

January 4

Gift

The Christmas season is just behind us. Permit me to pose to you a hypothetical question which may give us some insight on gifts, giving and motivation.

Let us suppose that you have been trading gifts with a relative for many years. This year, however, you did not receive a gift from her. It's most likely that you're not really concerned about the value of the gift but rather the motive for its absence. There are certain possibilities.

- It might be just a simple shipping error. This could mean that three blocks away from you there is a 93-year-old lady whose last name is similar to yours who is wondering why anyone would ship her a trampoline.
- It's also possible that someone did open the present at your house, thinking it was addressed to them. This is usually found out when your son says to you, "this looks like a shirt dad would wear."
- The one most feared is that you now have an angry relative somewhere in the country, who is just waiting for you to call and ask what happened so that she can chew you out. Some variant of Murphy's Law says that you will have absolutely no idea what she's talking about.

Christ has the opposite problem. He has given you a great gift, the gift of salvation. He knows you have it but he still has motive to ask you to do something about it.

- First, he wants you to remember his sacrifice that bought your salvation. This, of course, is what communion is for.
- He wants you to remember who gave it to you. The giver is Christ, not the church. The church is the delivery mechanism, but Jesus is the giver.
- He wants you to use this gift. This is a gift which changes your life. It frees you from the guilt of sin; it tells you that ultimately you will live and reign with him. These things, and many others, are meant to change the way you live.

Communion, in a sense, is the gift card that goes with his sacrifice. How does he want you to use his gift?

- First, remember that you are not entitled to this — it is a gift.
- Next remember that he paid for this gift with his body and his blood. This is not a ceremonial trifle, but the heart of the Gospel.
- Therefore, he asks you to examine your self at communion so that you may repent of whatever sins you have. He wants not just verbal repentance, but he wants repentance to show in your life. Repent is an action verb.

Therefore, do not take communion lightly but rather remember what it cost and what you should do with it.

January 11

Seek the Lord

"Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David. "Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, A leader and commander for the peoples. "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you." Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.

(Isaiah 55:3-9 NASB)

There is a common misapprehension about Christianity, namely that those who would become Christians was somehow or other "clean up their act" before becoming a Christian. It carries over to the question as well; often enough, we assume we are not righteous enough to be effective in our prayers or in our work. This passage is an interesting counter to that thought.

First, God puts out his track record in dealing with the repentant sinner. He cites as his example his treatment of King David. Now, other than adultery, abuse of power and murder David would've looked just about like one of us. He points out that he forgave; that his mercies are "faithful." Not only is faithful in granting mercy, but he restores David to a position where he is a witness to others. Isaiah the prophet gives us the secret of being treated this way: seek the Lord while he may be found. This implies that he is available; it also implies there is a time when it is too late to do this.

So then, how does one seek the Lord? Well, first things first: seek him immediately. Don't wait until you become more righteous; do it now. There are two primary fields of human endeavor that God focuses on:

- He tells the wicked to forsake what they are doing. In short stop doing what is wrong.
- The unrighteous man is commanded to forsake his *thinking*. Just because your sins are hidden in your brain doesn't make them any less sinful.

One of the reasons we think this so incredible, so hard to get, is that we put God in the same position we are. With what we would do in his place — and the answer is, "not much." But God is compassionate. This seems strange — and the answer is, it is strange. At least it's strange to us; his ways are much higher than ours. It is perfectly normal that you do not understand why God forgive; it's just required that you understand that he will.

The ultimate proof of his compassion is found at the Cross. In communion, we remember that sacrifice. The bread represents his body; the cup represents his blood. It is his way of proving that he means it —

he is compassionate. Therefore, as you partake remember that you are commanded to examine your self. If that examination produces repentance, do not put off. Seek him while he may be found.

January 18

Sounds

In the January 2015 edition of *Physics Today* there was a short article which presented some research results on a problem which will undoubtedly grow in importance. Researchers in South Korea have discovered that the eerie silence of an electric car can be replaced with sounds which can make the vehicle sound like a luxury car (or a cheap one); a sports car (or a very economical one) and so on. The key to the discovery was that sounds that influence our thinking of about what kind of car this come in pairs. So, if you want to portray your car as a luxury car you would take the sound pair and emphasize the luxury end of the spectrum. None of these things actually make a car more luxurious or more sporty; but it does make the car *sound* more like it.

Of course, we already have this sound distinction in the cars that are running around the roadways today. Even blindfold, you could tell the difference between the Ford pickup and a Mercedes sedan. We are conditioned in this way by our experience. The researchers in South Korea did not invent the sound pairs; rather, they discovered them. These things are fairly consistent throughout the automobile industry. All we are doing here is providing something which meets your expectations. Your expectations typically come from three things:

- Price. You expect them expensive sedan is going to sound quite different from a cheap little economy car.
- Performance. You expect the sports car is going to sound rather different from an underpowered economy car.
- Public relations. The automobile industry has done quite a bit of work in its advertising to set your expectations — and not just for sounds, but also for the feel of the leather and the frost of the air conditioner

in some ways, these three methods of setting your expectations are also used to form your impressions of communion.

- Price. There would be no communion without the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the Cross. Communion is fittingly solemn, because it commemorates the price he paid for our salvation.
- Performance. I hope that you have experienced this; if not, you really need to give this a try. When you confess your sins and repent of them He is faithful and just to forgive your sins. No one else can perform such a thing; communion is the opportunity for it. “Let a man examine himself...”
- Public relations. If you have experienced the salvation and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, you cannot bury it under a bushel. You should be willing to share it with one and all. The church is use this method for its public relations for 2000 years; it still works — if you will.

Take the time here at communion to examine yourself, confess and repent and receive forgiveness of your Lord.

January 25

The Whisper, Part One

I recently had the privilege of attending a concert by the [Gary Bonner Singers](#) during which they performed the song about communion which I had never heard before. It is called *The Whisper*.

In the desert, in the wilderness of life,
I am searching for the One Who searches me.

As I wander, hungry, thirsty, lost, alone,
I hear the whisper of my name.

"Come to the table. Your name is written on My hand.
Come to the table. Your name is hidden in My heart.
Come to the table and live."

At the table, He prepares for me a place.
He redeems me, I am pardoned by His grace.

He restores me with His rich and lavish love.
In His call, I hear the whisper of my name.

"Come to the table. Your name is written on My hand.
Come to the table. Your name is hidden in My heart.
Come to the table and live."

Composer/Arranger: Craig Courtney
Lyrics: Susan Bentall Boersma

For the next few weeks I will be using this song as the basis for a series of communion meditations. If you'd like to hear the song as sung, there is an excellent rendition [here](#).

For those of you who have never spent any significant amount of time in the desert, it may seem unreasonable to use the desert as a metaphor for the spiritual wilderness of life. After all, if you're in the desert everything appears to be quite clear. There is no mass of trees between you and your destination; all you have to do is look around. But those of us who have lived in the desert know that it is a subtle place, and its disguises are subtle too. The colors seem in pale shades with very fine differences in tone. When night comes, it is dark. I don't mean the dark with a shopping center glow on the horizon; I mean dark — like sailors know when they are far from land. It is our spiritual wilderness; subtle changes in color, disguises everywhere and darkness coming frequently.

The wilderness of life is like that. Things seem obvious to us. As one wit put it, “to every problem there is a solution – neat, plausible and wrong.” Many of us are gifted at finding that exact solution. How do we distinguish the right answer from the answer which looks almost right? Especially if we don’t have the experience of having been here, it’s difficult. This is why you’re obviously bright ideas often have a subtle flaw that appears gradually. If you want to turn around and go back the way you came, you find that it’s no more clear than the way you got here. If you’re like me, you need a Guide.

But how do I determine who is the right Guide? Just because I’m actively seeking him, doesn’t mean that I really know which guide I should be following. Many of us focus on the guide that we make, or the guy that we imagine, or the guide that is cheap and easy. The real test is not that you or I made, imagines or found the guide. We tell the right guide by what he can do — and in the spiritual wilderness that means that he must be able to demonstrate that he has searched me. In the spiritual wilderness the guide had better know my inmost being and my every fault. The spiritual Guide knows every detail of the spiritual wilderness.

Christians meet this guide at the communion table. At communion, you reveal to him your inmost being so that he might search it and know it. If you do this, he will first show you your fault and error. You, of course, must be listening if this is to be of any good effect. But there is more to it than this. In communion we see that our Guide has offered himself as the remedy for our sins. It is not that Jesus knows the way in the wilderness — it is that he *is* the way, the truth and the life. Search your heart today, open it up to the only guide who knows where you should be going – and live.

February 1

The Whisper, Part Two

As I wander, hungry, thirsty, lost, alone,
I hear the whisper of my name.

"Come to the table. Your name is written on My hand.
Come to the table. Your name is hidden in My heart.
Come to the table and live."

The word "wander" in the English language has come to have to different emotional meanings to it. One of them is the word we would use to say, "I wandered the shopping mall." There's no sense of loneliness or of being lost; just a sense of no particular purpose. The other meaning is much more clearly threatening. There is a sense of having no real direction, or purpose and what you're doing. In the spiritual sense, it needs to be without guidance. The words hungry and thirsty describe it well, both in the physical sense (I'm lost and where's the McDonald's) and in the spiritual sense. When you have that sense of being lost, spiritually, you will also have the sensation of being hungry and thirsty. Perhaps the most terrifying thing about being lost is that you usually are doing it alone. Worse yet you may have some people following you thinking that you are there only hope. It focuses your mind quite wonderfully when this happens. When it does, listen for the whisper of your name. Christ is the ultimate gentleman. He will not barge into your life with overwhelming promise, supported by a brass band. You will recall Elijah: earthquake, wind and fire were his lost in the desert moments; but God spoke to him in a "still small voice." Listen for it.

The poet tells us that our Lord has your name written on his hand. Have you ever tie the string around your finger to remind you to do something? It's as if our Lord wants to make so sure of finding you and rescuing you that he writes your name on his hand so that he will be ever mindful to look for the one he loves. Unlike the string, this is written. That means that it is a permanent record. Christ will never stop searching for you.

Of course, just because someone is looking for you doesn't mean they're searching for you — they could be hunting you. The poet assures us that he has hidden your name in his heart. This tells us that he loves you, and it makes it doubly certain that he knows you by name. You're not just a number on the roster; you are a child of God.

What does he ask of you? The poet tells us that he wants you to come to the table. He wants to share his holy meal with you. He wants you to be one who can partake of the body and blood of Christ in good conscience, in fellowship with the church. As you partake today, remember that he came to seek and save the lost — and that includes you.

February 8

The Whisper, Part Three

At the table, He prepares for me a place.
He redeems me, I am pardoned by His grace.

He restores me with His rich and lavish love.
In His call, I hear the whisper of my name.

There is one thing I would call to your attention first. It is a simple stated fact, both in this song and in the Scripture, that you do not prepare your own meal at the table of the Lord. It is not a “do-it-yourself” project. Unless the Lord himself prepares the table, it will do you no good. You are the invited guest, not the caterer. For most Christians, however, the idea of preparing the table brings back the echoes of the 23rd Psalm. You will recall, however, that that Psalm deals with pasturing sheep. Sheep must be led. And it is a fact of life that if you are leading, then those whom you are leading are in your care; you must take provide for them. That’s just how Christ does it for us; indeed, the verb is “prepare.” Is there not in this a slight hint of the return of Christ? Is there a reason we take communion “until he comes?”

The table of the Lord is the place of redemption and part. In the ancient world, redemption would be understood someone along the terms of paying a ransom for an individual. Piracy was common in those days, and one of the main sources of income for the pirates was the ransom they would get for various individual citizens who were being detained. The person who paid that ransom was said to have redeemed you. In our time, a somewhat similar example might be taken from the common pawn shop. In your financial distress, you go down in hock Aunt Myrtle’s precious vase, hoping at a later date to come back with enough money to get it out of the pawn shop — and to do so early enough that it is still there. That’s what it’s like to be redeemed: our Lord got to the pawn shop in time with enough money. Or, to be more accurate, he came at just the right time to offer his blood and body for our redemption.

Pardon, on the other hand, is an act of sovereignty. You will notice that the president may pardon; the governor may pardon — but not the Congress or the legislature. It is by definition an act performed by the reigning head of the government. In the times of the apostles, this would be (for example) a Caesar. You could not earn it; nor did the governor have to cite any reason whatsoever for giving you a pardon. You and I have been pardoned by the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. His love motivated him to do this; he does it by the authority inherent in being the creator.

This restoration is done indeed by his rich and lavish love. Have you ever notice the things that are done out of love are not parsimonious? And not just barely enough? They have that lavish air to them a one who wishes to make absolutely certain that you understand that you are loved. This, indeed, is to be imitated. How often? “Seven × seventy” as Christ told Peter. Indeed, the way that we love one another is the true mark of the disciples of Christ. This is the result of the Lord.

Christ calls you softly and tenderly, with the still, small voice. It is not an impersonal call; he knows your name. So come to his table with a repentant heart seeking to imitate the love of your Lord.

"Come to the table. Your name is written on My hand.

Come to the table. Your name is hidden in My heart.

Come to the table and live."

February 15

De Profundis

Psalm 130

In Psalm 130, which many scholars think was written during the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, we see the way in which the believer returns to God. Thus, it is a fitting picture of communion.

I call to you

There is a sweet and simple appeal in this Psalm. In the first two verses, the psalmist acknowledges the depths to which he has come. He appeals to no one but the Lord himself; the situation is so desperate that there is no one else who could help him. In so doing, the psalmist asks only that God hear — there is no rationalization or claim of being one of the good guys. There is no appeal of merit. Rather, it is the simple and direct plea of a man asking God Almighty for help.

Who could stand

in the third and fourth versus the psalmist shows us why that appealed to God alone is made. He acknowledges that not one of us has any standing before God on our own merit to make such an appeal. Indeed, he acknowledges, if God chooses to keep a record of our sins, not one of us would have any standing before him. But that implies that God has the choice of whether or not to mark our iniquities. It's somewhat like a court case. The authorities must bring charges; the charges must refer to a known section of the law — and therefore they have the option to prosecute or not. God has the same option: when he does not prosecute us we call that forgiveness. The fact that forgiveness exists means there is a way past our iniquities to the help of the Father. But why would God do this? The psalmist tells us here that this is to create and enlarge the fear of the Lord (which is the beginning of wisdom.)

Patience

Curiously, the next two verses talk about patience. You might ask why. The psalmist understands that God isn't going to jump through the hoops set up by man. He will bring forth his redemption in his time and by his way. That, it seems, would eliminate the possibility of hope — after all, if God's going to do what he's going to do and we have no influence, could we have any expectation of blessing? The answer is quite certainly that we can. As the psalmist tells us our hope is in his word. We are trusting the honesty of God; we believe he will do as he has said.

Communion is a ritual portrayal of these things. By partaking of the body and blood of Christ we acknowledge that it is not our merit. It is his table; it is his body; it is his blood. In approaching the communion table we ask forgiveness — and should be willing to grant it to one and all as He does. It is also our acknowledgment that we believe him when he says he will return to judge the living and the dead. And like the psalmist we wait anxiously for that day.

Spread the word

In the last two verses we see three virtues which we are to spread to the world:

- There is God's loving kindness, or mercy.
- There is redemption from sin.
- There is hope in his return.

All three of these are portrayed in communion. In the simplest of rituals is shown God's most profound mercy and hope for us.

February 22

Symbol of Unity

The use of symbols and ritual in Christianity is, on the whole, rather limited. But in those instances where it is provided, the usefulness of symbol and ritual is very great. For example,

- Those who are not particularly learned — indeed, those who are illiterate — can see and understand that which they cannot read.
- Symbol and ritual by their very nature allow each of us to invoke our own personal experiences. We all agree on what a wedding ring means, though each of us brings our own experience of marriage to the understanding.
- Those who disagree on the meaning of a ritual may still insist on unity in the church. If this happens, then the ritual may allow those who are in disagreement to be united in Christ.

We may examine that last point in a bit more detail. It is almost impossible for any large group of Christians, meeting together, to agree on every last little point of doctrine. But at some point the disagreement is of far less value than the unity of the church. Sometimes we need to present the truth in a way that it can be understood differently by different people without sacrificing the innermost meaning. For example,

- There is endless disagreement over who, precisely, is forgiven and by what process. But all of us agree that the root of forgiveness is found in the body and blood of our Savior, sacrificed on the cross.
- Perhaps the most prominent disagreement today concerns the return of Christ. There are three predominant theories, each of which can be broken down into hundreds, even thousands, of different understandings. But we celebrate communion “until He comes.” This, of course, implies that we all believe he will return.
- To become more common disagreement, consider the question of what works of charity the church in a given location should perform. Money, people and other resources are limited; wisdom is required in making the choice. We all agreed that there is no greater love than that which was shown to us at the Cross. It is this love of which we are reminded when we take communion.

On the last night before he was crucified, Christ prayed “that they may be one.” The source of our unity and union is in Christ himself; it is to be shown in the way that we love one another. Why is this union so necessary? We are to proclaim the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord. It’s hard to believe a bunch of people with a story like that who are constantly bickering over trivial matters. By Christ we proclaim union; we claim the power of the cross and we look forward to his return. As you partake remember that he wants us to be one. Take this communion in a worthy manner; if you know your brother has something against you, get it cleared up. One fruit of love is forgiveness; and we are to be known as disciples by our love for one another.

March 1

Publican

Luke 18:10-14

In communion, we have the privilege of approaching the Almighty God. Perhaps you don't think of it that way, but it's very much parallel to the way in which the ancient Jew approached the Temple. As you do this, you acknowledge the sacrifice — the body and blood — that was shed so that you might have grace. By doing this, you are actually asking for justification; that is, you are asking him to declare you "not guilty" of your sins. There seem to be two methods of doing this, as exemplified in the story of the Publican and the Pharisee.

There's little question as to which of the two finds approval in the eyes of Christ. But may I point out that the Pharisee (at least on the surface) had good reason for doing it his way? Notice, first, that he stood close to the Temple — and that is to say, close to God. He then pours forth what seems to us to be a contradiction: how can you thank God for your character and then take credit for your actions? It's a relatively simple thing to see, from the Pharisee's point of view. He is thanking God for *who he was* — in essence, saying that God gets the credit for the Pharisee's circumstances. He is not grateful for God's mercy, but for God's gifts which he translates into his own virtues. Then — giving credit where he thinks it is due — he modestly boasts of his righteousness by works. As if to make the point absolutely clear to the Almighty, he includes a brief comparison between himself and the Publican. God gave me my circumstances; I did the work.

The Publican (the word in the original means a tax collector, not an innkeeper) stands *away* from the Temple, as if he dares not to approach. Isaiah, the man of unclean lips, would've understood this perfectly. Having nothing of which particularly to boast, he comes to the point quite quickly. He is asking for mercy. From which we correctly conclude that he is a sinner; after all, no one but a sinner would need forgiveness. He reminds us that there is only one qualification you must meet before you can become a Christian: you need to be a sinner first. Some of us (blows on fingernails, polishes them on shirt) are exceedingly well qualified.

Communion shows us the sacrifice (and hence the love) that Christ has for us. It offers to us his mercy — and awaits a reaction. Curiously, choosing your reaction is rather more difficult for those who frequently practice righteousness than for those who don't. The Pharisee (at least in his own mind) had a choice. He can either submit his own righteousness or appeal to the mercy of God. The Publican was somewhat more fortunate — he was out of options.

March 8

Shrinking Spell

In 2010 the nation of Haiti suffered a severe earthquake. Like many other countries, Canada sent assistance; in this instance in the form of a military detachment to help keep order and prevent looting. One Canadian soldier had the interesting experience of being called upon to be a part time witch doctor. A woman approached him and, on her knees, begged him to lift a spell which had been placed on her and her family. The spell, it seems, condemned her and her family to steadily shrink in size until they were about 4 inches high. At that time, they would be so small that people would simply step on them without noticing them. So she begged the soldier to please lift the curse.

This is not something they train you for in basic training. But the Canadian corporal rose to the occasion. He took out a package of instant coffee from a pouch in his belt, opened it, and poured half of it onto the ground. He then proceeded to sing the Notre Dame fight song in the manner of a Gregorian chant. At the end of the chant he poured the rest of the coffee onto the ground, stomped on it several times, and pronounced that the curse had been lifted. The woman offered him her profuse thanks — and the corporal had a story to tell his friends for the rest of his life.

Of course, to modern eyes this looks a little silly. But, if you please, let's look at the woman's needs, and how she was to recognize the correct lifting of the spell.

- First, words were not sufficient. She needed something tangible to see; instant coffee is tangible.
- She also needed an air of solemnity. This was serious business for her; no clowning around would convince her that the curse had been lifted.
- Not just anyone could lift the curse — it had to be someone with authority. The soldier's uniform gives every appearance of authority.

This gives us some idea of why communion was designed the way it was. We have something tangible: bread and wine. We need to see something. We also have an air of solemnity about communion. But most of all we have authority behind it. For the Christ who announced that he had all authority in heaven and on earth gave us this ceremony so that we might remember him and know that grace has been brought to us.

There is one more aspect from which we can learn from this woman's behavior. She was truly grateful for what the soldier had done. Let me ask you: do you walk away from Communion with an air of gratitude for the grace your Lord has provided you? Or is it just another chore that has to be done before you can leave the church? If he reminds you of his blood and body, given for the remission of your sins, shouldn't this stir the memory of grace and the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead? As you partake, think on what he has done for you and the gratitude you should have for it.

March 15

Candle

Psalm 112:4

You may never have considered this, but please picture in your mind that you are in a very dark wood. The only thing you can see clearly is a candle at some distance in front of you. The interesting thing about this is that the candle is much easier to see in total darkness than it is in daylight. It's also interesting that the candle attracts those who have nothing to hide in the darkness – but repels those who are in the dark of the night so that no one will notice what they are doing. The candle, you see, has the grand advantage of simplicity. The flame of a candle looks pretty much the same on every candle in the world; you can look in the distance and say, "that's a candle!" It is an interesting thought for churches which do not light candles anymore.

Let's take that comparison a little bit further. In medieval times churches were lit in the night by candle. The candle in the cathedral drew you towards itself. If you were going to see, you had to become a seeker and go to the light. In today's churches the candle is replaced with stage lighting, large overhead projection screens and other audiovisual secrets. The net effect for the visitor is that the lighting says, "take a seat; be entertained." You don't have to seek anything; we have the power of millions of candles to light it up for you and you can see it from anywhere in the house. The medieval church had no choice but to use candles; there seems to be nothing in particular wrong with having a lot of stage lighting in the modern church. But it does change the way in which we interact with the worship service.

Communion, in a sense, maintains the function of the candle. All the rest of worship is modern — it's under the lights and does not depend on time of day. The sound system is designed to make sure everyone can hear what's going on; if there's an error in the sound system, the error is in too much sound rather than not enough. So the church finds itself in need of the latest and greatest audiovisual systems. Communion, however, is an old and simple thing. It has but two elements and everyone in the church has to handle those elements one way or another. So while everything else in the church is bathed in the complex world of audiovisual systems, communion stands out by its simplicity.

May I submit to you that Christ probably intended it that way? He did not want this ritual ceremony to be overwhelmed with massive sound systems, or loud choral singing, or anything else overwhelming. He made it simple and small so that you could not just sit in the pew and watch it go by. He wants you to be a seeker. In fact, he wants you to seek Him. In communion you find his body and blood. Be the seeker; find the Master.

March 22

Trinket

Sit up straight children, and consider today's example: it is an advertisement for a product which is currently available on the Internet. The text of the advertisement is rather brief, and reads thusly.

CROSS. Exorcised salt inside. Certificate of Authenticity papers. Touched to 1st class relic of True Cross. Backed up by perpetual prayers. Exceedingly beautiful designs. Partial indulgence to those who will "kiss, hold, venerate" with faith and unconditional indulgence at moment of death.

Until I read this advertisement, I had no idea that salt could be exorcised. As you no doubt suspected, this is sold by an agency of the Roman Catholic Church. You may be smiling at the example of a religious trinket that is given here, but please do remember that it is not the Roman Catholic Church which distributes these things exclusively. Many charismatic Christians are aware of offers to ship you "Holy Anointing Oil" for a minimum contribution. There is a long tradition of this sort of thing; one of the first radio preachers use to offer his listeners the chance (for a minimum contribution) to obtain a "bright religious green prayer cloth." The idea was that you put this cloth on top of your radio and whatever you put on top of the cloth would somehow be blessed.

Of course, most of us at one time or another have purchased something because it was a Christian thing to do. I suspect that many homes contain calendars which have a verse of the day, for example. These things don't claim to have spiritual value other than to point you to the real thing. May I suggest there are a couple of questions that you want to ask before you purchase such an item?

- Does the trinket claim actual spiritual power, or just a reminder of who really does have that power?
- Who created the first such trinket? Is this something that goes back to the early church, or was it invented recently?
- For what purpose was it created? Is this someone's way of making money?

It is good to note that our Lord himself instituted only two rituals. These two rituals relate to his prime purpose: to seek and save the lost. I have never encountered an instance of anyone charging money for either of these two. The first, of course, is baptism — which in a sense is the start of salvation. Communion is the continuance of salvation. It is of value to us because it reminds us that we are sinners saved by grace. It is his blood and body on the cross that has purchased our salvation. We need to be reminded of that; so our Lord has implemented a simple ritual which will remind us of that. Simplicity carries with it the virtue that it lets us see the real core truth. Behold the man upon the cross; by his wounds we are healed.

March 29

The Lady Will Take It

The story is an old and cherished one within our family. Just after the end of World War II, my father and mother were crossing the southwestern American desert. They stopped at a little restaurant and gift shop in New Mexico. There my father discovered a necklace that he thought my mother would like. He took her over and showed it to her, and she immediately said no. It wasn't that the necklace wasn't in fact lovely, it was that it cost \$25. That was a lot of money in those days. The two of them wandered onto other things, but as soon as my dad could he went back to the counter. He pointed out the necklace to the clerk, and said, "the lady will take it."

There are three things about that necklace that I would bring to your attention.

- First, it was by the standards of the day very costly.
- Second, by the standards of the day, it was just so much decoration. It was probably overpriced.
- Most important of all: it was an act of love.

I bring this to your attention today so that, in a small and humble way, you might see the sacrifice of His only Son in this light. For the Father to sacrifice his only begotten son is an extremely costly thing. That most of us recognize. But do you recognize also that on the night after the crucifixion the world would've had a reaction like, "what a waste!" It would seem to them that the sacrifice produced little of value. It may even be seen this way today. You can look at this and say God has sacrificed his only Son, and for what purpose? He sacrificed one who has deserved all honor and praise for the sake of one who is a sinner. You can see that from the world's point of view it makes no sense. And that is the outstanding proof that this is the supreme example of God's love for us.

Every time my mother wore that necklace, even after my father's death, she was reminded of his great love for her. My wife now has this necklace; more than ever it is a reminder of love.

So it is with us at communion. Every time we partake, we remember. We remember the price that God the Father paid. We remember how useless it seemed before the resurrection. From the other side of the resurrection we see it as the sign of the greatness and depth of the love of God.

How deep the Father's love for us

How vast beyond all measure

That he should give his only son

To make a wretch his treasure.

April 5

Second Passover

In Numbers, chapter 9 we find a most curious incident. Some men have come to Aaron and to Moses with a problem. Passover is just about to happen, and they are ceremonially unclean in that they have been handling a dead body. The Passover in question is very important; it is the one the Israelites are to eat before they go into the land to conquer it. Moses inquires of God and comes up with an interesting solution. For those who meet the proper criteria, a second Passover can be celebrated on the same day of the month, but in the second month instead of the first month. The second Passover serves the same purpose as the first one, and therefore has to have no difference in ceremony. Indeed, it is reiterated that this law applies both to Jew and the Gentile who wishes to take Passover. There is one law the Jew and the Gentile alike.

This might be the first really clear symbolic exposition of the idea that God wants to provide you with a second chance. Preachers are fond of reminding us that we only get one life. Beer companies are fond of reminding us that we only go around once. But in that trip we are to forgive 70×7. If that is our requirement, how much more will our heavenly Father forgive us? You can see that the rules and methods are the same. But it is not too late to come to Christ. Your author knows of a man who became a Christian at the age of 83.

I submit that the reason that there is no difference in the rules and regulations for these two Passover celebrations is to give us the clear thought that there is no sense in waiting for God to change his mind and make it easier to enter the kingdom of heaven. Frequently in our history we have seen those who have proclaimed baptism without repentance, but the Scripture is clear. The steps of repentance are the same now as they were then, and they apply to one and all, without exception.

Communion, in a way, reminds us of that.

- Communion is a reminder that we are all sinners; those of us who are Christians are those who have repented and sought His mercy.
- Communion is a reminder that the opportunity of repentance is still open to any of us. It will be open until he comes again — but no man knows when that day might be.
- Communion is a reminder of the sacrifice which was needed to make our repentance lead to his redemption.
- Communion is a reminder that God has the same rules for everyone — he is no respecter of persons. The same communion, on the same terms, is offered to one and all.

The reminder is there. The question is, what are we going to do about it?

April 12

Second Coming

It is a seldom mentioned point about communion: it explicitly includes the promise that Christ is coming again. The Second Coming is a subject which both fascinates and mystifies most Christians. We want to know when he's coming again. When someone says to us, "soon," we usually let them know we had in mind something we can put on our calendar. So we do not know the date and the time. There is one feature that we do know:

Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

(Isaiah 40:5 NASB)

Isaiah has a strange way of putting things sometimes. He not only tells us that the Lord will return and in so doing predicts the resurrection of the dead, he also tells us what we should be doing to get ready for it:

A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley;

(Isaiah 40:3-4 NASB)

There are several interpretations of this passage. As applied to us as individuals it is easiest to take this as a collection of metaphors. The mountains in this passage might be seen as those obstacles in our life to becoming better Christians. These are things like the sins of the body, the world and pride. As these things diminish in our life it is easier for the Lord to fill our lives. The valleys may be seen as things which should be exalted. These are things like the life of giving, faithfulness and joyful fellowship. If we emphasize these things in our lives we are making it easier for God to enter into our lives more fully. But there is also another way to see this.

As these things grow in our lives, the world around us can see the glory of the Lord revealed in us. In our own time that glory is revealed in the change lives of sinners. This is the witness which goes beyond words. Of course, when Christ returns the world will see it in the resurrection of the dead and the judgment to follow.

You might ask, how can I be sure of this? Take a look at the elements of communion before you. They symbolize his body and his blood, and reminds you of his sacrifice on the Cross. If you are reminded of the Cross, you are then reminded of the resurrection of Christ. If you will recall, he told his disciples before hand that he would rise from the dead. He said it; his word is trustworthy. As for the Second Coming, the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. He said it, his word is trustworthy. As you partake this morning remember that you are proclaiming his soon returning. The question for all of us is, are we preparing the way for his return?

April 19

Cowboy and Horse

(Full Disclosure: your author once worked as a cowboy. It's a hard and dirty job, and I found nothing romantic about it.)

It is a fact most of us have an idea of a cowboy as some sort of romantic Western hero. The truth is far from it. The job is lots of hard work, long hours and virtually none of the glamour that we are accustomed to see from the movies. There are some things, however, that the movies got right. For instance, there is the cowboy's uniform. There are two essentials to it the first is a pair of jeans, preferably extremely strong. The second is a hat. The Stetson is preferred because it keeps the sun out of your eyes and the rain off your nose. But the most important thing the movies got right is the simple fact that you have to be able to ride a horse. Not just sit on the back of the horse, but actually control its direction — that's what's required.

Of course, the cowboy has tools to motivate the horse by fear and pain. There are spurs, riding crops, and various assorted bits and reins. The truth is, however, that is much better to guide the horse in a relationship based on love, rather than fear or pain. Note, please, that love does not mean the horse gets to do whatever it wants. It means that the horse is guided correctly without the use of fear or pain. It's a balancing act; the net result is that you get the horse to go where you want it to go by making sure the horse knows that he can do it and thus please you. For the practical among you, I suggest an apple in your back pocket as a very fine token of love for most horses. Only beware that some horses can in fact pick your back pocket of the apple.

Christ uses much the same method with us. It starts with the idea that if you love Him, you will keep his commandments (John 14:15). That's the result he desires. How does he get that result? The Apostle John answers that question too:

**There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us.
(1 John 4:18-19 NASB)**

He first loved us. The proof of the fact that he first loved us is quite simple: it is found at the Cross. But just like the horse, we need to maintain that relationship. Once the apple is gone, the horse will look for another one. The human being is much the same, needing not so much to be taught as to be reminded of Christ's great love for us. This he does in Communion. In the bread we share the memory of his body, given for us. In the cup we share the memory of his blood, shed for us. It is not something we just do for the routine of it; we do it so that we may remember his great love, and build our ongoing relationship with him around that core truth.

April 26

Why Unleavened Bread?

Have you ever asked yourself why Christ unleavened bread to participate in his meal of all meals? The choice of this lowly form of bread was not accidental, and carries with it meaning for the Christian today.

The most obvious point is that it is a part of the Passover meal. It retains its symbolism from the Old Testament, from which we may note two things:

- The reason it's unleavened bread is that there is no time for the yeast to rise before the Israelites leave Egypt. They are in a hurry.
- As Moses makes clear later on, (or what we would call yeast) is the symbol of evil within the people. Unleavened bread therefore is a symbol of the people purging themselves of their sins.

The Christian application this is fairly simple. The question is a pilgrim in this world; "just passing through." We not to make ourselves at home in this world, but always be prepared for the journey ahead — even the journey through the grave.

Unleavened bread is also a symbol of poverty. Baking regular bread costs more, takes longer and (in the technology of the time) is easier to burn. You might make a simple comparison between homemade bread and pancakes. In our time we associate homemade bread with do-it-yourself gourmet cooks. Pancakes are associated with fundraising meals run by men who are much better at barbecue and pancakes. The Christian application for this is also quite simple; the Christian should accept what he has. If it has pleased the Lord God Almighty to make you a rich man with a taste for gourmet bread, so be it. The rest of us can just eat pancakes.

Perhaps the most unused symbolism of unleavened bread comes with its physical characteristics. If you take the unleavened bread of the type normally served for Passover you will find that it brings literal meaning to the phrase, "breaking bread." You don't slice it; you don't cut it up you break it. When you break it, it breaks with a snap — just like breaking a bone. The symbol of your Savior's body should be very clear in this.

Breaking bread has one other characteristic: the only way to share unleavened bread is to break it. Communion is a shared meal; if you going to share that bread, you have to break it. By taking that shared bread you announce your brotherhood with all Christians of all times. As you hear that bread snapped between your fingers, you should hear your Lord's body — and you should feel the brotherhood that he established. So it is that he prayed that we might all be one, just as he and the Father are one. Remember that fellowship as you partake. Without the breaking of bread, there is no sharing; without the breaking of our Lord's body, there is no fellowship.

May 3

Prayer Never Prayed

Much of the prayer life of Jesus Christ is recorded for us in the New Testament. There is a sufficient biography of this that we may draw some conclusions from the things for which Christ never prayed. For example, we know that Christ prayed fervently for his release from the pain and suffering of the crucifixion. It is obvious that Christ did not wish to suffer this way, was in great fear of the pain and agony of the Cross, and therefore asked his Father to relieve him of the anxiety and then the pain of the Cross. It is interesting to note that while Christ prayed frequently to be relieved from the dread of the Cross, but this was never contradicted by his Father. From that, we may assume that his prayer was in accordance with being fully human and not sinful. The pain of such prayer denied was amplified by the fact that his three best friends couldn't stay awake long enough to be of any comfort to him in his hour of trial.

It is seldom remarked upon, but I think it is important: Jesus Christ never prayed about the Resurrection. He never asked God to give it to him; he confidently predicted it. You will recall his remark about tearing down this Temple and in three days he would build a new one — clearly prophetic of the resurrection. He regarded the coming Resurrection as a future fact. But, as we can see from his prayers, that fact was of utterly no consolation whatsoever. Sometimes people think that Christ must've known that he would rise from the dead, and therefore this wasn't such a big deal, the Cross. That is utterly false. As the Scriptures make plain, he dreaded and feared the Cross. And not once did he make the light appeal of asking to be tided over with courage on the grounds the Resurrection would come so soon. So how does he overcome his fear? By his obedience to his Father. True courage consists of looking the fear in the face and deciding that you will do the right thing anyway.

At communion we celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, we do not celebrate both the sacrifice and the Resurrection — just the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Even the elements of communion speak to the sacrifice, not to the Resurrection. The bread represents his body, broken. The cup represents his blood. There is no symbol of the Resurrection. Even in the Old Testament forerunner of communion, the Passover, there is no sense of anything being celebrated except the sacrifice of the Lamb which protects the ancient Jew from the angel of death.

The Resurrection is the central fact of the Christian faith. As C. S. Lewis once remarked, Christianity can almost be reduced to one fact and one doctrine. The fact is the Resurrection. The doctrine is redemption by grace. For this reason alone there is no reason at all for us to be prompted to celebrate the Resurrection. But we do need to be reminded to celebrate the sacrifice which made it possible. We have a tendency to focus on the warm and positive things and put behind our backs those things which are miserable and dirty. The sacrifice of Christ should not be relegated to a back room closet. We need to be reminded that Christ went to the Cross for us.

It is an exercise of memory; the string around the finger. We remind ourselves of those things which we are apt to forget — including the sacrifice of Christ.

May 10

Behold Thy Son

Mary, the mother of Jesus, gets very little press in the New Testament. Which is the reason for this is the disagreement between Protestants and Catholics. In the controversy, there have been some things overlooked about Mary that might give us a deeper meaning of communion.

First, why did Jesus commit his mother to the apostle John?

- The Scripture informs us that Christ's brothers, whoever they might be, did not believe at this point. Christ would want his mother in a home that was believing.
- Of all the apostles it is likely that John is one of the richest. You will recall that he and his family owned a fishing business. Christ wanted his mother to be at least comfortable as well as competent.
- It is also likely that John is a cousin of Jesus. He would then be assigning this task to one who was a close blood relative, not just somebody in the group.

Perhaps even more puzzling is the question of why Jesus waited until he was on the cross before he did this. There are some possibilities:

- It is faintly possible that Jesus is some sort of a procrastinator. This seems rather difficult for such an orderly and organized mind as Christ had.
- Some might consider that this was an afterthought; something that wasn't really important but needed to be done sometime.
- Love those answers as you please, but I think the truth is he did it then because that was the right time to do it. Considering how often Mary must've felt frustrated with Jesus (remember that incident in the Temple when Jesus was 12?) This let her know of his love for her after all.

There are some implications here that we may use in our contemplation of communion.

- Think how Christ suffered knowing that his mother was there. Crucifixion was intended to be as humiliating as possible, it would be understandable if Mary avoided that. When we contemplate his sufferings, remember that his humiliation was being watched not only by his followers but by his mother.
- Next, we may also look at this as Christ being obedient in the last detail. At his death on the cross Christ sets for us the example of obedience in that he takes care of his mother in accordance with the Law of Moses.
- Finally, even in dying, Christ sets for us the example we need in obedience to God's command to "honor your father and your mother."

Our Lord's suffering on the cross was not merely physical. It included the emotional dimension of having your friends and even your mother watch you die in a way designed to produce the maximum pain in the maximum of humiliation. As you partake this morning, think on these things.

May 17

Things Left Behind

Everybody dies. When they do, most of them leave behind a collection of detritus which is rather accidental. I'm not speaking of the things that your lawyer will list in your will but rather the things that are left in your desk drawer, in the top drawer of your dresser and in that box full of stuff in the garage. You never think about it when you're making out your will — and it's usually such trivial stuff that it's not worth bothering with. After all, when you're dead, what difference does it make?

Most of it must be disposed of somehow. A small portion of it will be given away, either to people as souvenirs in some sense, or taken to the local Goodwill center in the hopes that someone else will be able to wear the absurdly loud Hawaiian shirt that the deceased would never part with. Some of it — usually the least part — will be sold, often at a garage sale. The rest will be disposed of as so much trash. The executor of the estate always hopes that he never gives away anything which the deceased meant for someone else to have. Isn't it curious that things like this, which often have so much influence on us while we are living, become such a burden to those left behind?

Contrast this, please, with what was left behind by Jesus of Nazareth. The first thing you'll notice is that it was an extraordinarily small amount. He had no place to lay his head, and therefore no place to put his ordinary items into the top desk drawer. In fact, as far as we know, the only physical possessions he had at death were his clothes. His executioners were perfectly willing to tear most of them up as scraps of cloth, but one item caught their eye and they gambled for it. Later in Christian history we find that a market developed for physical items associated with Christ. These were things like the Holy Grail, which was the cup used at the Last Supper. Fragments of the true cross — which I suspect outweighed the true cross considerably — were a popular item to sell to pilgrims in the fourth century. Even, as absurd as it seems, we have vials of blood drops which the purveyors insisted came from the execution of Christ. Some of these relics are still in churches today.

But we might ask: just what physical items to Christ intend to leave behind? You might consider that the rite of baptism would be one. But the obvious contender for things physical left behind is communion. He specifically and deliberately left us instructions that we were to consume the bread as a memorial of his body and the wine as a memorial of his blood. He left nothing else of a tangible nature. Perhaps we might conclude that he did not intend to. It is as if he intended his spiritual legacy to be great in and his physical legacy to be limited to that which was necessary for our discipleship. Communion, therefore, is a rare item. This morning, as you partake, consider that your Lord left this one thing behind that you might see, feel and touch so that you might remember the most important thing he did: suffer and die on the cross for your salvation.

May 24

Repair or Replace

In the middle of the 19th century, the United States Navy had a little problem—money. Feeling that the demands placed on them by their various duties exceeded the means at hand, the Navy asked Congress for money to build new ships to deal with the situation. Congress was isolationist, however—and fully remembered that they had voted some such thing for the War of 1812. Congress viewed the problem as one of repairing what you have or buying new. Reminding the Navy that frugality is a virtue, they authorized funds to repair some number of ships.

One such ship was the USS Constellation. She was a veteran of the Revolutionary War. Years of neglect had put her into a condition in which repair would have been foolish. Her design was obsolete. So the Navy took what seemed the obvious course. They announced their request for bids to repair her—with the unwritten proviso that they would scrap her and build a new, "repaired" ship.

As it happened, Constellation saw a very long service career and was then selected to become a museum ship. All the official records stated she was the Revolutionary War frigate—so the museum officials "restored" her to what she had never been. After about fifty years, the official historian for the ship discovered the truth. Then they had to correct the corrections.

In a sense, we face the same choice today. The human soul resembles that old ship, rotted by sin. We have the choice of repairing or replacing. Repairing is our business; it means that we can correct ourselves to the point of being acceptable to God. Replacement is something God must do; you will recall David in Psalm 51 asking, "create in me a new heart, O God." It's tempting to do the repair ourselves; the only real problem with it is that it doesn't work. We're trying to repair the rotten with the rotten.

So how does replacement work? The first step is in Christian baptism, and the gift of the Spirit. That work must be continued, however; one way we do this is in constant communion.

"This is my body; this is my blood" — these are the building materials of the new man. Some Christians take this statement quite literally; others symbolically. But all would agree with St. Paul when he warned us about taking communion in an unworthy manner. In 1st Corinthians 11:29-30, he tells us this:

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

But by the constant taking of communion in a worthy manner we cling to the core of the Gospel, and in so doing claim his grace. Grace, his unmerited favor, implies that he is free to rebuild us in his image. We are to grow more and more like Christ as the time goes by. Communion is essential to this. So, let Him rebuild the ship — there are stormy seas ahead, and you will need His strength.

May 31

Items on a Grave

It is one of the more curious sites I have ever seen. While attending a funeral I noticed two items sitting on the gravestone a few yards away. My eyes not believing what they saw, I went over to make sure that I was seeing things correctly. Two items rested upon the gravestone. The first item was a little plaster angel with a cute smile on his face. The second, almost unbelievably, was a miniature high heel shoe. The shoe was about 5 inches long with the heel of about 3 inches. It was nicely made, but obviously too small for anyone but the smallest child to wear. I found myself puzzled; who would place those two items on the gravestone which might have been for grandpa and grandma? I could find no logical explanation; there was no one around to ask. So I must leave the mystery with you.

Why do we put items on the gravestone like that? What makes us put — more commonly — things like a bouquet of flowers next to the gravestone? I submit there are at least three possible reasons.

- It may simply be a desire to honor the people who are buried in the grave. It's usually done by some family member, so it is very personal.
- Sometimes it appears that we are somehow trying to express our thoughts to those who are deceased. It is a comfort to think that they can understand this, even if they cannot communicate with us.
- Sometimes it is simply because we want to remember them, and using tangible items helps us do that.

These things may indeed be the natural way a human being handles a gravestone. Jesus, in establishing the Lord's Supper, took advantage of this.

- We are to do this "in remembrance of him." Communion is an act of memory.
- In so doing, we honor his sacrifice at the Cross, which was our atonement. The grace of God was poured out on Calvary, and that is worth all the honor we can give it.
- Notice that in doing this he took advantage of tangible elements. He knows it's easier to remember someone if you have something physical to remind you. Thus we have the cup and the bread.

Christ taught us that God is not the God of the dead, but the living. We are indeed surrounded with a "great cloud of witnesses" — those who have died in Christ. Christ's resurrection is the first fruits in God's new order of things. It is the evidence that establishes the fact that he will do as he has promised: the dead in Christ shall rise at the return of our Lord.

Communion is, in that way, the memorial of hope. As Paul put it,

But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

(1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 KJV)

If we acknowledge his sacrifice on the cross, we acknowledge his resurrection. If we acknowledge his resurrection, we acknowledge the hope that Paul describes to us here — that all the dead in Christ shall rise. Remember these things as you commemorate his sacrifice.

June 7

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! (James 2:12-13 NIV).

There is a young man of my acquaintance who is, as I write this, sitting in a jail cell awaiting trial. There is virtually no doubt as to his guilt. The district attorney has offered him a more than reasonable plea-bargain. He has refused it, insisting upon a trial. His view seems to be that the court owes him mercy for his crime. He pleads his circumstances; he pleads that he is a first-time offender; he pleads that he is basically a nice guy. All these things are true. But is he entitled to mercy? The answer is, I think not. No one can be said to be *entitled* to mercy. It may be the good pleasure of the court to give mercy, but there is no requirement for it.

Judgment, you see, is a necessary precursor to mercy. You cannot be merciful to the innocent in a court of law, though you must be fair and just. Mercy can only be given to the guilty, and then only after we have rendered justice. If this principal were strictly enforced by God, all of us would wind up in hell. Fortunately for us, there is a way to receive mercy.

Judgment indeed has preceded mercy, for our sins have been born by Christ at the Cross. Jesus paid for our sins; justice has been satisfied. But this does carry with it the implication that if I want mercy it must be received on God's terms, not my own. And as James tells us here, his terms are simple: we must be merciful to others. By giving the mercy of sinful man we obtain divine mercy, called grace.

In a way taking communion is the acceptance of that mercy. By participating in communion you remember the sacrifice of Christ which has enabled the mercy of God to reach you. Indeed, by participating in communion you claim that mercy for yourself. But how can you claim mercy for yourself without acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ? He is the one who commanded you to remember him in communion. If you are obedient to that command you must logically be obedient to all of his commands; you call him "Lord" and therefore you are subject to his commands. His command to you is to be merciful to others.

Therefore, examine yourself. Have you indeed been merciful to others, or are your standards for others much stricter than your standards for yourself? If so, this is a very fruitful area for the exercise of repentance.

June 14

Two Way Street

They have been our friends for many, many years. So it was quite a shock to us to discover that he had filed for divorce. Further investigation led to many sordid details which need not interest us here. The one thing that stands out is that both of them sought reconciliation — and found it very difficult. Each of them wanted reconciliation on their own terms. But reconciliation is a two-way street — and a toll road in both directions. By God's blessings the process has begun; but it will be neither easy nor quick to put this marriage back together.

Most Christian thinkers frame the thought of reconciliation in terms of what man must do to be reconciled with God. We might summarize man's attempt to reconcile with God in these three steps:

- First, man must recognize that he is the unrighteous one, the sinner. Blaming God for your troubles when you are the sinner just doesn't work.
- Second, man must go through the process of repentance and cleansing. It is a matter of prayer and intention.
- Repentance and cleansing must be shown by the good works of the Christian. Good works are the result of repentance, but not the cause.

We don't often think about it, but there are steps in reconciliation which God must take too — and He has.

- By his very nature, God is just and righteous. The price for our sins must be paid — and has been, at the Cross.
- This reconciliation must be in accord with his nature, completely. God is love; therefore the reconciliation he offers must be offered in a loving spirit. We remember Jesus on the Cross saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."
- Indeed, the Prodigal Son teaches us that God is ever reaching out to the sinner.

Communion is the visible sign of the process of reconciliation between man and God. In it, we acknowledge our sinfulness — if we were sinless, we would not need communion. It is a visible symbol of our pledge of repentance. It is also the visible acknowledgment of the sacrifice Christ made on the Cross. The bread is his body; the wine is his blood.

Most of all, communion is an acknowledgment that we *are reconciled* to our Lord. It is a statement that the things we must do and the things God must do are indeed already done. Our Lord said, "it is finished." When we take communion, we are proclaiming that our reconciliation is an accomplished fact.

June 21

Forgiveness – But Not Yet

Who is the person in your life who is most difficult to forgive?

- For a very small minority of us, this person is someone who has done something major and completely offending. If the subject comes up, all of our friends know exactly where we stand on the issue — we're not forgiving that one!
- For others, the offense is not so large; indeed, rather minor — but very annoying. It's not the offense which is the main barrier to forgiveness. It's the attitude of the person to be forgiven.
- For a lot of us, it's something so trivial that for the most part we forget it — until someone else reminds us of it. It's been with us so long that it has coalesced into a very difficult situation.

It's not that we're not going to forgive them. We know that we should, and someday we will — but not just yet. Why is it that we postpone forgiveness?

- With some people it's the thought that we savor revenge. This is particularly true when the revenge is rather petty. Someday we're going to get even with that guy who borrowed my stapler and never returned it. ("Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord" — so don't steal from him.)
- Some of us are waiting to become a better Christian — which, of course, is accomplished in part by forgiving people.
- Most commonly, we're hoping that God forgets about the whole thing. After all, we need to receive forgiveness from God. If we forget and postpone forgiveness thereby, surely he forgets too? Not likely.

The subject is pertinent to communion, because we are to take communion "in a worthy manner." We are taught to examine ourselves, which I submit includes examining our forgiveness or lack of it. In communion we partake of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ; Paul in particular tells us that we must "recognize" the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. That body, that blood was given for your forgiveness. It is the price that God paid to forgive you. So, in a very real sense, when you take communion you are remembering the forgiveness of God. If you are remembering His forgiveness for you, how can you forget your forgiveness for others?

June 28

What I Have Written, I Have Written

Pontius Pilate would be almost unknown to history were it not for the crucifixion of Jesus, the Christ. By all accounts he was a shrewd politician, well-versed in the Roman methods of keeping a conquered province under control. Indeed, his instincts concerning Jesus revealed a great deal about Roman methods. He knew quite well the man was innocent, and attempted to give the Jewish hierarchy some symbolic satisfaction without too great an injustice. He was a merciful man — until it got risky. Like many bureaucrats sense, he did not have the ability to risk it all by doing the right thing no matter what the cost. But even after things got a little out of hand he was not averse to twisting the knife. He knew that Roman law required that the crucifixion's victim have a little placard which described his crime. Pilate knew that being "King of the Jews" was not really a crime — but once it was on that little placard it could not be altered. It was his way of striking back at the chief priests.

He probably didn't realize that God is in the habit of using these little foibles of man to work his works in an unexpected way. For example, in John 11:49-52, we find the high priest prophesying that it is good for the people that one man should die for them. As high priest he was making that prophecy on behalf of God — but he didn't know it. He thought he was making a political argument. Why is it that this happens? It is because even in the worst of times, God is sovereign. What man considers expedient, God can make it useful for his eternal purposes.

Consider, if you will, the sacrifice which is made for Passover. Passover celebrates the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt. Later in the Old Testament, Egypt is often used as a symbol for sin. So it is seen as a picture of God's delivering the Jewish people from their sins. Interestingly, the sacrifice in Passover is a relatively minor element. Like much of the ceremonial law in the Old Testament, you see quite a bit about how the sacrifices to be prepared, what kind of animal is eligible for the sacrifice and so on. In the Lord's supper, however, the sacrifice is the center of thought. In the Old Testament we have the sacrifice of a lamb, by man. In the New Testament we have the sacrifice of The Lamb Of God for the benefit of man.

It is not just simply an adaptation of whatever was at hand. This is something God planned from the beginning. He is drawing for the Jewish people of the picture of the sacrifice to come. When it arrives, they must discover that God had a meaning hidden in Passover, showing the sacrifice of The Lamb. The meaning is hidden — in plain sight. It is not until the sacrifice of Christ that it becomes clear what God really had in mind. It is God's way of telling us that no matter how smart we are, we're not going to be able to figure out everything in advance. It also lets us know, however, that God in his sovereignty has everything planned and will work all things together for the good of those who love him.

So, as you take the bread in the cup this morning, remember that you are seeing the sovereignty of God — awesome, regal and overpowering — displayed for you in these simple elements. Our God reigns, and even in the simplest of things once his children to recognize this. Remember that the sacrifice of Christ led to the establishment of the church — and your salvation.

July 5

Exclusive

If we had only the Old Testament, it would be a reasonable conclusion if we determined that the salvation of God was a very exclusive thing.

- For example, Noah took 100 years to build an ark in which to save his family — and nobody else. A great deal of expense, a great deal of effort for a very small result.
- Of the more symbolic nature is the Ark of the Covenant. You will recall that Moses got the pattern for the Ark from God himself, directly. Its major ingredient was gold. It was therefore a beautiful thing, and extremely expensive thing — and seen once a year in the Tabernacle. Precious and rare was the Ark of the Covenant.
- Solomon's Temple was quite a bit larger, but note that there was only one of them and it had to be built on the exact spot where God specified. It was large but it was incredibly expensive; even today the amount of gold specified for the Temple runs into several billion dollars. It was the place where God had placed his name, and the only place where you could truly worship God.

In the New Testament the matter changes quite a bit.

- First, there are no geographic limits. You don't have to make a pilgrimage to Mecca nor bring your sacrifices to Jerusalem. Rather, God told his church to go into all the world with his salvation.
- If the materials symbolizing salvation in the Old Testament were precious and rare, such as gold, the materials in the New Testament are common and plentiful — bread and wine.
- Indeed, there seems to be only one qualification you have to meet before you can have the grace of God. You must be a sinner first. As a practical matter, this does not seem to be much of a difficulty.

In the Old Testament God's grace is distinguished by the fact that it is exclusive, rare and precious. In the New Testament, the first thing you see about God's grace is its abundance. This does not mean that God's grace is cheap; anything but. The price of God's grace was Christ upon the cross, a price beyond our measure. So it is that when we approach communion we must do so with a calm reverence of someone who was approaching the Temple, or the Ark of the Covenant. It is a great and solemn thing, and our hearts should reflect this. At the same time we should remember that the greatness of God is shown in the fact that this high and holy offering of grace is poured out abundantly, even to the least of sinners.

July 12

Exclusive

One of the difficulties of being a teacher is this: you generally see only the books that are written in your own time. If somebody thought of something 100 years ago, you don't know it. You can see why fairly easily. Publishers are in no hurry to take a book that is out of copyright and make copies of it for you; there is very little profit in that. The words used may indeed be a different form of your language. In English, older word forms are more stilted and more formal than modern English. Still, it is worth the effort to see what someone else thought.

One of those ancient writings is something called The Didache. It purports to be the teaching of the 12 apostles, though it is clearly written sometime after them. They see the cup and the bread somewhat differently than we do.

They refer to the cup as "the holy vine of David." This brings up some interesting thoughts:

- It connects the Lord's Supper with ancient prophecy. David was promised that there would always be a man to rule on his throne, and that one of these would be the Messiah, the one through whom all the world would be blessed.
- More than that, it connects to the concept of rule over the royal house. In a sense, then, we are the rulers over the church. The Scripture clearly tells us that if we live with him we shall reign with him.
- The phrase, "Son of David", was one of Christ's favorites. In looking it up, we find that in most instances it's part of the phrase, "Son of David, have mercy on me." The cup of Christ pours out upon his church the mercy of God.

The next refer to the bread as being, "scattered on the hills." The phrasing is a little bit awkward, but the references quite clear. To get bread, you need wheat. To get wheat, you need to sow the seed. When you so that see you through it every which where on the hills.

But once you have finished sowing and then harvesting the wheat, you bring it back together again in a pile of grain and then grind it into flour. So you scattered it, and now you have brought it back together. The early church saw this as a model church being scattered all over the world. It will then bear grain, and when the time is ripe our Lord himself will return and gather it together again. In this we see the second coming of Christ.

One phrase appears continuously in the instructions to prayer for the Lord's supper: "glory of God." We are taught to praise God for the glory of his creation. Most particularly with regard to the Lord's supper, we are to praise him for the sacrifice at Calvary by which he bought our salvation. But perhaps the most pertinent glory to God comes from our own conduct. We are to live so that those around us see what a Christian is like that that life is indeed given to the glory of God.

It's a simple thing; just bread and wine. But wrapped up inside it are the ancient prophecies; royal rule both now and when he comes; his mercy to us; the reaching outward of the evangelists of the church; in the church we gathered at the second coming of our Lord. Sometimes even simple things can carry with them great and deep meaning. Does your life bring glory to God? If not, it is recommended to you that you should not partake before examining yourself and seeing if there is something in you that he wants removed.

July 19

Act of Devotion

One of the characteristics of young lovers is an act of devotion. We see this in the Bible as well, perhaps most clearly in the story of the widow's mite. An act of devotion has three primary characteristics:

- It is extremely expensive to the giver, either in money or pride. The widow, you will recall, put in all she had to live on. She could've done less; she did have two coins. But she didn't.
- In the world's eyes an act of devotion is either useless or an extravagant expense. The widow's mite would appear to be useless amidst the coffers of the Temple. An example of extravagance would be the perfume poured on Jesus feet by the prostitute. Even the disciples said she should've sold it and given the money to the poor.
- The motive for an act of devotion is always the same: love. In a sense we use it here, it is love for God.

God loves and cares for us. We can see this in a number of ways, the first being the fact that we exist. We borrowed the very idea of existing from the great "I Am." We were told in the Scriptures that his "mercy is new every morning" — in other words, it's very good for us that God does not have a short temper. Perhaps most of all for the Christian God cares for us by providing hope. The grave is not the end.

Which brings us to the thought that the sacrifice on the cross is God's act of devotion to us. It certainly meets the test of being expensive to the giver. After all, God could have sent us just another prophet. He didn't; he sent his son. Things don't get much more expensive than that.

In the world's eyes, his sacrifice on the cross was a waste. After all, he could've come as the conquering King. God could've arranged things to have been much less expensive and much more valued in the eyes of the shrewd.

When you partake of communion, you are remembering God's act of devotion. You are acknowledging that he did this for you. Despite the expense, despite the extravagance, Christ died for your sins. It is well said, "no greater love has any man than he lay down his life for his friend." There is no greater love, no greater expense, no greater extravagance than the sacrifice on the cross. As you partake this morning remember the intense love God has shown for you. Then ask yourself, have you returned this love to him?

July 26

Why Communion?

Communion is celebrated in different ways in different churches. One thing, however, is constant: the reasons for which we celebrate communion. The first, and most obvious, is that we do so in memory of Christ.

- We do this in memory of the one who has given us our salvation. Can there be any greater gift than eternal life?
- We do this in memory of the one who is our example. The imitation of Christ is the rule for living for all good Christians.
- We do this in memory of the one who is our bridge to God the Father. He is our high priest, our intermediary in dealing with God the Father.

We also do this as a token of our trust in him. It is a visible evidence that we have trusted in him and have faith in his words.

- It shows that we believe in the resurrection — not just the resurrection of Christ, but the general resurrection of the dead to come.
- It shows that we believe that Christ not only rose from the dead but ascended to the Father — and is coming again, as promised.
- In the meanwhile, we trust in his words, taking them to be our guide in life.

We do this as evidence for our obedience to Christ. In the most obvious sense, we do this because Christ commanded it. More than that, if you were a genuine believer you know that you must believe wholeheartedly. When you do something wholeheartedly, you do not skip the ritual parts. This is not a candy store to pick and choose in.

We do this to have communion with our Lord and the church. We do what he and the apostles did; we therefore have communion with our Lord as they did. That also implies that we have communion with the church which has gone on before us — 2000 years of the saints who have trusted the Lord and taking communion just as we do. What applies to the past applies to the future as well. We are in communion with the church to come.

Finally, we do this in hope of “drinking it anew” when our Lord returns. This has several implications to us.

- It means that death is not the end for us; rather we have inherited eternal life.
- That eternal life is not one of floating on clouds and playing harps. It is clear that Christ intended us to know that he would return again in the same way he left, bringing with him the full implementation of the kingdom of God. If we suffer with him, we shall reign with him.
- We know, and proclaiming communion, that at the return of Christ we shall see the great judgment of God. At this time he will reward those who have served them well, and punish those who have defied him.

Communion is a ritual, but not an empty one — the creator of the universe created this as well, for us. He does all things well, his rituals included.

(The author is indebted to C. H. Spurgeon for the general outline of this meditation.)

August 2

Whale Shark

She was about eight years old at the time. Her father announced that they were going on a tour boat to see (and swim with) some whale sharks. This struck fear in her mind. She thought of how small she was and how big sharks are. Everything she knew about sharks came from the movie, "Jaws".

When she got out to where the sharks were, her father volunteered himself and her to be the first ones in the water to swim with the sharks. Whale sharks are the largest fish in the sea. They can grow to a length of over 60 feet. This particular whale shark was a little over 30 feet long. To her credit, she decided to conquer her fears by bravely jumping in and going up to touch the shark. As she reached out to touch the shark, one of the tour guides yanked her hand back. They went to the surface and the tour guide explained in rather angry tones that you are not supposed to touch a whale shark. Why? It's because the whale shark coats itself with a rather clear slime to protect its skin. If you touch the shark, you might scrape some of this off and thus leave the shark open to infection. The whale shark itself is no threat to humans; it is a filter feeder that lives off tiny organisms in the sea. At eight years old, she was a much greater threat to the shark than the shark could ever be to her.

It is surprising to human beings sometimes just how our view of the world is distorted. She saw a "big" shark and a "small" girl, and concluded that the odds were all in favor of the shark. We often see the powers of this world the same light. We seem so small, and they seem so arrogant and high and mighty. "Pride goeth before a fall" — but sometimes the fall doesn't happen when we want it to. But hubris is still there; God still brings down the prideful and evil. Sometimes we forget that he is not finished with us yet.

We forget some of the essential characteristics of God — especially when we look at ourselves. We seem so weak and forget that we are not the only resource available. Indeed, it might be helpful to lay this out explicitly.

- God is powerful.
- God will intervene for those he loves.
- God loves us, to the point of going to the Cross.

The battle belongs to the Lord. That's why we say that we "celebrate" Communion. The bread and cup represents his sacrifice on the Cross. They also remind us of the Resurrection and of our resurrection to come. Communion symbolizes to us the triumph of God's love. It also shows us the promise of victory to come, when he returns.

August 9

Long Tom

One of the happiest times of your author's life came when he was a boy living on a military Proving Ground. It was a place where they tested tanks, artillery and other weapons. My father, a career soldier, was stationed there. Those who ran the proving ground were always delighted when someone came to see what they were doing and ready to show off some of their more interesting failures.

My grandfather, a machinist with an automobile company, went with us on one occasion. After looking at several smaller failures, we came upon a World War II "Long Tom" cannon. Imagine, if you will, a 22 foot long banana peel, made of metal and twisted in all directions. My grandfather took a professional interest in this. He started by saying that the steel in the cannon must be defective. He took out his pocketknife and examined the steel with it in several places. Finally, he concluded that steel was perfectly good — and that whatever caused this must've produced one really large explosion.

My grandfather exhibited for us a professional interest in testing. He knew that without testing the steel you could not determine what it might do. Consider Paul's admonition to do the same:

But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

(1 Corinthians 11:28 NASB)

The word in the Greek for "examine" is used to mean testing metal for its soundness and purity. Just as my grandfather sampled the steel with his pocketknife, we are to examine ourselves at communion. This carries some interesting implications.

- We are to examine ourselves — not others. We may encourage, exhort or empathize with others; we are not their judges.
- Indeed, we are to examine ourselves — and no further approval is required.

Ultimately, it is you who will face the Lord at Judgment Day. He will know in what manner you took communion. It is much better that you test yourself now than find yourself wanting on that day.

Well then, what should you expect when you examine yourself?

- You should have a sense of sorrow for sin (your sins, not others). From this you should develop the will to repent of that sin and make such amends as are possible.
- You should have love and respect for your Lord because of the sacrifice he made. This, incidentally, requires that you have faith.
- Your heart should then turn to giving glory to God for what he has done for you.

We are not told that we must be a "worthy person" to take communion. That would require an impossible degree of perfection. Rather, we are told that we must partake in a "worthy manner." We are sinners, but here we are called to do it right every time.

August 16

Show Stopper

It seems like a minor point at first. The debate comes up at meetings of some church board on the subject of exactly when during the service should we have communion? There are many opinions; here are three of the most common.

- Some prefer to have it at the end of the sermon. This certainly emphasizes its importance, but may impose some awkwardness on the preacher. Imagine trying to make a graceful transition between a sermon on, say, adultery into the Lord's Supper.
- Others would put it right before the sermon. In this way the seriousness of the Lord's Supper settles down the congregation, and puts them in the right frame of mind to hear a serious sermon.
- Sometimes all that is desired is to separate the Lord's Supper as much as possible from the sermon. The idea is that you don't want to distract people's attention from the sermon, so you put communion at one end of the service and the sermon at the other.

You might see a pattern there. Often enough, we think of the sermon as the most important part of a worship service. But is that really true?

One of the early church fathers, Ignatius, wrote about the importance of communion to the early church.

- He said it was the focus of the church's life and order. It occupied a central place and not just in the worship but in the thinking of the church. This implies that the early church thought and talked about communion much more than we do. It is a magnificent source of clear doctrine.
- Also, he said, it is the source of unity in the church. When it comes right down to it, you either partake of communion or you don't. You are either in the church, or not. Remember, this is at a time when the persecution of the church, to the point of death, was quite common. Communion marked those who really were in the church.
- It is also the source of fellowship in the church. Think of it this way; our use of the word "fellowship" usually implies some sort of community dinner. If a physical meal means so much to fellowship, how much more should a spiritual meal mean to fellowship?

Your author must leave the timing of communion to others. But I would have you remember three things about communion.

- First, remember that communion is the core of worship. At no other point do you do something which is so high and so solemn.
- Remember that "we" take communion. That's a plural pronoun; communion is for the church, not just for individual members.
- Remember that you do this as a sign of the unity of the church — not just your local members, but the entire church, both those who live and those who sleep in Christ.

August 23

Blessing the Food

We can sometimes learn something from what the writers of the Gospels do *not* say. It is a reasonable assumption that Jesus bless the food and gave thanks and practically every meal he ate. His disciples would see that as a reasonable thing for him to do. Interestingly, however, the writers of the Gospels record only four instances where Jesus is explicitly said to have blessed and given thanks for the food.

- Two of those instances were the feeding of the 5000, and the feeding of the 4000.
- Another such instance was the meal at Emmaus after the resurrection.
- The fourth was the Lord's Supper.

Apparently the fact that Jesus blessed the food and gave thanks for it was significant in these four instances. Examining the three which are given first, we see in fact there are two reasons why the Gospel writers might have made it explicit in those instances.

- In the first two instances the meal was going to be greatly multiplied. His giving thanks and blessing the food was not a formality, but rather essential to the fact that the meal itself would be miraculously multiplied.
- At the meal at Emmaus we read of the disciples that "their eyes were opened." It was not just another meal; they learned from the Law and the Prophets the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah.

Both of these cases apply to Communion. May I submit to you that both of these cases still are of relevance to us today. We may see some lessons which are not usually connected directly with Communion.

First, we should not remain content with Communion being something that is "only for us." Christ intends that Communion, along with the Gospel, should be spread as far and wide as we are able. In so doing, we may point out to those who are considering the Christian faith that Communion is a symbol of God's grace — mercy which we do not deserve. As such it is also a symbol of God's love. But perhaps most important, is a symbol of God's plan. God did not conceive the Resurrection as a stopgap measure to fix something that went wrong. It was "Plan A" all along.

Also, as Christ opened the eyes of his disciples at Emmaus we need to should approach him with open eyes. In Communion we remember his suffering and death which he voluntarily undertook on our behalf. We should grow in our knowledge of the faith, and that growth should spur us to greater obedience. Growth in knowledge and obedience however are not sufficient; we should also grow in thankfulness for all the blessings he gives us.

August 30

Bad Day at the Doctor's Office

Most parents will tell you that they always love their children, no matter what they do. Every now and then an occasion arises to test that statement.

My grandson and I were at the doctor's office. Neither of us were the patient involved; that was mother who was being examined for what could have been something quite serious. The examination took quite some time, and my grandson began to misbehave in a highly visible way. It's a fact that grandparents don't have to be as strict about discipline as parents do. So as long as he was just running around the office, burning off energy, I wasn't too concerned. But things got worse and I was eventually obliged to sit him down and tell him to behave. His reply (at the top of his lungs) was to shout, "I hate you!" Every parent, and a lot of grandparents, will eventually hear this from the kids. But one of the advantages of being "grandpa" is that you've been through this before. Indeed, not only had the grandparents been through this before, but my parents had been through it — and told us all about it. So I had quite a bit of experience to draw on. I picked him up gently, looked him right in the eye and with as calm a voice as I could find said "but I love you, buddy." A lady in the doctor's office waiting room with us complimented me on the way in which I had replied. It caused me to think about that reply.

I love my grandchildren. What's important to know here is that my love for my grandson existed whether or not he behaved. Of course, misbehaving will get you a different reaction from grandpa. But my love exists whether or not he behaves. The question is not whether or not I still love him, the question is what am I going to do about his misbehavior? Such an event does not cause me to love him, *but it causes me to show it.*

God is, was and always will be love. His greatest demonstration of the love he has for us was to send his son to Calvary. Note that he didn't decide just before the day that he was going to love us now; his love is eternal. But he had planned from the beginning that Calvary would be the way in which he would provide the greatest demonstration of his love for his children, mankind. It was not a question of whether or not he loves us, but how best to demonstrate it to bring his children back home. In Communion, we are reminded of that great demonstration of love. In a very real sense, as you take part in Communion this morning, you are holding the love of God in your hands. This is a high and sacred thing; do not hold it lightly. It is your Heavenly Father's way of saying that despite your sins he still loves you. All of us have sinned; all of us need forgiveness — and God loves all of us.

September 6

Healing Word

Psalms 107:20 NASB He sent His word and healed them, And delivered them from their destructions.

It is a curious turn of phrase for the Old Testament. What does it mean when the psalmist says, “He sent His word...”?

- It may mean simply that he sent his commands. We still use this kind of phrase today, when we say that someone “got the word.”
- In context, it might also mean that he sent his blessing. This might be met either physically, or in terms of our more complete understanding.
- In a New Testament context which is anticipated in the Old Testament, it could refer to the Scriptures in general.
- But for the Christian, the most powerful use of this noun is that which St. John uses, when he tells us the word became flesh. As Christ is the agent of creation, all four of these meanings have within them the possibility of coming through the Christ.

The most powerful part of the passage is the connection between “word” and healing. The Living Word himself often used just a word to perform his healing.

- In Matthew 8:8, we find a common phrase came into the English language from the Bible – when the centurion tells Jesus, “just say the word.” He knows the power of the word to heal, when that word comes from Christ.
- Christ often speaks the word that tells us that our sins are forgiven. His opponents challenged this; he authenticated his forgiveness by healing. (Matthew 9:6, “but so that you may know...”)
- But Peter, echoing Isaiah (1st Peter 2:24) tells us the source of our ultimate healing: the wounds of Christ. In older language, by his stripes we are healed. The ultimate source of our healing for eternity is the atonement of Christ.

In communion we can see this picture in symbolic terms.

- When Christ says, “This is my body...” We have a picture of the Word becoming flesh. That which is immortal and invisible is shown to us in a piece of common bread.
- When Christ says, “This is my blood...” We have another picture: it is a view of the atonement of Christ.

So here, the concept of the word becoming flesh and the atonement are combined. That combination brings forth our ultimate healing. We are to do this, as He commanded, until He returns. Our healing is not yet complete. At the ultimate healing, the Saints are raised from the dead, never to suffer again. Until then, we are given a reminder of what the Word will do, healing all things. Remember his body; remember his blood; remember, He is coming again.

September 13

Blood of the Lamb

Revelation 7:14 and... they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

You will find the phrase in over a hundred Christian hymns: "Blood of the Lamb." The phrase itself, however, occurs only twice in the Scriptures. It is found here in Revelation 7:14 and also in Revelation 12:11. The first of these two passages emphasizes one thought: those who come out of great tribulation find the grace of God in the Blood of the Lamb. Grace is here expressed in prophetic symbolism, harkening back to the Passover of the Old Testament. It is God's way of drawing you a picture for what cannot be truly expressed in words.

The other these two passages shows that grace is given in accordance with their endurance and sacrifice. In other words, we are not dealing with the magic formula which allows someone to be forgiven of all their sins merely by performing a ritual. It's like James said: faith without works is dead. The people described in the 12th chapter of Revelation show their faith by their endurance and by their personal sacrifice. Put shortly, they walk the talk.

God's pictures are meant to keep something in our minds. They are visual reminders.

- We must remember that this is the blood of the Lamb. It is a deliberate reminder of the sacrifice that Christ made at Calvary. Grace is not free; it cost the life of God's only Son.
- We must remember that this is the blood of the Lamb. Everyone dies; many of us die a bloody the death. But this was the death of one who was completely innocent. More than that, he was the designated sacrifice, chosen by God. So we have here a death which is a model of injustice on man's part. It is also the pinnacle of God's love for his people.

You will remember that Christ did not struggle against the Romans or the Pharisees at the crucifixion. He accepted the cup that his father provided. In so doing, he gave us the innocent blood which washes away the sin of us all.

Revelation 12:11 tells us that they *overcame*. Who did they overcome? The answer is clear; they overcame the accuser of mankind, Satan himself. Satan is greatly powerful and extremely deceitful. How did they overcome him? By grace — by the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore, when you come to communion and you partake of the cup, remember why we do this.

- We do this as a sign of remembrance of the sacrifice that gave us the blood of the Lamb. In so doing we acknowledge its power of grace.
- We do this as a sign of victory over evil. The war is won, even though the battle is not over. Satan is doomed.
- We do this as a sign that prophecy in the Scripture is nothing but the description of future facts. Therefore we do this until He comes again — as come again He most certainly will.

September 20

Wait for One Another

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

Have you ever wondered why we take the Lord's supper together, at the same time? Paul here tells the Corinthian church that's exactly what they're supposed to do. If you read the preceding verses, you will see that he is trying to prevent the Corinthians from taking the Lord's supper in "an unworthy manner." To see why this is so, you need only consider doing it in an opposite way.

Imagine, for a moment, that we gave communion by means of a "drive-through" kiosk. Think of the advantages!

- You can "do communion" in the privacy of your car. Confession, repentance would be behind glass. Absolutely perfect for Los Angeles!
- Communion would no longer interfere with the service. We could have longer sermons and more time for announcements.
- Best of all, it would require almost no one to assist in the serving of communion. We could have it done by a machine — just push the button!

You may have noticed that your church does not do it this way. You don't have communion kiosks: you don't send out mail order kits for communion. You do it together.

You do it together, and you do it at the same time. Why?

- Taking communion together is an important part of maintaining the unity of the church. Christ prayed that we might be one.
- We do it at a scheduled time, regularly, so that we might not go a long period of time without the opportunity for self-examination and repentance.
- We do it together in public, which forces us to mind our manners be serious about it. Communion is not trivial; therefore it is right to make it a solemn ceremony.

You might think that taking the communion to a hospital patient is an exception to that. It is not; it reminds the patient that he or she is still in unity with the rest of us.

Therefore, may I recommend to you the following:

- Take communion with a deliberate reverence. It is a serious thing and should be taken seriously.
- Take it with proper self-examination. If the Holy Spirit brings anything to your mind needing repentance, then repent. When you leave, take action on that repentance, whatever that might be. In particular, grant forgiveness where it is needed — for your Lord forgave you.
- Take communion looking back to the past — to the sacrifice of Christ. Take it in the present, with repentance. Take it looking forward to the future — when He comes again.

Wait for one another – we're all in this together.

September 27

A Curious Law

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 NIV (22) If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, (23) you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

It is a curious passage. The ancient Hebrews did not execute a criminal by hanging him. Death was by stoning, or occasionally burning to death and sometimes by the sword. What is referred to here is the practice of hanging the body of one who has been executed in a public place. The ancient Hebrews used the word tree to mean any form of wood; it was usually done on a post with a horizontal beam. It was designed to increase the shame attached to the criminal. Most often, it was used for royalty or other important people. You will recall that the Philistines took the head of King Saul and put it in the Temple of their God. Likewise, David took the head of Goliath and brought it to Jerusalem. The key point is that it was used to increase the disgrace and shame of the execution.

The warning to the Israelites than concerns desecrating the land. In their minds, the land of Israel was God's possession which he had parceled out to them. It was God's land, and it was not to be desecrated. We might ask why the body had to be buried on the same day.

- One reason is that this limits the scope of anger. If that body stays up for a few weeks it will be a constant reminder both to winners and losers and may provoke more bloodshed.
- We must also recall that the body is God's temple — the temple of the Holy Spirit. As such, even the body of a criminal should be treated with respect.
- There is a third thought: moral defilement. If you continually hang the bodies of criminals, leaving them up for weeks, what does it do to the mind of your people — especially the young ones? Perhaps the perils of violent video games can be seen in this illustration.

Whatever the rationale, the Pharisees understood the law quite well. Everything had to go according to the law, or there would be no end of bickering about it. So, they buried him on the same day to conform to even the slightest details of the Mosaic law.

Indeed, the Mosaic law would recognize the sacrifice of Christ as an atonement sacrifice. The Pharisees made sure that the rules were followed to the letter. Apparently they got it right, for no one ever raised the issue in the church (or in the Jewish community) of whether or not this was an atonement sacrifice. It also gave the Pharisees a chance to examine the body carefully. They had every opportunity to make sure that he was — as the munchkins said of the Wicked Witch — he was really “most sincerely dead.” When we take communion we are to remember the pain and suffering of his sacrifice for us. This is fitting, for with this pain and sacrifice he bought our salvation. But we should also remember that this was an extremely shameful death. It was a disgrace to be crucified. As you partake this morning, remember that he bore not only the pain but the shame of the cross — and he did it for you, because he loves you.

October 4

Augusta

Ask any golfer if he has ever heard of Augusta, Georgia. You will soon find out that one of the premier golf clubs in the United States is the Augusta National Golf Club. Established in 1933, it is by golf standards not a particularly expensive club to get in — but it is extremely exclusive. It is a club which is highly driven by tradition, with an eye towards pageantry. There is no application form for entrance into the club. You must be invited by the club to join. Currently, there are around 300 members. As a practical matter of fact to gain entrance in the club somebody has to know you. More than that, you must be regarded as a success in this world. How exclusive is this club? The last president of the United States to be a member was Dwight Eisenhower. Barack Obama, a well-known golfer and president of the United States, seems to have been overlooked for membership.

In the same city of Augusta, Georgia you will find an institution named University Hospital. Interestingly enough, despite the name, it is not affiliated with any university. The name is a leftover from previous times. The hospital itself was established in 1818 and has gone through many changes since. It is probably the best hospital in that part of the world, repeatedly winning awards in a variety of specialties. Unlike the golf club, admission to the hospital seems to be a very non-exclusive event. All they seem to want to know is what's wrong with your body? The fact that you are socially well-known or a rich, worldly success really doesn't seem to have anything to do with it.

The church, in many ways, resembles both of these institutions. Like the golf club, the church is a highly traditional organization. For example, we have been celebrating communion in the same way (bread and cup) for almost 2 millennia. It's not particularly expensive by charitable organization standards; indeed, depending upon your circumstances you may find it quite inexpensive indeed. And like the golf club, membership is by invitation only. Unlike the golf club, the invitation is open to anyone who is a sinner.

The church is also like the hospital. You have to be sick to get into the hospital; you have to be a sinner to get into the church. Who you are and who you know are essentially irrelevant. The one person you really do need to know is Jesus Christ. He's the founder of the church and he designed it to do good for you.

The church precedes both the hospital and the golf club. It was established about A.D. 33 at a tremendous cost — the price tag was the body and blood of our Lord and Savior. This is what he asks you to remember at communion. Your particular congregation may be on the right side of the tracks or down in a ghetto; it does not matter. The value of the church is not a matter of social exclusiveness nor even the help that it tries to provide its members. The value of the church is in salvation by the grace of God through the blood of Christ. As you partake this morning, remember that you are in the church; the very body of Christ in the world. Take communion, in remembrance of the price Christ paid for you.

October 11

Self Examination

1 Corinthians 11:28 NASB (28) But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

It is an often repeated injunction, but a seldom explained one. We are told to examine ourselves; just what does that mean? We might begin with a problem that Paul is trying to solve in this passage. It seems that some of the Corinthians were treating the Lord's Supper more or less like a potluck. Worse, they were exhibiting rather bad manners in doing so. Those who arrived early seem to have been fed quite well; others went hungry. Some of them got drunk in the process. Whatever else this might mean, it's obvious that these people were not taking the Lord's Supper seriously at all. Paul tells them that in that instance they are guilty of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So it is that he tells them that they should examine themselves first. It's a common thought in the Old Testament and the New Testament; self-examination is a requirement so that you might produce the fruits of repentance. The word itself in this context is often used to mean to test something, like you might put a bar of metal to a test. John Wesley put this fairly simply; you must know the nature and design of the Lord's Supper and desire to comply with both. Put shortly, know what you're doing and do it right. Another commentator said that it should always be done "in loving remembrance." You are to remember what the Lord did for you at the Cross.

These criteria exclude certain people from taking communion. For example, most churches do not offer communion to infants, for they are not capable of understanding what they are doing. But we might extend that; if someone claims to be a Christian, but does not really understand what the Lord's Supper is, we might at that point tell them not to participate until they do. But suppose someone comes in to take the Lord's Supper while he is furious and angry; a state which does not do much for the ability to examine oneself carefully. Should we not, in Christian charity, decline to serve such a man? Take that little bit further. What about the man who is willing to partake in the Lord's Supper, but not willing to repent? We do him no favors by offering communion to such a man.

So what should we do? We need to remember that communion is a sacrament: an outward sign of your inward intentions. When you take communion you declare the death of our Lord Jesus Christ as being the atonement which covers your sins. Look inside yourself; do you really mean this? If not, it is better not to partake. But if you are willing to do so knowing what the bread and cup really mean, in full sincerity and great love for your Savior, do so. Then go forth this week and show the world that you are one who is in full communion with our Lord and Savior.

October 18

Rudder Orders

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

The United States Navy, some years ago now, made a major change in the way in which its ships were steered. It's not something obvious to just any passenger, but as you might imagine they take these things very seriously in our Navy. The old-style consists of what are called "rudder orders." In this method, the helmsman is given orders concerning what to do with the rudder. So if he was told to turn the rudder port 30°, he would set the rudder at that position and the ship would turn to the starboard (the rudder always points in the opposite direction of the turn of the bow.) The degree of the turn really did not determine the new course; only the rapidity with which the ship was to turn. A small angle meant a gentle turn; a larger one, a swifter one. Note that this did not tell the helmsman just what direction he was going to wind up in. He needed a second order to put the rudder amidships to set the ship on its new course.

The new method is quite a bit simpler. You tell the helmsman to bring the ship to a particular course, or you tell him to change the course by some number of degrees. With the advent of computers, power assistance on rotors and the fact that we have only one sailing ship left in our Navy, the new method seems to work better. As you can imagine, however, it was quite a change in style for the sailors of the time.

So why did the Navy change? One reason is that the old-style did in fact require two orders. That occupied more of the captain's time, which could be very precious in a combat situation. Also, it's much easier to check the results of the new method. If you happen to be heading towards a specific target, you just look out over the bow of the ship and see if the jack staff aligns with where you're going. If there's no particular target, you can look at the compass. The old-style focused on what you were doing with the ship. The new style focuses on where you're going. After all, the voyage is not a success if you don't arrive where you intended to go.

The institution of communion marked a similar change for the people of God. In the old-style — that is to say, the Old Testament — the people look backward to their sins and attempted to make corrections with the sacrifices they brought. They understood that this wasn't going to work forever, but it is what the Lord had commanded them to do. They were going to continue to do it as long as those sacrifices were needed. But in the new style, corrections by sacrifice have ended. Christ is the sacrifice who has atoned for all of our sins. The new style looks ahead.

The new style looks ahead — to the coming of Christ. We are told frequently in the New Testament that he will return to judge the living and the dead. That's where this ship is going. We should therefore take communion with gratitude, looking back to the sacrifice of Christ. We should also take it with anticipation, looking forward to his imminent return. As the ancient church used to say it, "even so, Lord Jesus, come." Communion should remind us that we want our Lord Jesus to return — and taking communion proclaims that he will return.

October 25

Clear the Way

It is a common fact of communion meditations that we are exhorted to continue "until He comes again." It is a phrase which is always there in the scriptural passages concerning communion, but seldom mentioned. This gives rise to an unusual bit of behavior, which if you will pardon me I will refer to as the "gumdrop method." If you ask a Christian what he's supposed to do about the fact that the Lord is coming again you will get an answer that more or less runs along the lines of the gumdrop. The gumdrop is plopped down wherever it may go, and it stays there. Blorp! We conclude from the communion meditation that there's really nothing for us to do. This is a conclusion which is brought about by examining a lack of evidence and concluding that that's the evidence. It happens, however, that we have suitable instructions on the point:

Isaiah 40:3-5 NASB A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. (4) "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; (5) Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Somehow or other, we are expected to clear the way. What could that mean? At the very least it means that we are to clear away the hurdles and barriers that the average man has to overcome before he could come to Christ. That might mean such things as a good knowledge of apologetics, or participation in our political process which as of late has tended to drive Christianity out of the public mind. It might even mean that we are to preach the gospel to those who have not heard it, the unsaved of our own community.

It's not just a push and shove operation. We are to make the way "smooth"; we are to make it easy for our friends and neighbors to receive Christ. That might mean removing some of the barriers between us and our next-door neighbor. But in all of this we need to remember that we are in the wilderness. If we think this is going to be easy, we are mistaken. The desert is a tough place to live; the wilderness doesn't offer much support. We need to be prepared in our minds to do what needs to be done.

Then, if you will notice, the Scripture takes a different turn of verb. The first verse is plainly a command; the second verse instructs us to "let" things be done. That's not us; that's Him at work. We work on the highway; he gets the rest of the desert. Only when he has finished his work of preparation will he return. Note that this is his timing, not that of self-proclaimed prophets.

And what is the result we shall see? We shall see the glory of the Lord revealed. We often picture that is Christ returning, but that understates the case completely. The glory of God is already an accomplished fact; we just don't see it visibly. On that day it will become visible to one and all, the living and the dead. The world shall see what we have known. I just hope we're not too embarrassed when someone asks whether or not we knew about this before hand. It's going to be rather embarrassing to admit that you knew the glory of God and did nothing about it.

So, as you meditate upon the Lord's supper today, you might ask yourself some questions:

- Have you worked in this world to clear the way for the Lord?
- Have you made it smooth? Is it easy to see Christ in your life?

Remember what Christ has done for you; ponder what you should do for Him.

November 1

Dirty Shirt

Psalms 102:25-27 NASB "Of old You founded the earth, And the heavens are the work of Your hands. (26) "Even they will perish, but You endure; And all of them will wear out like a garment; Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. (27) "But You are the same, And Your years will not come to an end.

The psalmist here reminds us of the eternal nature of God. The matter is relatively simple, taken from a philosophical sense. The universe exists; it had a starting point. Therefore it needed a starter — or as we would put it, a creator. Genesis 1:1 tells us that God is exactly that creator. That tells us that God is not part of the universe, for the part did not create the whole. It is interesting to observe that in the history of mankind the only person to put himself forward as this creator is the God of Abraham. There are no other candidates for the job. The fact that he is the creator implies also that he has an eternal nature, one which is not bounded by time or space. This nature — a glory only hinted at in creation — is later to be revealed to us. We are told that we shall see him "face to face."

If you follow what the physics department tells you, we shall see a continuing increase in what is called entropy — a measure of the disorder of the universe. Eventually, the universe should wind down into a very cold, very homogenous muddle. The time to accomplish this is much greater than the known age of the universe today. But God tells us a different story. He tells us that he will change this universe, as one commentator put it, "like a dirty shirt." One of the seven last things is the new heaven and new earth, and he has promised us this. But let us be clear: God's character does not change, just the surety where is known as the universe. As the old hymn put it, "thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not." Even if the heavens and the earth change completely, God's character will remain the same.

Someone is all the supposed to happen? Virtually every theory concerning the prophecies says that this will happen at or after the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Which brings us to the point of communion: we do this in anticipation of his return. Each and every time you take communion, you are telling the world you believe that he will return. When he does, communion will cease, for we will have fellowship with the risen Lord. In the meanwhile, be of good cheer — for as Christ has told us:

John 14:19 NASB "... because I live, you will live also."

We are handling high and holy things. For this reason, if for no other, you should examine yourself carefully before taking communion. Is there something in you which displeases Him? If so, give him your promise that you will allow him to deal with it, however that might be. Then partake, with your eyes on the future, knowing that heaven and earth will pass away but God will not change. He has promised you a home in that new heaven and new earth — and his eternal character shows that he will keep that promise.

November 8

Mime

2 John 1:7 NASB For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.

In 1976 the comedian Mel Brooks made an unusual film. It was titled *Mel Brooks Silent Movie*, and it was just that — silent. Silent, except for one word spoken by one actor. So here's your movie trivia question of the week: what was the word, and who spoke it? The answer is fairly simple: the word was "non" (which is the French word for "no") and it was spoken by the famous French mime, Marcel Marceau. (A mime, for those of you who don't know, is always supposed to be silent.)

The art of the mime is simply this: he tells the story, whatever it is, in gestures, bodily movement — but never in words. You might ask of what use is such a performer. The method has its uses:

- It is excellent in telling the story to those of a different culture.
- It works pretty well with the illiterate, as well.
- It is a technique which can be brilliant and simple at the same time — which is a most intriguing way to tell a story.

In a way, Communion bears a great deal of resemblance to mime. It needs no words; it is simple and brilliant at the same time. For most of the history of the church — at least before the Reformation — the majority of Christians were quite illiterate. Unless you were part of the upper-class, you were probably never educated in reading and writing. Not that this would do you any good if you were, because you would also need a great deal of money to purchase a copy of the Bible — they were all hand written. And, since Christianity spread across many cultures, we needed things that would tell the story without words.

Communion tells the most important story ever told. It teaches us a lesson of the Incarnation. It is a central point of Christian theology that Christ came in the flesh — in other words, he is totally and completely human. But it is also equally true that he is totally and completely divine — God in the flesh. The purpose of the Incarnation was to provide the ultimate atonement sacrifice. After all, God could drop off instructions in the form of any number of prophets — and did. It is no accident that virtually all the classic heresies of the Christian faith start with someone having "a new and special addition" to the Bible. That special knowledge somehow or other informed you that Christ was either not God or he was not human — or both. The church has had to fight this since its earliest days.

So when you take Communion this morning, remember that when you take the bread you are proclaiming his body — silently, like a mime. You are telling the world that Christ came in the flesh, that he is totally human. Being totally human, he can sympathize with your problems and your pains. But you also take the cup, which proclaims his sacrifice on the Cross where he bled and died. To be an acceptable sacrifice he had to be sinless, and to be sinless he had to be God. So you proclaim his divine nature, fully and completely, when you take the cup.

Therefore, do this in a serious and sacred manner. Don't take it lightheartedly, but examine yourself before you do take. Then, in remembrance, partake of his body and his blood. Be the silent witness to the Incarnation.

November 15

Solid

1 Corinthians 10:17 NASB (17) Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

One of the difficulties of translating one language into another is that the same word may have different meanings. The author of the text may have use that word to mean one of those meanings, or perhaps more than one of those meanings. This type of text is very difficult to translate. Take, for example, the Greek word for “body.” It has a number of meanings.

- It can simply mean the body of a man or an animal, living or dead. This meaning it shares with English.
- You can also mean planets and stars — usually translated “heavenly bodies.”
- Another sense familiar to Christians is that of being a body of men; the church is often described as being the body of Christ.

There is, however, a fourth definition. It’s meaning is something which casts a shadow — as distinct from the shadow itself. Paul just might be alluding to this definition here.

- To cast a shadow, a body would require light. We could see this as the light of God shining upon the church, casting the shadow which then portrays God to mankind.
- More to the point, perhaps, to make a shadow you need something which is solid and opaque — something which can be seen. This physical, tangible nature which can interact with light also characterizes the church. We are the body of Christ in the world.

The most obvious point of this particular verse is that we, the church, show ourselves to be one body — a single entity, casting a single shadow. That unity is particularly important for evangelism. But we also proclaim ourselves to be solid. If you will, by the very act of proclaiming our unity in communion, we are telling the world that we are not just some random collection of people. We proclaim ourselves to be something which casts the distinct shadow in the light of God. We say by this act that we are proclaiming that we represent, that we model, the heart and soul of Jesus Christ. In us, men may see the image of Christ.

That’s the claim we make when we take the same body, the same bread. We are telling the world that if they want to see Christ they should look here. The question for us is quite simply this: if they look at us, do they really see Christ? Perhaps as you examine yourselves this morning you should be asking this question. Do I really look like Christ?

November 22

Altar

Two of the most dull and boring books of the Bible are Ezra and Nehemiah. There is a great deal of accounting and a goodly amount of genealogy; this is coupled with the with the record of correspondence between the monarch and the people of Jerusalem. It's not something most Christians are familiar with; much less do they connect it with Communion. But there is an important connection.

Let's look at the situation. This is the first batch of Jews who have been permitted to return to the city of Jerusalem by King Cyrus. He has specifically commanded them to rebuild the Temple and there to offer sacrifices for the King — Cyrus is a man who takes no chances with any God. When they arrived they find very quickly that they are surrounded by hostile populations who are completely opposed to any rebuilding. This is tightly coupled with the fact that the city has no walls. In those days, city walls for your primary method of defense. A city without walls was simply a collection of victims and slaves waiting to be picked up. So you might think that the first order of business would be to rebuild the walls. It wasn't. The walls were not rebuilt for quite some time. Their first step was to build an altar in accordance with the Law of Moses and offer sacrifices on it, as prescribed in the Law. This might seem to you to be the actions of a bunch of religious nut cases, but they saw it differently. One overwhelming fact was clear to them: their ancestors had sinned against the Lord God and he had punished them with exile. That exile was beginning to end, but they still had the same sense of sin. That sense of sin was both personal (that is, each of them individually was a sinner) and national (that is, that the nation of Judah as a whole had sinned against God.) Their first need was to get right with the Almighty. They were confident God's power and ultimate triumph — they just wanted to be part of it. And to do that they knew that they had to present atonement for the sins of the nation and for their own sins. This is important to us in for no other reason than to understand that this is the civilization into which Jesus came. More important, it tells us the necessity of dealing with our sins before the Almighty.

There is a great parallel in this to Communion. Our atonement, of course, was made for us at the Cross by Jesus, the Christ. We should not adopt the attitude that Christ has made atonement, everything's going to be all right for us. We are sinners; we live in a nation of sinners. If we ignore these facts we have much of history to look at to see just what will happen to us — and it is not very pleasant. It is vitally important, therefore, for us as a church as well as individuals to connect with our atonement.

We do this in the Lord's Supper. In the cup we see his blood, shed for us. In the bread, we see his body broken for us. It is not something we can do as an afterthought; it is something essential to our right relationship with the Lord God Almighty. Like the Jews of Ezra's time, we must look at it as being first things first. For the children of God, the first thing is our relationship with him. For the Christian, that first thing means the atonement made by Christ on the Cross and our connection to it. Therefore, consider well what you do when you take Communion this morning. Do it in a worthy manner, repenting of your sins and asking our Lord to send revival on our land so that we as a nation may repent as well.

November 29

Transfiguration

In one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament we see the record of Christ, on the mountain, being transfigured before three of his disciples (Peter, James and John.) During this Transfiguration two figures from the Old Testament appear before Christ. The first of these is Moses. In a career that positively dripped miracles, the most important thing that can be said about Moses is that he is the Lawgiver to the Jewish people. By his hands the Ten Commandments were brought down from the mountain. This was his great mission. You can see its importance by the fact that when Christ is arguing with the Pharisees or the scribes, the common phrase used to describe the regulations derived from Moses is "the Law of Moses." To the Jewish people, he is the supreme authority on right and wrong.

The other man who appears before Christ is Elijah. He is the quintessential prophet of the Old Testament. His particular role was to be the man who stood against all of the authority in the kingdom and proclaimed the will of God. It is our picture of prophets ever since; men who live in the wilderness, often on the run from the anger of the King. What is remarkable about Elijah among all the other prophets of the Old Testament is this: he never died. His assistant, Elisha, saw him taken up to heaven bodily. When the ancient Jew spoke of Moses and Elijah it was a synonym for "the Law and the Prophets."

Taken together these two men, great as they are, are subordinate to Jesus Christ. Christ is a man whose mere presence suspends the law; whose message exceeds that of all the prophets. In all things he is first. But there is more.

Moses died. It seems that he made one mistake in his career, and it cost him the privilege of entering the promised land. Great as he was, he experienced death. Elijah, on the other hand, is a representative of those who have eternal life — he never died. The superiority of Christ over these two also implies his superiority over both life and death. If these two lessons were all we got out of the Transfiguration the text would be more than honored. What is astonishing about it is that the Transfiguration happens just before the Crucifixion. Indeed, as Christ was walking down the mountain and explaining the role of John the Baptist as Elijah he remarks that as the leaders had done to John the Baptist what they pleased, they would do the same with Jesus. He knew that he was going to suffer and die. He gave his life for us, out of his great love.

And out of this great episode we can see what Christ thought most important. Think about it; what did he ask you to remember?

- He does not ask you to remember that he is Lord of the law and the prophets.
- He does not ask you to remember that he is Lord of life and death.

He asks you, as you take communion, that you remember his great sacrifice on the Cross. It is not his great power or authority, it is his great love that we celebrate in communion. Consider it well; this is the one thing he wants you to remember every time. So as you partake this morning, remember that the Lord of the law and the prophets, the Lord of life and death wants you to remember his great love.

December 6

Jailbird

She is 62 years old. She lives in a room — well, really a cell — with seven other women. She is serving a 14 year sentence; given the incentives offered, she will probably serve another 11 years before being paroled. She will be 73 years old when she gets out, at the earliest.

You might well ask what she's doing there. What particular crime puts a woman away at that age for that long? It seems that about nine months ago, in a drunken blackout rage, she took a butcher knife to her husband. This was made worse by the fact that this was a second offense. Her first conviction was for manslaughter which is, of course, a crime in which someone dies. The State of California takes a rather dim view of these things. California is not particularly noted for providing luxurious facilities for prisoners, male or female.

With that background, there are two facts which you might well find quite amazing.

- Amazing fact number one: she is a Christian. She had wandered from the faith, but a few months ago a group of Christians visited her and hundreds of others in a county jail. She was restored to the faith and has been trying to live that faith ever since. In prison ministry, you see things like this quite often.
- Amazing fact number two: her husband forgave her. It doesn't affect her sentence, or her guilt. But it is a powerful testimony: if Jesus can forgive me, who then is it that I cannot forgive?

There is very little more that we know about her, and much that we could know. But you now have the essentials of the matter.

I can almost hear the voice of an elder's wife from the church we use to attend. I mentioned a similar circumstance, and in a shocked tone of voice she told me, "no real Christian would ever go to prison." Really? Do you remember a fellow by the name of Paul? A man who persecuted the real Christians, some of them persecuted to death. He was called by Christ and later on found himself in prison for the faith. He understood this quite well. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. It doesn't matter who the "lost" might be; he died for all of us. As one Bible teacher once put it, "there is only one qualification you have to meet before you can become a Christian. You have to be a sinner first. And some of us (blows on fingernails, polishes them on shirt) are *exceedingly* well qualified."

Perhaps that's why the commandment to take the Lord's Supper is given to all of us, not just those of us who are respectable. We are commanded to take it because we are all sinners, all of us in His church — and therefore it symbolizes our unity. We are commanded to take it because it shows that we have been given the grace of God, out of his great love for us. We commemorate his great love in his sacrifice on the Cross, for he died for all of us. So as you partake of communion this morning, remember what your Savior did. Look at the bread and see his body; look at the cup and see his blood. Examine yourself, and see if you need repentance — and someone's forgiveness. Do this in the worthy manner commanded. You do not know if this is your last Communion; none of us is guaranteed tomorrow. If it is, should it not correctly reflect both your sinfulness and your gratitude?

December 13

Yosh

Most men understand the protocol. If you get a new shirt for Christmas, particularly from your wife, you wear it as soon as possible to demonstrate that you like the shirt. This particular shirt was one which was nice, but not the kind that would ordinarily invite a lot of attention — or so I thought. I came up to the breakfast table but before I could sit down my daughter interrupted me.

“Dad, that shirt is YOSH.” Having no idea what the content of that sentence might be interpreted as, I snappily replied with, “Yosh?” I thought I was expressing my ignorance of the word; however, my younger son thought that I was challenging his sister’s judgment on matters sartorial. “Oh yeah, dad, that shirt is definitely YOSH.” So at this point I had a shirt, it was Yosh — but more than that I did not know.

The Urban Dictionary defines the word as an adjective which expresses an enthusiastic affirmative. This was quite some time ago, so we didn’t have that definition available. But my son rose to the occasion, and informed me that something which is Yosh can be a person, place or thing (most commonly a thing). The word is an adjective and has two characteristics:

- It means that its object is perfectly suited to whatever task is assigned to it.
- It means that the task assigned is a very specific one for which that object is designed.

(I would advise the reader that the meaning of the word has changed over the years since this incident, acquiring several new meanings which might not be acceptable in polite company. Use with caution.)

The concept, if not that specific word, applies to communion. We may see it this way:

- Christ was perfectly suited to the task of bringing salvation to us. He is Son of Man, and therefore knows our weaknesses. He is the Son of God, and as such is the Word of God, the message in the flesh.
- The task of the atonement, by which we are saved, required a very specific individual. As detailed in the Old Testament Law, the sacrifice must be perfect; only Christ is. He is uniquely qualified to be our atonement.

Ah, but you might ask, “where’s the enthusiasm part?” If you want to find that you’re going to have to look in the hymnbooks. You won’t have far to look; like the writers of the Psalms, the writers of the hymns understood the enthusiasm generated in our salvation. Perhaps you might remember this old hymn:

We have heard the joyful sound,
Jesus saves! Jesus saves!

Sometimes we must look back and see what great sacrifice it was for Christ to go to the Cross for sinners like you and me. When we look back at that we can see what a tremendous gift he has given us, and that is cause for great joy. The time when we do that “looking back” is when we take communion. As you take of the cup and the bread this morning, remember: this is the visible echo of the joyful sound — Jesus saves!

December 20

We Need to Talk

Let me be perfectly clear. Your author lives in Southern California — yes, Disneyland, beach bunnies, Hollywood stars and smog. Normally this is not too much of a handicap, but at Christmas time we get a visual bombardment from Vermont. I'm talking about those Christmas cards we all send. Designed in Maine, printed in China, they pose an interesting form of culture shock. Southern California has a climate very much like Israel; there are only two places in the world where the Joshua tree cactus grows. Israel is one; you guess the other. So here's the problem:

- First, what's with this horse pulling a vehicle with no wheels? We know about horses. But we can at least ask that whatever you're using behind that horse should have seatbelts.
- Snow. Yes we know what it is. We occasionally visit it to go skiing. But we keep it up in the mountains where it doesn't bother things.
- Have you seen how these people dress in Christmas cards? If we did that there would be an epidemic of heatstroke.
- At the Rose Parade each year, there will be some Iowa native holding up a sign saying, "Hi mom. Windchill factor +85°." He is factually correct.

So, imagine the difficulties of explaining to our small children just what these things on Christmas cards are all about — and what possible relationship they can have to Christmas. If you think this is a problem for us, can you imagine all those poor children in Hawaii? You are warping their little minds with the strange images. (For the record: your author was born in Alaska. He lives in Southern California. That is not an accident.)

I bring this up to you as a matter of reminder. If you live in Vermont, the Courier and Ives Christmas makes perfect sense. But suppose you are trying to explain Christmas to someone who lived his entire life in, say, a jungle. You would be stuck explaining snow, sleighs and various other items which aren't really particularly relevant to the Christmas story. And this planet has a lot of jungle dwellers. Evangelists know that if you want to be understood, you need to speak the local language. That's true not only for the language of sound, but for the language of symbols as well. An African native might look at your picture of a sleigh going through the snow and be completely puzzled. Getting him to the manger at Bethlehem would be a long trip.

That, I submit, is one of the reasons why Jesus chose the elegantly simple symbols of Communion. They are common enough across multiple cultures and easy enough to explain.

- The wine, representing Christ's blood, bears a strong visual resemblance to blood. (We assume you have sense enough to use a red wine, or other grape product.) This is a liquid which is almost as universal as blood.
- Bread also is nearly universal, and carries with it the interesting characteristic that for most people of most times bread was not sliced but broken — just like the body of Christ.

As you celebrate Communion remember that you are in fellowship with the church universal. Billions of Christians celebrate with you. In so doing the church universal he proclaims the physical sacrifice of the death of her Lord, Jesus Christ. He's put it to you plainly, in simple language. Remember his death on the cross and the change it should bring in your life. Do this, in remembrance of Him.

December 27

Whose Body?

(The author is indebted to Agatha Christie for the title and Andrew Murray for much of the content.)

Consider, if you will, the favorite word of most two-year-olds: mine. As adults use the word it has a variety of meanings. But I would focus today on the method by which you got whatever it is of what you can say “mine.”

- You could’ve obtained it by creating it, purchasing it or inheriting it. In these instances there is no particular dispute over whether or not it’s really yours, and there is some sense that the item in question is deservedly yours. You, or your ancestor, paid for it or earned it or made it.
- Alternately, it could be yours by means of a gift. In that instance, you usually don’t feel that you particularly deserved it — just that you got it.

Does it make a difference? I submit that it does. We are told that in communion we receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Do you not see that this makes that body ours? Indeed it does — what we call His body is now ours, by means of a gift. It’s not that we deserved it, or that one of our ancestors deserved it, it’s that he gave it to us.

Gifts come in assorted sizes, shapes and flavors. But it is a fact that a gift which is given to us out of love is usually one that is highly prized, for we remember the love which gave it. We tend to think highly of the giver. But there is a greater possibility. A gift which is given freely — not out of compulsion, but out of free will — is the gift of a friend. The gift symbolizes not only the love, but our relationship with that individual.

There’s a curiously interesting aspect of this. We mentioned gifts *given* freely; but have you ever considered that this is a gift which is *taken* freely? When people think that the gift is somehow suspect, they ask questions, wondering if they aren’t really entitled to it. But a gift that you can take freely is one that is a pure gift indeed. When a gift comes with the simple joy of being nothing but a gift, purely, it is much easier to take.

In this instance, we must also consider the relationship between the giver and the gift. Depending upon the giver, a gift can have greater value if the person giving it is greatly valued. For example, suppose that one of your distant ancestors had served in the Revolutionary War. For his services, George Washington gave him the gift of a sword, let us say. You wouldn’t keep it in the junk metal bin in the garage; it would be hanging over your fireplace mantel and you would be very happy to explain its origins to anyone who asked. The giver (in this instance George Washington) gives value to the gift. Thus, the Lord’s Supper is a very prized and great gift indeed; do not take it lightly. As you partake, consider these things:

- Who is the giver?
- At what price was the gift given?
- With what motive was the gift given?