclaim His death; you proclaim the judgment to come; do you also see to it that you are ready to face that judgment?

# Measuring Value

*Originally scheduled for July 13*

It doesn't take much thought to realize that measuring the value of something cannot always be done with a credit card.

- There are some things which we do value using a credit card. They are the more mundane things of life; these are the things of which Christ said, "Your Father knows you have need of them." Gasoline, grain or gravy; they are worth what you pay for them.
- Other things are valued by what you forego in order to keep them. If you have the world's most perfect wife, it's wise to forego all the others to keep the best.
- Some things are known by how tightly you cling to them. Have you ever seen a small child clutching tightly to a teddy bear? No price tag can measure that.

May I suggest that the "Pearl of Great Price" – your faith – can be measured in these ways as well?

- There is a monetary measurement – tithes and offerings. Your checkbook is often your biography, you know.
- If you are a true Christian, then you have let go of what the King James Version called "the pleasures of sin for a season." What you don't do is sometimes a measure of who you are.
- Perhaps most precious of all is how you cling to the faith. This is especially true in times of grief, when comfort can be freely given but never purchased.

We may see these ways of measurement in the love God has shown to us, as well.

- The agony that Christ suffered on the Cross is the most visible means by which we can see God's love for us. It is that suffering and death that we are called to remember in Communion.
- Think, too, of what Christ gave up for the opportunity to die that way: He who was in heaven, the equal of God the Father, left the glory of his life there for our sake.
- Even today, we see God's love in the way He clings to His Bride – the church. His providential care for us is shown in the billions of people who worship him.

We cannot put a credit card number to all this. He does not ask us to try. All that he asks us to do is to remember his great love for us, shown at the Cross. This do in remembrance of him – who sacrificed beyond our measurement that we might be saved.

# First Fruit

*Originally scheduled for July 20*

Most of the people of biblical times lived in a society tuned to the annual rhythms of agriculture. One result of this is that people would anticipate the arrival of first fruits – the first harvest of any given crop. We have some feeling of this as well; you author anticipates the arrival of fresh peach pie each year. Canned peaches just aren't the same. Because they were most cherished, they were considered in Old Testament times as ideal offerings for sacrifices. You give of your best to the Lord; you give your most cherished things to the Lord – so that nothing comes between you and God. God then commanded that most of the first fruits would be the portion of his priests – so those who serve God directly got the best of the harvest.

All this takes on more interest to us today when we consider that Christ is declared to be the first fruit of the resurrection (See First Corinthians, chapter 15). The parallels are interesting:

- First fruits are the most anticipated – and the return of Christ is the most anticipated event in human thought.
- First fruits were considered the best – and at Christ's return we are told that the creator of the universe will "make all things new." Nothing could be better!
- And who will receive these first fruits of the resurrection? None other than the kingdom of priests (see Revelation 1:6), the church – all who are written in the book of life.

All this is implicit in communion. That's why we are commanded to celebrate communion (and "celebrate" is the right word here) "until he comes." His return is promised, though we are told that no one knows the day and hour. In communion we remember the sacrifice which precedes the great harvest of the earth. It is by his atonement that we are transformed into his church, his kingdom of priests.

The matter is most serious. Therefore, do not take communion in a light hearted manner. Take it with an honest heart, grateful for the immense love poured out for us at Calvary. Then you may look forward with joy to the harvest to come. The dead in Christ shall rise; those of us still alive at his return will rise to meet him as well. All this is promised to you by the first fruit of the new creation – the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

# Shock the Ostrich

*Originally scheduled for July 27*

We must begin with a disclaimer. You have all seen – usually in a cartoon – the picture of an ostrich with its head in the sand. To the best of my knowledge, this is not natural behavior for the ostrich. On one occasion an advertising firm produced a commercial which appeared to show the ostrich putting its head in a small hole. The zookeeper, on seeing this for the first time, was shocked. “How did you ever get it to do *that?*” The method was simple; they put the ostrich’s feeding dish on a ledge which looked like a small hole from the camera’s point of view. The ostrich started to eat; they took away the food dish and the ostrich resumed an upright position. They photographed this – and reversed the film to make it look like the ostrich was putting its head in the sand.

Of course, we are more familiar with the metaphoric meaning – that someone is deliberately ignoring a problem. But have you ever considered how to get our metaphoric ostrich out of the sand? Let’s suppose that you apply an electric shock to the ostrich. You might, possibly, get the desired result. But it’s much more likely that the ostrich would start by kicking you with its powerful legs – and that could cause a great deal of pain.

This is true with humans as well. It is common to find a Christian whose head is stuck firmly in the sand over the problem of a particular sin. How do we do this?

- We tell ourselves we will worry about it “later.” Whenever later comes, that is.
- We engage in self-justification – it’s not really a sin but righteous anger, right?
- Comparison works well too – “I’m a better man than ...”

When this happens, we resent being shocked (or even gently reminded) and tell someone to mind their own business. Pushed far enough, we will kick back.

Perhaps this is why our Lord provides a more gentle method during communion. He tells us we are to examine *ourselves* – which makes things much easier. But if this is going to work, we need to remember that we must do so honestly – not later, not self-justified, no comparison, just an honest look in the spiritual mirror.

Perhaps you’ve missed it before: one of the ways in which Christ shows his great love for us is in the agony of the Cross – his body, his blood – willingly endured so that you might be *gently* restored. Out of his great love he provides a way for you to be lovingly restored to him. Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling.

# The Nature of Christ

*Originally scheduled for August 3*

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Hebrews 1:1-3 NIV)

If you wish to understand the greatness of the sacrifice Christ made at Calvary, you must first understand the greatness of Christ himself. We see it laid out before us here in the book of Hebrews. Just consider things in the visible universe:

- He is the heir to all things – everything belongs to him.
- He is the agent of creation – the one who made the universe.
- He is the sustainer of creation – the one who sees to it that gravity works today like yesterday.

That should be sufficient to give us awe. But our writer goes on to explain his relationship with God:

- He is the radiance of God's glory – the spiritual light of the universe. He therefore, like God, must be eternal.
- He is the exact representation of God's being – like a photograph that penetrates to the very essence of God. To know Christ is to know God Almighty.
- He is seated at the right hand of the Father – the position of authority, equal to God the Father.

Then please consider his relationship to us. One might think that a being so high and powerful would simply ignore us, or perhaps apply some bug spray to us. But it is not so; instead, he provided our purification through his atoning sacrifice. Christ is unique in this:

- He is the only man who could provide for our purification, for only He was without sin.
- He is the only man who would be motivated to do this, for God is love, and Christ is God.
- To put the point simply, He is also the only one who *did* provide for us.

Therefore, as you take communion today, you will of course remember his agony on the Cross. But give some thought, too, about the sacrifice he made just to come to us as a man. The author and sustainer of the universe, the equal of God the Father, so loved you that he went to the Cross for your atonement. Remember that.

# Hero Worship

*Originally scheduled for August 10*

Most of the older members of the congregation will not be familiar with the name Jackie Chan. Mr. Chan is a movie actor; he specializes in high-energy karate films. There are three usual characteristics in his films:

- The fight scenes are very well choreographed; usually the odds against the hero are very large and the action quite exciting.
- There is a certain tongue-in-cheek humor that pervades his films. Mr. Chan takes his films quite seriously – but takes himself lightly.
- Often, the most interesting (or at least funniest) part of the picture is – the final credits!

Why would the final credits be interesting? Because as they roll by Chan features some of the outtakes from the film. In particular, he shows those in which someone was injured or (for example) karate kicked himself off a pier and into the ocean. It's his way of teaching young viewers that the stunts they've just seen are just that: stunts. Don't try this at home.

He has, of course, a large collection of hero-worshipping fans. Hero worship has its rules:

- Rule 1: people want to have heroes. They come in many forms – sports, military, literary, for example – but we seem to need them. Perhaps this is because we know we cannot triumph by ourselves.
- Rule 2: you should make sure they really are heroes! Real heroes show the bitter and the sweet. They have opposition to overcome; if it was easy, they wouldn't be a hero. They'd be ordinary like the rest of us.
- Rule 3: emulate the real heroes. If you have a good example, follow it.

Heroes often arise in the context of war, and there is no greater war than the struggle between good and evil. It's a war that all of us, like it or not, are in. We're all sinners; we all seek to overcome that. So we seek the Hero in that war, Jesus Christ. He is the one who gave us the ultimate victory in that war.

Like Jackie Chan's outtakes, Jesus shows us the cost of that victory – the Cross. Suffering and sacrifice are part of the hero's life. We, as his followers, are to imitate him – and that means that we will share in his suffering. Communion is a reminder of his suffering; it is therefore a reminder of the suffering we should expect as a follower of Christ.

Remember Rule 3: If you have a good example, follow it. In communion you acknowledge that Christ is your divine example; so follow him.

# Baby Food

*Originally scheduled for August 17*

When you purchase it at the store, it appears to be the most innocent of things. You look at that cute, charming infant on the label. Note that the child is completely clean, well-dressed and his hair is perfectly combed. This is the only place where a child remains that way; any parent who has ever fed a child in a high chair knows that a goodly portion of that food will soon be scattered everywhere. It will be all over his clothing; he will soon be using it to style his hair and it remains a great mystery how strained peas can possibly wind up between the toes of an infant who is wearing shoes and socks. The child, of course, is delighted with this result. That green stuff from the little jar is an excellent play toy. Why mother has to bring in the fire hose to clean up the mess...

Infants make a mess. This is true spiritually as well as physically. You think not? Consider what Paul has to say about it to the Corinthians:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

(1 Corinthians 3:1-3 NASB)

There is the test for spiritual infancy: jealousy and strife. You might want to take a look at your spiritual bib. Is there someone around you provokes you spiritually? Does the spirit of jealousy and envy eat at you?

It is the explicit prayer of Christ that his people may be one; he wants us to be united. So, if there is someone who is unforgiven in your eyes it is time to take action. Remember Christ's example on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." That's your example; that's the standard that he set for you so that his children would be united in his church.

If there is division between you and another Christian in this church then go to that person. Forgive what must be forgiven and abandon the spirit of envy. Make a positive effort to restore the harmony of the church. When you take of the Lord's body and blood you are proclaiming that there is one church, not a gaggle of factions. We are one body; it is up to us to keep it that way.

# Chaff

*Originally scheduled for August 24*

During World War II both the Nazis and the allies invented, independently, a method of battling the new science of radar. It was called chaff. It looks very much like the wrapper of an ordinary piece of gum, with aluminum foil on one side only. You wouldn't think this would be very much of a problem for radar, but it is. The strips of foil are technically known as tuned dipoles. They are cut to a very precise length which matches the wavelength of the radar system to be confused. The result is that they show up as much larger than they really are. They flutter about; in so doing they leave tracks which look like those of an airplane. Eventually you can tell the airplane from the chaff — but it's usually too late.

Have you ever wondered why they call it chaff? The term is actually used in the Bible. It describes a part of the wheat plant which is discarded. To separate wheat from chaff — it's called winnowing — you toss the grain in the air when there's a good wind blowing. Chaff, being very light, is blown along with the wind while the heavier grain falls back on to the threshing floor. If you do this a sufficient number of times, the chaff gets blown off the wheat. The real chaff is very light, blown along with the wind and has to be separated from the real wheat — that's why the tinfoil chaff was named that way. Real chaff is lightweight and worthless — fit only to be burned.

That's what John the Baptist was warning people about. Speaking of Jesus, he said:

"His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

(Matthew 3:12 NASB)

We are warned that communion should begin with a period of self-examination; "Let a man examine himself." So — are you lightweight chaff or the heavier grain?

- Chaff is blown around by the wind — every new fad picks up the chaff. These people seek the grace of God without the Lordship of Christ. As a result, they are constantly looking for a new way to remain comfortably idle in the church.
- Wheat, being heavier, takes Christ seriously. These are the folks who bear fruit — and are willing to do so even when there's work involved.

Those looking at you from the outside often can't tell the difference. That's why we are called to examine ourselves — take the view from the inside. If you feel like you are just floating along in church, take warning. In communion we partake of the body and blood of Christ — something which should never be taken lightly.

# Perfume

*Originally scheduled for August 31*

We are taught that, as part of communion, we are to examine ourselves – but we are not taught to examine others in the congregation. There are some very practical reasons for this:

- Examining others – and we're good at this – misses the main point of communion. It's a distraction from the passion of Christ. Like we tell our Little League players, keep your eye on the ball.
- Examining others creates hardness of heart. At communion you should be getting rid of your spiritual problems, not making them worse.
- Examining others makes Judgmentalism seem to be holy and pious. It isn't.

We have a good instance of this in the Scriptures:

Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it on His head as He reclined at the table. But the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and said, "Why this waste? "For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. "For you always have the poor with you; but you do not always have Me. "For when she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. "Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

(Matthew 26:6-13 NASB)

Note the reply of Jesus: why do you *bother* the woman? After all, whose perfume is it? Who set you up as judge? God is working in her life too, as well as yours. You may think this is a waste – but isn't that much like saying that God cannot provide? Have you prayed about this, or is it just snap judgment? If it seems all that important to you, shouldn't you consider the harmony of the church and inquire of her privately?

So we are taught to examine ourselves. May I suggest that this examination should be both diligent and detailed? It should produce at least one good result: you should ask God's aid in dealing with the problems you find. The purpose of this self-examination is repentance.

As Paul tells us, in his famous passage on Communion:

But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

(1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NASB)

As a Chinese Christian once put it, “Lord, reform thy world – beginning with me.”

# The Stolen Turtle

*Originally scheduled for September 7*

When I was a boy I was prohibited from owning the more normal sort of pet, such as a dog or cat. Anything with fur set off my sister's allergies, which were quite severe. My father therefore reasoned that I would be well off with a turtle, and got me one. It was about the size of a half-dollar, and came with its own terrarium, appropriately sized. All was well until one day I noticed that the turtle was missing – AWOL, if you please. It took little investigation to discover what had happened; one of the other children in the neighborhood had recently acquired such a turtle, his parents knew not where. They soon had the truth out of the child.

Quite properly, the parents wanted to return the turtle. There was one slight difficulty: in the process of being hijacked, the turtle had died. The parents decided that it would be appropriate therefore to supply a replacement. Unfortunately, the replacement reptile was about three times the diameter of the original. It could not possibly live in the terrarium. They had captured it at a local stream, and so we returned it to its habitat. This caused little grief, because the turtle in question was one of the ugliest of God's creatures I had ever seen. The first turtle was cute; this one was mostly notable for its monotone mud color.

Have you ever approached your own sin that way? We are to ask forgiveness of our Lord for our sins; it is the only acceptable way. But sometimes we find ourselves trying to substitute our own atonement for his. By making amends in our own way – bringing in the ugly turtle – we think we have cleared the matter. We have not. Only the forgiveness of Christ will do.

This does not mean that we shouldn't make amends to those we have sinned against. We should do that, in order that we may be reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ. In so doing we build up the unity of the church; we strengthen our fellow Christians by our example; we often will be able to replace anger with love. But let us not mistake this process for the forgiveness given by God. It is not a question of either/or but both. We need to make amends for our sins as we can, and we need to seek God's forgiveness for them. That forgiveness is not based on our efforts but upon the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary.

At no time is it more important to remember this than at Communion. By taking Communion you acknowledge the body and blood of Christ as necessary both for your salvation and your forgiveness. Do not, therefore, attempt to substitute your own actions for what Christ alone can do. Have the humility to accept and proclaim that Jesus paid it all – all the debt of sin you have. We are to examine ourselves before taking Communion; it seems that distinguishing our efforts from his atonement might just be a good place to start.

# Clear Channel

*Originally scheduled for September 14*

In the days when radio was in its heyday broadcasters had discovered that AM radio signals carried quite a bit further after sunset. For this reason, most stations were required by the FCC to reduce their signal power quite a bit at dusk. Old-timers who lived out in the country will remember that transition; often, it meant your favorite station just disappeared. Their signal would interfere with that of another station in the distance, using the same frequency.

In most areas, however, one station was allowed to stay at full power all night. There were a number of reasons for this, one being that radio stations were frequently used as navigation beacons for pilots. These stations, called “clear channel stations”, could be heard for hundreds of miles. The music was middle of the road, and often mixed various styles.

The stations themselves worked hard to get and retain long distance loyalties. They would frequently advertise their status (“This is KFI, the only clear channel station in Los Angeles.”) and how it was unique in the area. They encouraged listeners in outlying areas to write in – then would read the letters on the air. That not only flattered the writer but also impressed people with just how far that signal could reach.

They also played to the loyalties of the listener. In particular, the station in Los Angeles was for many years the radio home of the Dodgers. As many games were played under the lights, this gave the Dodgers an extended fan base over a wide area. (It didn’t hurt that the Dodgers’ announcer was a man named Vin Scully – who as of this writing is still with the club, some fifty years later.)

Communion is the clear channel station of God. You don’t need a translator; nor do you need some special receiver. The symbolism of communion is simple, but deep. This is my body; this is my blood. In so doing, God strengthens your loyalty to Him and to His church. Indeed, it also encourages you to communicate with God.

What does this communication from God say? It says, over and again, that God loves you to the point of dying on a Cross; He loves you to the point of forgiving you and then teaching you his ways; He loves you to the point of taking you home to be with Him at your death. Communion – the clear channel of God’s love.

# Rich Man

*Originally scheduled for September 21*

I once knew a rich man. He was not rich because he inherited a lot of money; he pursued the money all his life and eventually became rich. He was very proud of this; and because of his pride he had certain ways of letting you know that he was a rich man.

- One was by his actions. He enjoyed playing the patriarch of the clan, and as part of this he would always reach for the check at dinner. It was his way of reminding you that such an expense was trivial to him.
- Another was by his possessions. He was very pleased to have a Cadillac. In his particular case this was his only ostentatious possession. Other rich men seem to be affected by such things as the bling around the neck, the trophy wife on the arm or the second house in Palm Springs.

That is the way of a rich man — who wants more. Compare that, if you please, with the rich man who literally has it all: Jesus Christ. He is the creator and sustainer of the universe; everything in it is his by right of creation. Yet when you read of this in the Bible, it seems so matter of fact. He is the creator and sustainer; no further comment seems to be necessary.

Indeed, when Paul talks about the “unfathomable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8) he is talking about the love and mercy of God. It is as if planets, stars and galaxies were trivial. After all, planets don’t last forever; human beings are designed to be eternal. As Oswald Chambers once said, “When we choose deliberately to obey Him, then He will tax the remotest star and the last grain of sand to assist us with all His almighty power.” And yet, this is not considered as remarkable as his love for you and for me. He places his focus on his love, and the sacrifice which he made in response to that love and our situation.

Despite all the power and glory of being the author and sustainer of the universe, Jesus became a man like one of us. Not particularly a rich man, or a highly born one — in fact, he was the son of a peasant girl. He knows what it is to live in poverty. Perhaps that is why he invites you to remember his sacrifice with one of the simplest meals possible. The bread, representing his body, and the cup, representing his blood, are given to us so that we might remember what he did on the Cross. In remembering his sacrifice we contemplate his love. In contemplating his love for us, we grow closer to him.

He has made the greatest sacrifice possible, for us. He did this out of his love. And now he asks that you remember him in this ceremonial meal — so that he might continue to pour out his love upon you as you grow closer to him. As you meditate upon this bread and cup remember what a sinner you are — and what a Savior he is.

# Cursed

*Originally scheduled for September 28*

In the Old Testament there is a curious passage of Scripture:

"If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

(Deuteronomy 21:22-23 NASB)

It is curious for one particular reason. The method by which someone was to be put to death in the Old Testament law was by stoning. It appears that this law was used infrequently, and most commonly was meant to cover those who had been executed by some other method and were hung up to increase their disgrace. We must remember that execution in those times was a public spectacle. In those instances where it did happen, the victim of hanging was considered to be cursed by God. Somehow, this meant that you had to bury this person on the same day on which he was killed.

The penalty for breaking this commandment is that the land would be defiled. Looking back, the aging Jew would have seen this as an echo of the curse on the ground because of Adam's sin. The victim of the death penalty is cursed; you bury him the same day to avoid defiling the land. To the ancient Jew this would mean that the land would lose its agricultural productivity. This seems a little strange to modern ears. Some of the newer translations replace the word "defile" with the word "pollute." It is a form of pollution. You are placing into the ground something which should not be there. If someone buries toxic chemicals in the ground we consider that pollution; this is the spiritual equivalent.

Execution by crucifixion was intended to carry with it a great deal of public disgrace. But the Pharisees knew this commandment; their legalistic minds would tolerate nothing less than his being buried on the same day. Thus it was that, as Paul tells us:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"--

(Galatians 3:13 NASB)

It is clear that Christ bore our sins to the Cross. May I submit, however, that he also bore to the cross our disgrace. His was not a clean, tidy execution but one intended to humiliate the victim as well as kill him. That was part of the price our Lord paid for our salvation. He asks you to

remember his sacrifice in communion. In so doing, remember that he bore your disgrace as well as your sins. He became one who was cursed by God so that you might escape the curse of Adam. Therefore, remember his sacrifice in the cup and the bread before you.

# Sensible People

*Originally scheduled for October 5*

I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

(1 Corinthians 10:15-17 NIV)

One of the more irritating phrases commonly found in science textbooks is this: “it is intuitively obvious to the casual observer...” Many a student is found what is intuitively obvious to the writer of the textbook to be not at all obvious to the student.

But what does it mean to be “intuitively obvious?” Paul deals with this question here, indirectly. He makes his appeal to the Corinthians on the basis that they are “sensible people.” They should be easily able to figure out what he is saying. May I submit that there are two kinds of things which are intuitively obvious:

- One would be something that you already know. It could be something that appeals to your common knowledge as a resident of the planet.
- The other meaning could be that it is something you can easily reason out. It is this sense that Paul is appealing to.

This is perhaps not so obvious to us today, but Paul’s readers would be completely familiar with the worship of idols. It didn’t matter which god you are worshiping, there were certain ceremonial rules and principles which were the same in all of these temples. They understood what ritual worship was like. It is a form of acted out symbolism. We still see this today in many of the arts. I am told that ballet can be interpreted symbolically by those who understand what the symbolism means. A similar type of interpretation can be applied to plays, as those who have ever studied Shakespeare are quite well aware.

One thing is true across all of these forms of symbolism: the simpler the symbolism, the more easily understood it becomes. Paul applies this principle to communion. In so doing he produces two facts which are logical results of the symbolism Christ used in implementing communion.

- He begins with what he calls the “cup of thanksgiving.” The phrase only occurs in his letter to the Corinthians, but it is an obvious point: whatever else it means, we are thankful for the sacrifice of Christ’s blood on the cross. He calls it a “participation” (other translations use the word “sharing”) in the blood of Christ. This emphasizes the unity of the church, for all of us together in the church are those who are forgiven through the blood of Christ.
- He continues on this theme by pointing out the use of “one loaf.” Unlike churches in America today, the church of that time would take communion from the bread of a single loaf.

They would clearly see this as a sign of unity. Paul expresses this by saying that we are one body. He uses this metaphor on other occasions to describe the church as a whole.

The way in which communion is served in the modern church sometimes lends itself to the individual feeling very much alone with God. The early church would've seen it somewhat differently — they would've seen the unity of the church, being the body of Christ. Remember this today as you partake. You are one body with the believers around you because of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

# On Trial

*Originally scheduled for October 12*

In Acts chapter 26 we read of Paul's trial before the Roman ruler and a Jewish ruler named Agrippa. Technically speaking, the charges had to do with riot and insurrection. But this is a political trial, and Paul knows it — so he goes immediately to the main issue. That issue is none other than the resurrection of the dead. It is a very sensitive issue, because it involves the fact that the religious leaders of Jerusalem were the driving force behind the crucifixion of an innocent man. Paul of course has the disadvantage that these rulers will probably not believe the resurrection at first hearing. His problem is much like the fellow trying to prove that he was Santa Claus: if you are really Santa Claus, you're sane. If not, you're a nutcase.

Note please that Paul is trying here to prove not only the resurrection of Christ but also the general resurrection of the dead. He brings three very strong arguments to bear:

- First, in a general way he cites the writings of the prophets. This is going to do much for the Roman ruler, but King Agrippa is quite familiar with them. Whether or not he believes in the resurrection, those writings make it clear that a devout Jew of the time would be expected to believe in the resurrection.
- To this he adds his own experience on the Damascus Road. He is an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and so testifies.
- He closes his argument with a reference to the power of Almighty God. It is not man who is raising man from the dead, it is God. If you want to know if that's reasonable then you must inquire into the power and will of Almighty God.

It is interesting that we are told to celebrate communion “until He comes.” That implies two things. First, that he is returning. Second, since he in effect “called the shot,” along with him will come the resurrection of the dead. Communion, therefore, is a sign of this promise. When you take communion you are proclaiming the resurrection of the dead to come as well as the resurrection of Christ. His resurrection is the proof that it can happen; his word is the proof that it will.

So when you take communion today you must look back — look back to the crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. You must also look forward — look forward to his return again and the general resurrection of the dead. For those who love him and follow his word it will be the greatest of all days. Think on these things; they are your heritage.

# The Nature of God

*Originally scheduled for October 19*

Suppose, for a moment, that you were asked to provide evidence for the nature of God as he has been revealed to you. You would quickly find that the evidence breaks down into two types:

- There is a general revelation composed of those things you can see in detail in the universe at large. A walk in the desert on a cold and starry night is quite sufficient to convince you of his great power, for he created these things. It would take a little more difficulty to establish this, but the universe can also be seen as a moral place. As we say, “what goes around, comes around.” From that you might conclude that God is indeed righteous and in favor of justice.
- There is also special revelation. These are the things that God has to reveal to you in some form of direct revelation. You may know that God is righteous by observing his universe, but unless he reveals it to you it is impossible to know that he loves you. The quality of his mercy would be unproven.

We discover these things in the Scriptures. Sometimes these things are written out explicitly for us; sometimes we have to figure them out from the actions that God takes. For the most important of these, the love and mercy of God, we have both written and action revelation.

The supreme example of God’s mercy towards us is found at the Cross. We may take this in three steps:

- The first of these is the establishment of the Mosaic law. In this revelation from Moses and the Israelites we find the concept of atonement. This is most prominently displayed in Passover, which is the forerunner of the Lord’s Supper. It is by this revelation that we know that atonement must be made by the shedding of blood.
- The second of these is the Incarnation. If there is to be a sacrifice which is truly effective in purging the sins of mankind, it must be a sacrifice that is acceptable to God once and for all. As the law teaches us this sacrifice must be perfect and unblemished. Only the incarnate God himself could provide such a sacrifice.
- The third of these is, of course, the Cross. As it is often quoted, greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends. It is in the sacrifice of Christ himself, his death on the Cross, that we see the greatness of God’s love and mercy.

We are told that men need not so much to be instructed as reminded. In the general revelation of God, the reminders are built-in — they are everywhere around us. In the special revelation of God, the reminders must be constructed so that we will remember what we should. For this reason we have Bible study, prayer and meditation as well as worship and praise. But it is in the simple symbolism of Communion that we have the clearest reminders. The cup represents his blood; the bread, his body. When you partake, He is reminding you of the love God the Father

has for us. As you take this cup and the bread be reminded that God loves you — even to the point of the Cross.

# The Statement

*Originally scheduled for October 26*

With an impressive regularity the Postal Service delivers to me a series of documents known as financial statements. We all get them: and we pay at least some slight attention to the lists of cash, stocks and bonds (and whatever else) that are listed therein. There are two things that you are supposed to pay some attention to:

- The first is the difference between this month's statement and last month's statement. You have either gone up or gone down in wealth and it is wise to know which it is and how big the differences.
- The second is the list of detailed transactions that tell you how you got from last month to this month. Each of those transactions is a decision on your part which has been made. It's a time to look at the wisdom of each of those decisions.

It is interesting that communion starts with a period of self-examination. This is not an accident; communion is a time for taking a measure of oneself. We may do this using the same method used for the financial statement:

- It is important to look at every aspect of our life — the good, the bad and the ugly. If your self-examination consists only of applauding your improvement in things good you can be sure that the bad and the ugly are increasing.
- Identify the specific changes in your life. You're going to need a list of them to work on.
- Ask yourself what caused the change. Have you been letting your habits take more and more charge of your life? Is it the tongue that causes you so much trouble?

After you leave communion you cannot leave this comparison behind you. You must take action on what you have found. In particular, begin by repenting of those things you identified as an increasing evil in your life. Ask forgiveness of God, who grants it freely. If it is possible, ask forgiveness of those you may have offended. While doing this, do not forget that you are obligated to forgive so that you might be forgiven.

Communion may be seen as a ceremony which seals your commitment the Christian life of repentance and forgiveness.

- In the cup we see his sacrifice as being sufficient for our atonement. Acknowledge that his sacrifice is the basis of your forgiveness.
- The bread reminds you of your reconciliation with God. When you break bread together with someone you are stating that they are your friend.

- As there is one body and one blood, there is one church. Remember that you are united with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Seek also to put their benefit in your plans.

# Cup of Fate

*Originally scheduled for November 2*

It is a curious fact that the writers of the New Testament, in describing communion, always use the Greek word for “cup” rather than the Greek word for “wine.” The assumption that wine was in the cup comes from the fact that it was instituted in a celebration of the Jewish holiday of Passover, which does indeed use wine. The reason for this is that the Greek word in question has two meanings: one of them is the ordinary meaning of the word “cup” — that is to say, something to drink out of. The other meaning might be expressed as the fate to which a particular person is destined; that which they will experience. Jesus uses it in that form himself:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

(Matthew 26:39 NIV)

This emphasis on the cup instead of its contents might explain the medieval fascination with the physical cup itself, the Holy Grail. Much legend, many books and an occasional movie have celebrated the physical cup itself.

It is the second sense — the metaphor for fate — that we may look at here. The cup, in a very real sense, represents Christ’s fate: to die on the cross for us. We commonly take the wine inside to be symbolic of his blood. But by taking the same cup that Christ did, in the metaphoric sense, we recognize that the cup represents our faith as well. We are going to die, each and every one of us, unless our Lord returns before hand. But like our Lord, we are fated to be raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit at our Lord’s return. Thus it is that the cup unites us with Christ as those who share his fate of death and resurrection. It also unites us with all who call upon Christ, the church.

It is best to face facts and look fate in the face. We are all going to die, unless he returns before then. But in taking this cup, we also proclaimed that we expect the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. Indeed, we proclaim his death on the cross “until he comes.” It is therefore given to us to examine ourselves before taking communion. Look inside and see: is there something in there that is displeasing to your Lord? He calls upon you to repent and seek his forgiveness. You call him Lord; you share his fate, his cup. Therefore you are his, both now and forever. Let us take communion then in a manner worthy of those who have been called by God to be his children.

# Two Paths

*Originally scheduled for November 9*

(Read Luke 18:9-14.) In communion there is a sense that the Christian is presenting himself before God. This is not a familiar phenomenon in the secular world. But in the days when people had much more formality it was considered essential that you be presented to those in authority so that you might petition them as one who had been vouched for. The Bible preserves this sense both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

- In the Old Testament the people were required to come before God at a specific place (often the Temple) and present sacrifices. There were rules and regulations for the sacrifices which required them to be perfectly suited for the type of offering they were to be. A perfect and clean sacrifice was required.
- In the New Testament we have the sense that you are presenting your entire self before God, seeking his approval as being pure and clean. An example of this may be found in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2:15. Timothy was to present himself before God as “a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. “

As the passageway for it today points out there are two methods of doing this. Despite the warning of Christ we still see both of them today.

- There is the method of pride. We don't usually label it as such but you can see its characteristics. There is a condescending attitude towards those who are not so fortunate in the matter of righteousness. This is usually accompanied by a complete confidence in one's own good works — sometimes the point of being proud of your humility.
- There is the method of mercy. You notice that the tax collector stood at a distance; he made no pretense of being worthy enough to go up to the Temple. He had examine himself and found himself wanting. Therefore he did not proclaim himself virtuous before God, nor did he attempt to make a bargain with God about how we might improve. He made no claim to righteousness at all. Instead he asked mercy of the merciful God. In so doing he demonstrated a greater comprehension of who God is.

When we present ourselves to God at communion we are taught to examine ourselves. The proud man sees no need; after all, he thinks he is righteous and that God would agree with that. Indeed, he may be righteous by the world standards — but the standards of God are the ones that really count.

The man asking mercy sees no righteousness in himself — and sees no choice but to beg mercy from his God. It is best to be a righteous man who is humble. If you can't do that, at least make an honest evaluation of yourself. If you deceive yourself, how will you ever get right with God?

So then, examine yourself today. Seek God's mercy as you may require it; pray for his wisdom and how to handle the complications of your own sins. Then, after you have taken communion

and are walking out, show your repentance by the change in your ways and the fact that you ask forgiveness of those whom you may have offended.

# Travels

*Originally scheduled for November 16*

In 1932 the National Geographic Society produced a map of the travels of George Washington, in honor of his 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. Upon examination, it appears that George was as far north as Maine and as far south as Georgia. His travels were, of course, confined mostly to the eastern seaboard but he didn't get as far west as Pittsburgh, which was then known as Fort Duquesne. The map is visually quite interesting; and it reflects interest in George Washington which has not survived to our time. For example, in 1958 Douglas Southall Freeman was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his seven volume biography of George Washington.

Interestingly enough, you can purchase this map on the Internet today. You might think it unusual that the National Geographic Society could even offer such a map for sale today. But I submit that there are several reasons why this map sells:

- There is, of course, some interest in the main subject of the map: George Washington.
- It's also interesting to see how maps looked in those days. The map itself is artistically quite interesting, something that is missing from the typical Google map of today. This is a work of art as well as a work of geography.
- Finally, it shows us what was of interest to the people in the 1930s; it tells us what was important to them. We recently completed an election; I never heard Washington's name mentioned, whereas he would've been quoted in those days quite frequently.

There are some parallels here to communion, which serves somewhat as a map to Christianity in a very simple sense.

- The center point of communion is Jesus Christ, just as the center point of the map is not a location but George Washington. It turns our attention to the most important person in history.
- Like the map it's not an outline but more of a living artwork. It is a portrait of his death, and artistic work — not a laundry list.
- It includes what is significant and excludes what is not: it speaks to the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a marvelous work of simplicity.

As such, let it stir your heart and provoke you to repentance before your Lord. Let it provoke you also to reconciliation with all in your reach. Let it be your guide to bring you back to full fellowship with your Lord Jesus Christ and your fellow Christians. Examine yourself, then partake.

# Thanksgiving

*Originally scheduled for November 23*

We begin by examining the word “Thanksgiving” itself. It is composed of two ordinary words, “thanks” and “giving.”

- We give thanks, in general, to those who have delivered to us a blessing. Some act of grace, some gift or charity, these are the things that sparked the word “Thanksgiving.”
- This is particularly so because of the second half of the word, “giving.” Whatever it is that we received it was not something we exchange value to get.
- Of course, in America the word also connotes a particular holiday in which we give thanks and share the bounty of the land (and football.)

Thanksgiving is also the proper response of the human being to a gift from God. In that context I would like you to examine your prayer life today. Most people in prayer forget to give thanks; they rush right on into their list of petitions. Giving thanks has been reduced to a formality. So often it’s one sentence, followed by a very long list of things you would like to have fixed, or healed, or something just a little better off than it is. If this is your prayer habit consider how little you would be inclined to answer such a petition. This may cause your prayers to be neglected.

But as he has given us the Lord’s prayer to guide us and how we should pray he has guided us to his castle of the gifts hearing communion. It takes very little time for you to examine yourself in communion one the benefits of that as you begin to realize the blessings that God has given you. Indeed, it is a good thing to do this because you will see the grandeur of his creation; you’ll see the blessings of his love.

Most of all you will discover the blessings given to you for his sacrifice. You should indeed be thankful that you have both body and soul so that you can do this. But first and foremost consider his sacrifice on the cross. His body bled and died for their and for that you should have some feeling of Thanksgiving.

So take care this morning to remind yourself of what the Christian should be doing during communion. It is not a time to fold a tight crease in the program, but rather to contemplate a great extent of his gift and his mercy. We are all but sinners saved by grace it is fitting that every week we should acknowledge that fact. Confess those sins; repent of those sins and then join in identifying yourself with the body and blood of Christ, through his communion.

# Praise the Lord - Psalm 113

*Originally scheduled for November 30*

It is not generally well-known, but we know exactly which hands Christ would have sung (or chanted) at his last Passover during which he established the Lord's Supper. That first saw me with used is Psalm 113. It may be broken down conveniently into three sections.

In the first section the servants of God are directed to praise him.

- They are summoned to his praise, acknowledging that they are the servants of God.
- There to praise him throughout all time, now and forevermore.
- They are to praise him throughout all creation, "from the place where the sun rises to the place where it sets."

In the second section, they are specifically directed to praise him for his character.

- He is exalted far above all nations.
- He is unique; there is no one else like.
- Yet, he stoops to look down towards his servants.

In the third section, he is to be praised for his habits concerning the treatment of the poor.

- He raises the poor from the dust — remember King David ?
- When they are raised, he seats them with princes.
- But his most tender touch of all is to give to a woman who cannot have children the ability to bear many of them.

As we approach the time in which one ought to contemplate one's soul, remember the command that God has laid upon his people that he should be praised. You should praise him for who he is, his eternal character. Then praise him for how he treats the common man — even to the point of the cross.

# To The Pure

*Originally scheduled for December 7*

To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.

(Titus 1:15 NASB)

Paul's message to Titus in this little passage contains a very important point. Most Christians see communion as a very high part of the worship service. But there are always a few who say, "it's just a ritual." Mr. Webster defines ritual as "a formal act of religion." If we are to understand ritual, we must understand formality. This is becoming exceedingly difficult in most evangelical churches because we have adopted the stance that everything in our church is casual, and therefore laid back and "cool."

Those of us of sufficient antiquity can remember a time when we went to church wearing our (literally) "Sunday best." If you are born just after World War II, you probably grew up going to church wearing a white shirt and a tie of some sort. Most parents were willing to compromise with a clip-on tie. We might well ask why they did this.

- If you asked them directly, they would probably reply was something like, "to show respect to God." There was the vague feeling that dressing in your best was a good way to show honor to God.
- It also had the advantage of showing other people how important that ritual was to us. If you wore a coat and tie to church, it signified that this was an important occasion.

Those who were among the pure at heart would have understood these reasons, agreed with them and have trusted this agreement to mean that everybody else thought so too. To the impure heart, however, this would seem to be nothing but hypocrisy. After all, they didn't mean when they put on a tie on for church; so why would they think that you meant it?

There is in all of this a test for us. If you look upon communion as a boring ritual, that may say something for the people who organize communion. But it says a lot more about you. Communion is, at root, a simple ritual and one which is perfectly clear in its symbolism. If you see yourself in communion as being surrounded by hypocrites who don't really mean it when they take this ceremonial meal, perhaps the problem is not with them but with you.

To the pure, all things are pure — and that includes communion. The pure in heart see communion as the body and blood of Christ, taken in remembrance of him until the day arrives when he returns. So,

which of these two is your reaction? Is it holy, sacred and solemn? Or is it just something we have to get through to get on with the sermon? The answer says very little about communion, but a lot about you.

# Emperor Norton the First

*Originally scheduled for December 14*

On September 17, 1859 various newspapers in the city of San Francisco received the announcement that, by popular demand, one Joshua Norton was proclaiming himself to be Emperor Norton the First, Dictator of North America. Many of the newspapers reprinted the letter in the form of a formal announcement. Norton was indeed a lunatic quite out of touch with reality. Perhaps it was that which explains his appeal to the city of San Francisco.

San Francisco took him to heart, and humored him on all occasions. Restaurants wanted to be known as an establishment where the Emperor frequently dined; theaters always reserved a box for the Emperor on opening night. On one occasion a policeman, who evidently had a defective sense of humor, arrested Norton to commit him to an insane asylum. The city was outraged; editorials proclaiming themselves scandalized by such conduct appeared in all the papers. The incident was ended when the chief of police released Emperor Norton and issued a formal apology to him. In response, Emperor Norton magnanimously pardoned the policeman who had arrested him. The chief of police then ordered all members of the police force to salute the Emperor whenever they encountered him.

A harmless lunatic, he amused the people of San Francisco. It goes without saying that they never took him seriously as an Emperor; they participated in this harmless fraud because it amused them. He had no right to expect any more than that; after all, what had he ever done for them( besides amuse them)? Since he had done nothing for them, they quite rightly felt that they need do nothing for him. Humor is not a great source of authority.

So why did they go along with the gag? It was a harmless amusement, and — note this — Norton never asked them to change. There was no sense of commitment or authority about Emperor Norton the First. If the authority ruling over you has never done anything for you, it's difficult for you to do anything for them.

By contrast, Christ does indeed ask for change — indeed, a total and complete change in your life. He asks you to change, and then he changes you. It is simply an echo of his statement, “all authority has been given to me...”. It is logical therefore to ask, “what that Christ ever do for me?” If he demands something of me, he must've done something for me. And he did; he did it at the Cross. He atoned for your sins by his death on the Cross.

So what does he ask of you in return, here at communion?

- He asks you to contemplate your life, your sins.
- He asks you to repent of those sins.

- He asks you to partake in memory of the sacrifice he made for you.

Then he asks you to change — first to change yourself, then to change the world.

# Jealousy

*Originally scheduled for December 21*

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?

(1 Corinthians 10:21-22 NASB)

One of the most neglected concepts in the modern church is that of holiness. The central idea of holiness is that of separation, something set apart. Holiness, therefore, has two aspects.

- Holiness first means that you are separated from the world. There are things you do not do, places you do not go because they tend to pull you away. Note, please, that the list of places and things is different for each Christian.
- Holiness also means that you are separated towards God. As you give up the things of this world, you replace them with the things of God. Indeed, as holiness grows, it is not so much recognized by what you don't do but what you do for God.

Note that neither of these is driven by the idea, "what will so-and-so think?" Holiness is not concerned with public opinion.

We take this concept in response to Paul's question here about the Lord being provoked to jealousy. Jealousy is usually taken as an evil thing; but there are certain instances in which it is perfectly normal and righteous. God's love for us is a jealous love; just as my love for my wife is a jealous love. We hear from the modern world that if I really love my wife I would let her have sex with anyone she chose. Both of us would reply quite simply that we have chosen each other, exclusively. In fact, I'm rather particular about the point (and she is too). If you want to know why, consider this: the jealousy of lovers for each other produces faithfulness in marriage. People are sometimes surprised at how long the two of us have been married; they take it as normal that marriages will break apart. It's rather a self-fulfilling prophecy; if you don't think your marriage is going to last, it probably won't.

But Christ's marriage to the church is designed to be eternal. Therefore God is a jealous God, watching over his bride to bring her in to complete and holy faithfulness.

There is a dull temptation to treat communion as routine. Especially if it is given every week, it sometimes seems to descend to being a rather boring ritual. But remember — the Lord is a jealous God, watching over his bride. If he is not pleased with you in this, remember that he is much stronger than we are. Therefore, examine your self before you partake of communion today. If the dullness of

repetitiveness has said in, ask him to spark the Holy Spirit in your life. Self-examination leads to repentance; repentance leads to forgiveness — the very grace of God.

# Common Things

*Originally scheduled for December 28*

A point of dispute between various denominations concerns the number of rites that are officially proclaimed by the church. This may not seem much of a problem to you but consider this: is a marriage performed in the church something official, endorsed by the church? Or is it just simply that it's convenient to get married in a church (preferably, your own). A similar discussion could be held concerning the conduct of a funeral. But there are two rites which are pretty much universally acknowledged across all denominations of Christendom. One of these is baptism; the other is communion. Churches vary in how they conduct a baptism; similarly, many vary in how they conduct communion. Some think these differences are very important. Some think they are merely historical tradition.

These two particular ceremonies have some purposes in common.

- One purpose is that they unite us. We all take the same communion, just as we have all been baptized in the same way. This is important, Christ commanded us that we should be one as he and the Father are one.
- Another such purpose is to mark those who are in the church and those who are not. This applies across various denominations.
- Finally, another such purpose is to make us recall, from memory, the experience that we have. We stir our memories in order that we may strengthen our faith. Sometimes it's good to go to a wedding ceremony so that you might be reminded, much more than taught.

We see these purposes in the taking of communion. We share a common cup; we share a common bread. This unites us, for in truth we know that it's hard to be mad at someone and throw them out while you're sharing dinner with them. It also serves the purpose of marking those who are believers. It is common in preparation for communion to warn those who are not Christians that they should not partake of this meal. The distinction between those who believe in those don't is here made very sharp.

Perhaps most important of all communion stirs our memories. The symbolism is quite clear: the cup is his blood, the bread his body. So it is that we are reminded that Christ died on a cross. Instead, he was buried in a tomb — and rose again on the third day. It is the most extraordinary event in human history. It turned the world upside down. And even at 2000 years of time we celebrate this. We need to be reminded much more than we need to be instructed. This is our reminder of how great a salvation has been given to us through the Cross.