

January 6

Revealed

Matthew 11:25-26

One of the more popular forms of literature in English is the mystery novel. The word “mystery” is also used in the New Testament, and shares certain characteristics with detective fiction.

- The solution to the problem presented is revealed, not discovered by the reader. The brilliant detective does the revealing; you, the reader, just get to watch.
- In hindsight — once the solution has been revealed — you can see the clues to the correct solution were available from the very first chapter.
- The solution is, according to the great detective, “elementary.” It’s simple; but only after it is revealed.

God uses that same word, “mystery”, but he adds to this certain characteristics:

- The solution is hidden from the wise. He makes sure that the intelligent, brilliant scholar cannot possibly figure it out. This doesn’t prevent them from trying, of course. In hindsight it’s obvious, but in the meanwhile it is from the brilliant.
- It is not hidden from those who have a childlike faith. They understand they are believing what God has told them, not something they understand. These are the people who know that you do not have to understand something to believe it. They just see it and take it with a childlike faith.
- One key characteristic of God’s revelations is that he reveals these things through His Son. Just like the mystery writer, God has chosen to reveal his mysteries through a particular person. Jesus is, if you will, God’s Sherlock Holmes.

In a very real sense, communion is one of those revelations. It reveals to us in very terse symbols the plan of God for the ages.

- It reveals to us the atonement. This is something that would’ve been obvious to the Jews of the first century, but has to be explained to somebody in the modern age. It reminds us that someone else has paid the price for our sins.
- It reveals to us the resurrection. By the power the Holy Spirit Jesus came forth from the grave. By that same power, God’s children shall rise at the last judgment in much the same way.
- It reveals to us the love that God has for his children. Greater love has no man than he lay down his life for his friends; communion reminds us Jesus did just that.

January 13

Resurrection and Life

John 11:25-26

On his way to the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus stops to comfort Martha. In so doing he makes three of the most extraordinary statements about himself:

- He proclaims himself to be “the” Resurrection. God is the sum of all perfections and in that vein Christ says he is the Resurrection.
- He tells us that he is the life — the word in question is the Greek word for biological life, not spirits floating around on clouds with harps.
- And perhaps most unusual of all, he says that if you believe this you never really die. You may die physically, but you will continue to live. In the context, this includes being raised from the dead.

If anyone tells you that Jesus only claimed to be a good teacher, show him this passage.

It often escapes the curiosity of the reader, but it is absolutely contrary to the expectations of the culture of the time that he would reveal this first to Martha. First, she’s a woman — which means second-class citizen in this society. And of all the women to reveal this to, you’d think he would pick somebody like her sister Mary, who was the spiritual type. Martha is associated with the woman in the kitchen, washing dishes. She is portrayed as busy and practical, but not particularly interested in the finer points of theology. Indeed, she is no philosopher or theologian. She will never become a great evangelist; and as far as we know she was never a teacher. Christ revealed this to the most ordinary human being he could find. There’s a lesson in that; this revelation is not for those of great understanding only, but for the simple and straightforward as well.

Christ asks Martha whether or not she believes this. She tells him that she does. In a very real sense you proclaim the same thing when you take communion.

- The Scripture tells us that you proclaim his death in communion. But if you proclaim his death, you obviously proclaim his resurrection. It is no great logical leap to see that he has the keys to hell and death.
- You also tell the world that he is the Christ, the Messiah. This is the one promised to the Jewish people who would save them (and us) from our sins. This is Emmanuel, “God with us.”
- For that reason I must warn you: if you don’t mean it, don’t take communion. The Scripture warns us of this explicitly, but you can reason it out fairly quickly. If you do this because everybody else is doing this, God knows. You are messing with something he considers very, very important. He will not take it idly.

If you do believe this, then take heart. He is the Christ who is the resurrection; you will live eternally in his kingdom in some bodily form. He tells us that he has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. Communion says you believe, and look forward to your new home.

January 20 Preparation

Psalm 131

We are often told the significance of communion. Sometimes, however, it occurs to us to ask, “just how am I to prepare for communion?” David, in this very short Psalm, gives us a good model. Note, please, that this is primarily a conversation between David and God. It’s personal. God is, of course, a sufficient audience for anyone to talk to. You can say things to him that just can’t be said to anybody else — even those things that would embarrass you mightily were anyone else to know of them. So please, let us prepare ourselves for communion.

Verse 1.

“My heart is not proud.” The heart is the center of matters spiritual. It is important for us in our spiritual lives that we should not be proud, for, as CS Lewis once put it, pride is the “complete anti-God state of mind.” Primarily this means that we do not look down on others. Make no comparison with the man standing next to you. He may indeed be a terrible sinner, but what is that between you and God? Do not be self-righteous — remember the Pharisee and the tax collector.

“My eyes are not haughty.” Just as an aid to defeating your pride, remember that your eyes show what your heart wants. This may be simply a case of not looking at the short skirt of the cute girl next to you. A much worse case comes when you are haughty with the fake humility of those who are genuinely proud of being humble. Let your eyes express what your heart has to say — and look in the mirror once in a while.

“Great matters.” How often have you thought during communion of a series of improvements for the pastor’s sermon? Each of us is tempted at times to be an expert on things that are actually well above us or too difficult for us. Most of us know the vanity of an expert at everything — a critic without limits. Do you critique the sermon, or do you learn from it?

Verse 2.

“Composed and quieted my soul.” Communion is no time to allow your soul to be troubled by the anger and petty grievances of the day. You may think you have no control over this; anger just arises somehow. This is not true; you can willingly set it aside. You do not have to rehearse the petty grievances in your life. But to do this you must take charge of your own thoughts. Remember, communion is not a matter of life and death — it’s more important than that.

“Like a weaned child.” This is a great picture of mature Christianity. One who is mature in the faith is constantly relying on God alone. He is confident that God will provide his every need and basks in the love that is shown by our heavenly Father. Picture a young child crawling up in mom’s lap and curling up there. Not an infant looking to nurse, but a child confident of his mother’s love.

Verse 3.

“Hope in the Lord.” In communion, you proclaim the death of our Lord. In so doing you proclaim the resurrection of our Lord as well. But do you not see that when you proclaim the resurrection of our Lord, you proclaim your hope in your own resurrection — just as he has promised. In communion you claim the promises of a Christian, including eternal life. There is only one possible source for this — the Lord God Almighty.

But you don’t proclaim just the resurrection and life eternal; you proclaim all the blessings that his Fatherly care can provide in this world as well. The question is how you do this without a loudspeaker.

The answer is simply this: hope. Where do you put your confidence? How do you know everything’s going to turn out all right? This question arises when you put your hope in the things of this world, for this world cannot guarantee you how things will turn out at all. Rather, stop hoping in the things of this world; put your hope in Christ.

Communion is to remind us that Christ died for our sins. With that comes the hope with the resurrection and life eternal. Set your mind on things above; calm your soul and remember his great sacrifice.

January 27 Stumbling Block

Leviticus 19:14

Leviticus — the home of obscure commandments. Here is one of them:

‘You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the LORD.

(Leviticus 19:14)

it seems rather strange that God felt it necessary to issue this particular commandment. After all, what would your mother say if she caught you doing this? Yet, if you know human nature, you know that this is all too common a way of dealing with someone with a handicap. Someone else can be made to look at it; we are taught to laugh at it. If you upbraid someone for this they will tell you, “hey, it’s funny!” “It’s only a joke” is used to cover all kinds of cruelty. It’s easy to slide past the fact that doing something like this makes our ego swell; we are better than somebody else, if only a blind man. If you are a Christian, you are taught to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This clearly fails the test.

But notice that the commandment does not end there. You are given motivation why you would not do this. The reason? You are to revere your God, who is the Lord. Many of these commandments end that way. The reason has nothing to do with your sympathy for the blind or the deaf, but has everything to do with the fact that the Lord God is looking over your conduct. We forget who is the defender of the orphan, the widow and the powerless. We often think he doesn’t care; we can get away with it. It’s particularly easy to think this one several people do it to the blind. If you genuinely love your neighbor you will not laugh at their weakness but rather help them with it. You are to be kind and merciful to them — as the Lord God Almighty has been kind and merciful to you.

This is how the Lord God Almighty has been merciful to you: despite the fact that you were a sinner, he went to the Cross for your salvation. Consider the alternative: he could have just decided to laugh at you. You’ve been a fool often enough for that. But he didn’t; he died for your sins. You proclaim that every time you take communion. The church goes to some trouble to explain the meaning of the elements of communion. When you partake of them, you are accepting that explanation and telling the world that you believe it and accept the salvation that comes with it. You believe that the bread is his body, broken for you. You believe that the cup is his blood, shed to cleanse your sins. In both, you proclaim his atoning sacrifice is both necessary and sufficient for the forgiveness of your sins.

Therefore, before you partake this morning, examine yourself and see if you have a sense of humor or just a sense of cruelty.

February 3

Downstairs

In our previous church the toddlers had to go down a set of stairs with their parents to go to the parking lot. The stairs are a difficult thing for little ones; the steps are too large for those little feet. Parents know this. So, at the top of the stairs Daddy would reach over and say to the toddler, “hold my hand.” Dad is carrying the diaper bag and who knows what all else in the way of paraphernalia, so it usually takes a little readjustment to get a hand free to hold the toddler. Down the steps they go. Dad is usually in a bit of a hurry and this is rough on the toddler. But dad holds on so that the child does not fall. The child, no matter how many times you explain it to him, does not really understand that dad is doing this to keep him out of trouble. It looks to them like one more parental restriction with no obvious reason.

Thus it is that at the bottom of the stairs the toddler lets go of dad’s hand and rushes out the door as fast as his little feet will carry him. As the door leads to the parking lot, and there are cars moving through it, this causes dad to run after the child and grab his hand again. It’s a good example of how two-year-old brains think — and it’s a pretty fair example of how human beings act in general.

God, like Daddy, sees the difficulties ahead of you. He knows those stairs are going to be hard to climb down. So he takes action to prevent you from getting into trouble. You, on the other hand, don’t see the difficulties ahead (or ignore them completely). As a result you chafe at his restrictions and decide that as soon as possible you’re going to take off on your own. We’re going to do things our way as soon as we can. So the cycle repeats; we run off, he chases us and corrals us one more time. Go

Why does God do this? It’s because he knows you’re a sinner – but He loves you. You’re going to get into trouble, and he wants to prevent that if possible. The greatest example of this is at the Cross. You are a sinner, so before you were born he sent his Son to die on the cross for you. It is his body that is broken as our atonement; it is his blood that cleanses us from our sins. He has already taken this action for you. But he also gives you something that is in the present: Communion. It is not sufficient for you that he died; you must remember and accept his atonement. So it is that he has given us a memorial of his sacrifice so that we might know what to do today. Just like the toddler, he wants you to take his hand. He wants you to cooperate — which is to say, he wants you to repent. Take your troubles to him; take your sins to him and ask him to create in you a clean heart.

If the toddler is cranky enough, there is another method of going down the stairs. Daddy reaches down and picks up the toddler and carries him. If things have gotten much worse in your life, he will carry you, too. Like the stairs, the troubles in life are much easier when he does that. Repent, and accept his loving care. He is your heavenly father and he cares for you.

February 10

The Gift

Valentine's Day, which occurs this week, brings to the typical husband the problem of what kind of gift he should get for his wife. With due humility, we offer the following advice:

- A Valentine's Day gift should be a gift of extravagance, not something that's a "must have" item. There should be nothing mandatory about it. For example, it is generally not a good idea to get your wife a brand-new vacuum cleaner.
- It must be something which is suitable between lovers. There is no such thing as the perfect gift between all lovers; you and she are unique. Your gift should be based on her heart's desire.
- The gift must also be something which is secure in your knowledge of each other. If she doesn't own a pair of thong panties now, don't get her a box of them.

You can see these principles at work in a gift from the Old Testament. David is about to go the way of all flesh and he gives his personal fortune for the construction of Solomon's Temple. Here's what he gives:

With all my resources I have provided for the temple of my God—gold for the gold work, silver for the silver, bronze for the bronze, iron for the iron and wood for the wood, as well as onyx for the settings, turquoise, stones of various colors, and all kinds of fine stone and marble—all of these in large quantities. Besides, in my devotion to the temple of my God I now give my personal treasures of gold and silver for the temple of my God, over and above everything I have provided for this holy temple: three thousand talents of gold (gold of Ophir) and seven thousand talents of refined silver, for the overlaying of the walls of the buildings,
(1 Chronicles 29:2-4)

it's not immediately obvious just how much this is, as we are not usually familiar with the measurement system that David used. But let's deal with the obvious first: a "talent" at this time is about 75 pounds. That means that David is giving to the God he loves over 100 tons of gold. At the prices current at this writing, that's about 3 ½ billion dollars worth of gold. That is a gift of extravagance. Gold, of course, is suitable as a love gift. It has the quality of being precious; for all practical purposes in this world it is eternal; and it is lovely to look at. David is secure in the the knowledge that God wants this, as God has given him the plans of the Temple.

God's gift to those who love him is the ultimate love gift. It is extravagant; for Christ is human, and no greater gift can one human give to others than to lay down his life. It is a suitable gift between those who love each other as it is the ultimate expression of human love. And there is no greater knowledge between lovers than the One who knows your sins — even the sins you keep carefully secret from the rest of the world.

Let us suppose you give your wife a gift of jewelry. Every time she wears it she is reminded of the lover who gave it to her. Communion serves the same purpose for the Christian. Every time we partake of it, we are reminded of the love Christ has given to us. In the cup we see his

blood; in the bread, his body. We can picture the sacrifice and therefore we can understand the greatest love ever shown to mankind.

February 17

Scraps

Many years ago there existed an institution in Los Angeles which was a favorite of elementary school teachers — the Children's Museum of Los Angeles. One of the features that attracted the teacher so much was that this museum solicited scrap material from various manufacturers in the area. One prominent example was a series of colored discs, stamped out of plastic. They were the discard plastic from the process of making a hole in the sheet of plastic. The museum gave these to the teachers free.

Elementary school teachers must be very creative people. What you and I might see as just a disc of plastic they saw as an element of an art project, a mathematics lesson, or a science experiment. It is the nature of creative thinking that it is Trinitarian. The teacher must first have a very good idea in her head as to what she wants to do. If the idea is no good, nothing good will come of it. Then, the material she selects must provide a good incarnation of that great idea. Finally, she must consider her audience. What is appropriate for kindergarten students would not work for sixth grade students. Creative art follows the pattern of a father idea, and incarnation, and the work of getting the father idea across to those who receive it. It parallels the Great Creator: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God the Father has given us his great creative idea. The father idea that he has put forth is that he so loves this world, including the sinners, that he is willing to make the greatest sacrifice to redeem those sinners and bring them home. To put this in physical reality, he spent thousands of years drilling into the heads of one particular people just what kind of God he is — and then sent his son to die on the cross. No greater love has any man than he give up his life for his friends. Knowing that the work would not be complete unless we accepted it, we have the function of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin and judgment. It is God's masterpiece.

Communion, in its own way, follows that pattern too. There is a father idea: that you and I will remember the sacrifice on the cross and the great love of God that it shows. To do this the idea is incarnate in the ceremony of communion. The cup reminds us of his blood; the bread of his body. It is extremely simple and crosses all cultures. But like his other great communications, there is the part that we must play as well. When we do this we are to examine ourselves. If we find something amiss, we are to repent. Communion is not complete without our self-examination and repentance.

That means that you and I are part of the picture God draws at communion. He has given you his son; he asks that you give him that self-examination and repentance. The picture is then complete.

February 24

Miracles

Those who teach the Bible often hear the complaint: “if I could only see just one miracle, my faith would be so strong...” Have you ever felt that way? The evidence of the Scripture is quite to the contrary. Think about the ancient Israelites, with Moses. They were witnesses to a string of miracles unmatched anywhere else in the Scripture. And what was their reaction? They complained about the food. Who wants manna from heaven when you can grouse about the pizza?

The truth is quite different. As Aristotle said, men need not so much to be taught as reminded. That’s one of the functions of communion: to remind you of what God has done for you. Let’s take a look at one of the great men of the Old Testament, facing the same situation. Here’s what the Lord did with Elijah:

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

(1 Kings 19:11-12 KJV)

Elijah, you will recall, was in desperate circumstances. The Queen had promised to take his head off of his shoulders and he was running away as fast as possible. He feels miserable, despite the fact that God has miraculously fed him. He makes his complaint before God, and this is the answer he gets. There is a great display of the Lord’s power — when have you ever seen a rock being split by the wind — but God has chosen not to speak that way. Instead, in the exquisite phrasing of the King James Version here, he speaks in the “still small voice.” Elijah is being reminded of just who God really is.

Communion serves as such a reminder for us. It recalls to our minds the supreme miracles outlined in the New Testament.

- First, we see the miracle of the incarnation. That God Almighty should take upon himself the form of a human being — and a poor kid at that — is both miraculous and surprising. Yet, that is what God did.
- Next, we see the miracle of the atonement. The Christ would come as a human being is one thing; that he would sacrifice himself for the love he has for us is entirely another. We have seen the greatest example of love, and it was given to us by God.
- Finally, we see the miracle of the resurrection. Others had been raised from the grave before; this time, the man rising from the grave predicted it beforehand. We see in person the master of hell and death — who promises us eternal life.

These are the great miracles you should remember during communion. As you take communion this morning do not look for the earthquake, the wind or the fire. Listen instead for the still small voice by which God reminds you. Here him as he speaks to your conscience, and bring

before him that which needs repentance. Accept his atonement and remember his sacrifice of love for you.

March 3 Last Judgment

It is fairly rare for an evangelical, Protestant church to have an annual liturgical calendar. The device is common, however, for the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox. The theory seems to be that by putting everything on the calendar you will be reminded of everything important at least once a year. For example, in the Eastern Orthodox calendar today is the “Sunday of the Last Judgment.” This is the Sunday when the Last Judgment is brought into the center of focus. It is also called “Meatfare Sunday” as it is the last day on which an Eastern Orthodox Christian can eat meat before the season of Lent.

It’s a good reminder that communion will last until the Lord returns. That’s an often repeated statement, but perhaps you haven’t considered what it really means. As long as you’re taking communion, the Last Judgment has not yet arrived. But it will. Our Lord lays out the criteria by which the righteous arrive in heaven this way:

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ‘For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ “Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? ‘And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? ‘When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ “The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’
(Matthew 25:34-40)

This sometimes confuses Christians who have been taught that they are saved by faith alone. But the Scripture does not recognize faith as something which is an intellectual assent and nothing more. You are saved by faith; but faith without works is dead. As James puts it,

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.
(James 2:14-17)

Shortly put, if you have real faith it will show and what you do in your life. When you come to communion and partake, you are declaring that you have that real faith. You acknowledge the source of that faith as the atonement of Christ — his body and his blood. Should you not also acknowledge that you should be displaying the results of that faith? You are a Christian — a “little Christ.” You should then imitate him in the good that he did to show that you are one of his. Then, when the Last Judgment arrives you will hear is welcome and not his dismissal. Partake willingly; then go forth and be the body of Christ in this world.

March 10 Forgiveness

Most Christians are blissfully unaware of the traditions of those who don't belong to their denomination. Walking into a worship service conducted in a foreign language can leave you quite puzzled. Today, in the liturgical churches, is Forgiveness Sunday. The ceremony is rather elaborate and includes such things as everyone asking everyone else for forgiveness, in small groups, while being prostrate on the floor. I guess you have to be there.

Like most worship services, this one includes music. Here is an English translation of one of the hymns that is sung during this service:

Master, Teacher of wisdom,
Bestower of virtue,
You teach the thoughtless and protect the poor:
Strengthen and enlighten my heart.
Word of the Father,
Let me not restrain my mouth from crying to you:
Have mercy on me, a transgressor,
O merciful Lord!

It's an interesting sequence to obtain forgiveness.

- First, you acknowledge who Christ is. He is your master, which is to say he is your Lord. He is your teacher; from him you learn what God wants. And he is the one who bestows good things on you, whether or not you deserve them. Indeed the undeserving — the “thoughtless” here — deserve it least but need it most.
- Next, you ask his care for you, particularly for your heart. Often enough our courage fails and we need him to strengthen us. Sometimes we need to have our spirit realigned to the truth, and he is our teacher for that.
- Then, you ask him to forgive you — even if you have to ask him to give you the courage to do the asking.

You may approach communion the same way. Many of us use communion as the time we ask God to forgive us, and this sequence is a good way to do it. So:

- Acknowledge Christ for who he is — Lord, teacher, provider.
- Thank him for his care for you.
- Then, ask his forgiveness for your sins.

Having examined yourself, and sought the forgiveness of God, take and eat in a worthy manner. Remember it is his death on the cross that provided your atonement — the pathway to your forgiveness.

March 17 Multiplication.

It's a common problem with Christians: we put limits on what God can do. This in particular does include whether or not he is willing to forgive. You remember Peter asking Christ¹ how many times he should forgive? Christ's reply shows us that we should be willing to forgive indefinitely many times — and that's an imitation of our Heavenly Father. It's a common limitation that we put on God; we think he can only forgive so much.

One way we think of this is to imagine that there is a limit on the total amount of grace God is willing to provide to the human race. We view it as a competition — I really must be holier than thou. Only a certain number will make it to heaven. Other times we look at it as being that God's grace will run out at some particular time, having forgiven enough of us. We want to be the last person who grabs the rope ladder on the blimp of grace as it leaves.

More commonly, we imagine that God has a limit on the amount of grace he will grant to me. Have you ever heard someone tell you that what they have done is beyond what God could forgive? Or that they've done it so often that God has stopped forgiving them? You might consider the example of John Newton. He's the man who wrote *Amazing Grace*. He was a slave trader. The truth is that great sinners make great saints.

God is not Ebenezer Scrooge. However,

- He is the God of multiplication. Do you remember that little incident with the seven pieces of bread and two fish, with which Christ fed five thousand² ? If he can multiply bread and fish, he can multiply grace. As the old hymn *At Calvary* puts it —
Mercy there was great and grace was free
Pardon there was multiplied to me
- He is the God of transformation. He transformed water into wine³ . He will also transform the evil that we are, for he knows how to turn evil into a greater good.
- He is the God of life, the one who raised Christ from the dead. He is the one who holds the keys to heaven and hell. It is by Christ's love and authority that we are saved.

Have you ever noticed that God never “tries” to do anything? He just does it. He has implemented communion for us that we might remember what he did. The atonement that Christ gave us on the cross is the price of our salvation. He paid that price, not us. And at his command we are to remember the price he paid. In the bread we are to see his body broken for us; in the cup we are to see his blood. Examine yourself, fallen child of Adam, repent and take this communion in a manner fitting to one who has experienced God's infinite grace.

¹ Matthew 18:21-22

² John 6:5-13

³ John 2:1-11

March 24 Scarlet Cord

Weaving in and out of the Old Testament there is a subtle theme around a simple bit of material: the scarlet cord. It's found in the Tabernacle, but its most familiar use concerns the conquest of Jericho and the spies interacting with the prostitute known as Rahab.

It is likely enough that Rahab is not the innkeeper in this establishment; that would have been a man's job those days. She was likely enough a prostitute; and it is entirely possible that her father was the innkeeper. In those days a bed at the inn included a girl. The color of the cord at the time was probably thought to be just something convenient; some scholars have speculated that it was scarlet colored because this color would tell people where the prostitutes were — sort of like a red light district in our time. But for Rahab, it became the sign of changing sides.

Perhaps you don't think that's important. Let's consider a little bit more contemporary example. Suppose you were a devout Christian in Nazi Germany. You figured out who this guy Hitler really is and what he's really doing. And now you want to change sides! This is going to be neither easy nor safe. When it comes to the great decisions of life, this is quite similar. When you become a Christian, you change sides. You leave Satan's side of rebellion and cross over to the side of obedience. As each of us knows, it's not easy. Perhaps it was little easier in those days for a prostitute to do it; she likely was considered an outcast in her own society — a woman both despised and commercially patronized. That can breed a deep cynicism.

The spies probably saw the cord simply as a method of escape from the city. But Rahab had to look at it as a sign of her salvation. The symbolism of this cord is very much like the symbolism in communion. In both instances, the symbolism is borrowed from things that are at hand. Rahab had the cord, perhaps as advertising. Christ had the Passover and adapted it to communion. The symbolism is borrowed. It is also a symbolism which is quite simple. It doesn't take much to understand that the bread is his body and the cup his blood. Like us, she would not see her sins as being a barrier to this salvation. Our sins are forgiven and therefore count no more.

But there is a condition: she had to be faithful. She had to fulfill the terms of her agreement with them so that they could rescue her. We too, must be faithful. It is worse than nonsense to take communion as a trivial exercise.

One last thing: if you hang a cord from a high window it goes straight down. It is not just a way of access but something which tells you where the path is. If you want to get from sin to salvation, you have to follow the scarlet cord of the atonement. Be faithful; be honest; take this communion with its full meaning in your heart.

March 31

Trap

John 8:1-11

It should not be necessary to state this, but things have changed so much in my lifetime that I feel it necessary. This communion meditation implicitly assumes that adultery is a sin. It is a very serious sin. In this passage we must remember that all the participants would recall that the Old Testament equates adultery with idolatry, which was punishable by death. The incident shows Christ's love for his children, and his unique role as one who can forgive anyone. The Law taught us that adultery was wrong; it is our schoolmaster. Christ, on the other hand, is our Savior. It is in this conflict that we must contemplate communion this morning.

Let's look at the trap itself first. In the preceding passages the Pharisees have assaulted Christ's truthfulness, and then his humility. Now they assault his righteousness. Note that the trap is set in public. There is no sense of gently correcting this Jesus; they want him totally humiliated. You will often hear the question raised, "where is the man?" This is a trap. The trap needs bait. The pretty young woman is a much better bait than any ordinary man.

You are familiar with the story. Christ, in one of those actions we wish somebody had written just one more verse about, bends down and writes with his finger in the dust. There are many speculations as to what he was writing. But it is worth noting that there is only one other time in the Bible where God is pictured as writing with his finger. The net result was a set of tablets, called the Ten Commandments. Whatever he was writing, it caused the crowd and the Pharisees both to go away. The scene reduces itself to the sinner — and the Friend of Sinners.

Sometimes we have a similar scene in our lives. How do you condemn the sin of adultery without being judgmental to those who are outside the church? Perhaps the best way for us is to live such a life of purity and chastity so that we are unmistakable lights.

As we come to communion, we must recall that passing judgment is not always something which is forbidden. Paul says, "Who am I to judge those outside the church?" But for those inside the church such judgment is necessary. It is necessary for us first of all individually. Examine yourself and see if there is something within you which is wicked — and then repent. It often occurs that we have the duty to examine the rest of the church as well, or at least those who are closest to us. It is our duty to come alongside them and gently restore them to the right path. We are encouraged to do this in communion.

Communion is where the sinner meets the Friend of Sinners. It is where the Friend of Sinners shows his love for us in that he died as our atonement. Sin is still sin; adultery is still adultery; therefore let us repent, confess and then with gratitude partake of the body and blood of Christ, which heals us from all our sins.

April 7

Rough Riders

Just down the street to the west of the Alamo there sits the Buckhorn Bar. The place is legendary. In its early days it would accept as payment for a drink various animal horns which were used to decorate the place. To this day they still have one of the finest collection of animal horns in the world. But the Buckhorn Bar is famous for something else.

In 1898 the door swung open to reveal one Theodore Roosevelt — yes, the man who would later be president of the United States. People turned around to look, and Roosevelt opened up in his booming voice with, “I’m going to Cuba! Who wants to come with me?” The Spanish-American war was on, and this was the place where Teddy recruited about half of his Rough Riders for that war. (The other half were recruited from Ivy League colleges; you figure it out.)

It’s an appealing story. You can imagine yourself sitting in the bar on a hot day with a cold beer when someone walks in and offers you the adventure of a lifetime. It was a grand moment. But Teddy didn’t offer this to just anybody. He offered it to men who were prepared to do the job. Think about it; they were cowboys. They knew how to ride a horse; they knew how to shoot a pistol and a rifle; they were accustomed to outdoor living in hardship. They were also patriotic, and saw a chance to serve their country. These men were prepared for the adventure. Note that they were ready for the call — but not expecting it. Life happens like that sometimes.

We have a parallel to that in the church: the call of Christ. Like the cowboys, we can be ready but we don’t have any good reason to expect it at any particular time. Think back to the time someone preached the gospel to you. Your parents may have prepared you for the occasion, but for most of us it came as a surprise on that particular one day (see Romans 10:14.) A few of us have had the calling of the blind man (Mark 10:49). But all of us will one day experience the call as Christ sends out his angels to call the elect of the church from all the corners of the world (Matthew 24:31.) We cannot know the day. But we can be ready for it.

Communion helps us prepare for the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. How is this done?

- *Remembrance.* In communion we remember the atoning sacrifice that Christ made for us so that we might have salvation. Thus we keep before us constantly the central truth of Christian life.
- *Repentance.* As you take communion, you are to examine yourself. This is not an academic exercise — no, you examine yourself to find what you should change. If you’re doing something wrong, stop, turn around and do it right.
- *Righteousness.* After your repentance it is essential that you continue in the correct direction. You must be an example of righteousness — no matter where you’ve been before.

To accomplish this, you must take communion in a serious, sober manner. After all, you never know whether or not this might be the last communion you take just before Christ returns.

April 14 Pollution

One of the consistent problems in our country today is pollution. By this I do not mean pollution in general. Let us consider specific points of pollution. Suppose you find out somebody has been dumping chemicals in a back lot someplace near you. The problem quickly becomes how to neutralize those chemicals — and that problem is usually very messy.

In the Old Testament the word “pollution” is usually applied to the land of Israel. It is not chemical pollution; it is spiritual pollution. Let’s see how this works:

- We name that part of the world the “Holy Land.” The Bible makes it clear that the land of Israel belongs to God; it is his.
- Therefore, the Israelites are just tenants in the land — and therefore have an obligation to keep things tidy in the spiritual sense.
- If Israel damages the land, God takes action.

You might then well ask how does this pollution happen. In those days three things are most commonly mentioned as sources of pollution in the land.

- Adultery is most often mentioned. God uses marriage as a portrayal of his love for his people, and his love for his people is pure.
- Parallel to that is idolatry, the worship of other gods.
- Interestingly, bloodshed — particularly bloodshed involving sacrificing your children to other gods — is also polluting the land.

We might update these into the modern time as follows.

- Adultery needs no update. God has painted on the living canvas of our bodies a picture of Christ’s love for the church. That love is still pure and he wants that purity in your marriage as well.
- Idolatry today might take the form of materialism — the desire for the bigger boat, the faster car and the more expensive house.
- Bloodshed today might just be the same thing — sacrificing your children. There is no shortage of abortion in our country.

Of course, it’s easy to define the problem, and a lot harder to clean it up. So how do we clean up spiritual pollution?

- Repentance. We begin by stating the obvious, that we are sinners. We admit to God that we have committed these sins and that we have sorrow for them.
- Reformation. Once you have admitted the sin it makes no sense to go back and repeated over and over again. The effort must be made to reform.
- Given those two things, we can then ask God for forgiveness.

In communion, we see the forgiveness of God offered to all mankind. It is by the atonement of Christ, his body and blood on the cross, that we are offered forgiveness at all. This is symbolized to us in communion by the bread and the cup. Taken in earnest, with no deception intended, communion starts us in the steps of purification. As you partake this morning, do not take this as an empty ritual but rather a gateway to God's forgiveness.

April 21

Lilies

Matthew 6:28-29

A recent addition to the English language is the phrase, “bucket list.” The concept, briefly, is that there is a list of things you want to do before you die. You might list something like climbing Mount Everest, visiting Tahiti, sailing around the world solo, or seeing the biggest ball of twine in Minnesota. It is, of course, possible to have more than one bucket. You might have a sports bucket, a travel bucket, a financial bucket and who knows what all else. But in particular you may have a spiritual bucket. It is usually filled with things to worry about. Other buckets may be filled with things of the flesh (where is the girl of my dreams?) Or perhaps the things of the world (when do I get my Mercedes?) Or even the things of pride (I have to have a bigger fishing boat than my next-door neighbor.) But the spiritual bucket is filled with worries concerning the faith. I would submit that the most common worry in the bucket is, “am I really saved?” You can waste a lot of time staring at the ceiling in the bedroom in the middle of the night worrying about that one.

So what should you do about it? First, realize that impatient waiting never changed the results. Staring at the ceiling isn’t going to help anything except your insomnia. Asking such a question is evidence that you are not living a full Christian life.

As Christ commanded us, consider the lilies of the field. Look at how God makes them beautiful, clothing them in glory — and we worry about what business suit to buy next. May I suggest these steps:

- Begin by searching out the providences in your life. Tax your memory; see if you can draw up those things where you know that God was watching over you that day. God cares for those he loves; look for and remember those caring moments.
- Seek first the kingdom of God. If your top priority is the kingdom of God, your Christian life, then how big your fishing boat is just doesn’t come up to snuff. Put God first and you will see that he will deal with all your other needs.
- If that isn’t enough, look around for those people who are good examples of living the Christian life. Ask their assistance in helping you to grow in faith.

Sometimes, however, we need a “blessed assurance.” For this, God has provided you with communion. It is a reminder that he has prescribed; a reassurance that he repeats to you every time you partake of communion. Let’s look at what it’s reassuring us about:

- It is a reassurance of our *salvation*. It reminds us that God’s plan, from the beginning, includes us as his children.
- It is a reassurance of God’s *love* for us. The sacrifice made on the cross is the greatest example of love in human history.

- It is a reassurance of our *resurrection*. Christ rose from the grave and promises that we will rise likewise when he returns.

As the psalmist once said:

I shall remember the deeds of the LORD; Surely I will remember Your wonders of old. I will meditate on all Your work And muse on Your deeds.
(Psalms 77:11-12)

Let us remember what he has done in the past so that we might be confident of what he will do in the future.

April 28 Hatchways

It is seldom mentioned — because it is so obvious — but communion is one of the most simple things in Christianity.

- The elements — bread and wine — are almost universally available. They are common materials which are in stock year around.
- The ceremony itself is quite simple. There are no specific instructions in the New Testament as to how it is to be done; just that we are to partake and remember.
- The most complicated part of the ceremony is the memory it produces. Because the ceremony is so simple, the memories evoked are different for each of us. In that way it is personalized to each of us, yet common to all of us.

This may seem to be rather obvious. But have you ever considered what Christianity would be like if Christ had decided on some grand and elaborate scheme to provoke our memories? Suppose every church had to have a cross that was a hundred feet high, plated with gold. There would be financial campaigns to raise the money, ceremonies around the first steps of construction, newsletters detailing our progress and finally an announcement that the work was finished. There is the problem; once the work is finished, that 100 foot tall goldplated cross becomes just another object in our environment. If someone asks us about it, we can explain it. Otherwise, it's just one more thing. There's a reason why this is so. If you see something, but it has no action associated with it, your memories are not evoked.

Why did Christ do it this way? Perhaps it was the constant, repeated reminder of this simple ceremony is designed to once again fill us with the Holy Spirit. He does not wish to fill us with the Holy Spirit just once, but rather to continually fill us with the Holy Spirit.

Why? Look at it this way: if you have a ship with two hatchways, you can fill the ship with one hatchway and unload cargo through the other. Christ wants us not only filled with the Spirit but to share the Spirit with others. If our ship of life is full and has no way to unload, there is no sharing. How does he want us to share?

- He wants us to share *in love*. He wants us to reach out to our fellow man and show them just what a Christian is made of — the love of Christ.
- He wants us to share *in suffering*. There is no bond between us and our fellows quite like sharing in suffering. When you know how someone feels because you had the same suffering it makes a very strong bond.
- He wants us to share in *evangelism*. We are to let the world know who Jesus is and why he invites the entire world to come to him.

As your emotions are stirred this morning by the memory of the suffering of Christ, know that he is filling you for the purpose of you filling others. When you leave this place, carry the

memories and the feelings with you. Share them with your fellow Christians; share them with the world.

May 5 Cleaning

Consider, if you will, the plight of the ordinary dentist. You pay him to make repairs to your teeth; but you also pay him to prevent more decay — which thus of course means that he has less work to do. By doing this you are depriving him of some future income. Your dentist doesn't seem to mind; in fact, he thinks it's a good idea. You will notice that your insurance company usually will pay for preventive work as well. One good example of preventive work for the dentist is a teeth cleaning session. Every six months or so you are to go in and experience that symphony of scraping sounds which marks your teeth being cleaned.

It is a form of preventive maintenance. Not surprisingly, there are lots of things on this planet which benefit from the concept of preventive maintenance. For example:

- The manufacturer of your car recommends that you bring it in at certain intervals to have the oil and filter changed. This helps prevent damage to the engine, and thus in the long run saves you money.
- Human beings have the same thing. You get an annual physical examination; you buy vitamins to help prevent various diseases; you get vaccinated to prevent other diseases.
- Even computers have this. If you have an antivirus program on your computer, the chances are excellent that it conducts an antivirus scan at frequent intervals. They are set to do this without you noticing — it's called "background processing" — but they do it nonetheless.

In a perfect world this would not be necessary. This is not a perfect world.

God has a similar program with regard to sin. It's a part of communion.

- We are taught that we are to take communion regularly. One reason for this is so that this preventive maintenance will take place.
- Each time we partake, we are first to examine ourselves. We are to look at how we are behaving; we are to look at how others might see us — and then find those things which need to be fixed. We are looking for spiritual decay.
- As we find it, we are to set in motion the process of removing it. First we are to repent of our sins. That means telling God we are sorry — but also turning our lives around to stop doing whatever it is that displeases God. Then, asking God's help, we are to follow through and reform our lives to match his desires, not ours.

Don't take this lightly. If you fail in dental maintenance — brushing, flossing, teeth cleaning, and so on — the dentist resorts to the drill. If you fail in spiritual maintenance, you oblige God to resort to measures which are both more powerful and more painful. Examine yourself, therefore, and then repent and reform.

May 12

Complete

Hebrews 5:8-9

Let me start with an example. Suppose you run a construction business, and you're in the market for a new truck. You very carefully list all the specifications that this truck must have — engine size, cab room, weight carrying capacity, etc. You search all around at the various dealerships to find the truck that matches your specifications. You finally find one that exactly matches what you're looking for, and you go down and buy the perfect pickup.

But it's not complete yet. It's exactly the right color, but it doesn't have your company logo on it yet. So you go to an artist to have it applied. Do you see the difference between "complete" and "perfect?" The reason I bring this up is to explain a passage in Hebrews:

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, (Hebrews 5:8-9)

(other versions translate the word "perfect" as "completed.")

The verse has often puzzled Bible students. You have to ask the question: how do you make God perfect? Isn't he that way already? But Jesus is both God and man. And if you understand this word to mean "complete," you see that the dilemma disappears. Jesus started out with us as a baby, and grew up. He was perfect, as God — but not yet complete as a man. So how was he perfected, or completed, for his tasks?

He was completed by suffering. Isaiah, in chapter 53, describes this quite graphically. The submission of Christ was to the will of his Father — which logically gave rise to the suffering he endured. The terror of the cross was overcome in the garden by submission to the Father.

Let's look at that. Christ was failed by his closest friends who could not stay awake for an hour while he prayed. And it is very clear that he was deathly afraid of what was about to happen to him. He prayed fervently and frequently that this suffering could be avoided. But I would have you noticed something: as often as Christ prophesied his resurrection from the dead, there is no record whatsoever of his praying for it. As God, he knew about the resurrection. As man, he rightly feared a horrible death. He overcame that fear by his submission to the Father, so that the love of God might be spread to us in the grace of the Cross.

He suffered — for your salvation and mine. As you partake of communion this morning, remember what he went through. Communion is not only a reminder of God's grace — it is also a reminder of Christ's suffering.

May 19

Battleship

In the mid-1980s your author had a most unusual and enjoyable experience. A friend of mine was the Engineering Officer for the USS New Jersey, an Iowa class battleship built for World War Two. He invited me to come down and see the ship — meaning, that we would crawl all over everything from the bilge to the topmast. I am a naval ship enthusiast and I considered this quite a delight.

The ship itself weighs about 60,000 tons, mostly steel. Though this is no longer the largest ship afloat (the Nimitz class carriers weigh over 100,000 tons) it is quite large. People sometimes ask why they had to be that big. The answer is a simple process of naval engineering. If you want the ship to go a certain speed, carrying that number of huge guns, with that much armor there is a minimum size you have to make the ship. Naval ships are designed for a particular type of war, and all of the blueprints reflect the task the ship will have to carry out. For example: the conning tower on the ship has armor which is 18 inches thick, to resist enemy shells. The ship is rather complicated, and training the crew occupies a great deal of the Navy's concern. The ship itself must be the right size, have the right weapons, engines and armor and be crewed by people who know what they are doing.

God has a similar problem with his saints. If you don't mind the analogy being stretched a bit, there are some of his saints that are genuine battleships. There are others whose capabilities are not quite so exalted. God prepares his saints in a particular way:

- He knows what you will face. He prepares you for the trials and temptations which are going to come to you.
- He never gives you too much to handle. He knows what you can do, and what you can't, so that he never presents you with something beyond your capability.
- But — he never gives you the details, just the preparation. This can be frustrating.

Football practice is never fun-fun-fun. You have to work at it. Similarly, there is no sense having a battleship without a trained crew — and a captain willing to use it. Put shortly, we have to be willing to accept the training we're being given and use it for God's purposes. That means we have to be willing to suffer on his behalf.

Christ went through the same thing. In the wilderness he was tempted with the flesh, the world and pride. He was ready for it, for he knew the Scriptures. In the garden he was tormented by fear of death — a horrible death. He overcame it by his practiced submission to the Father. As you partake of communion this morning, you are sharing in that sense of submission and sacrifice with your Lord. He said, "this is my body; this is my blood." You become more like him in communion. So as you partake, remember his sacrifice. Be encouraged, that your Lord will take care of you as you prepare to do likewise.

May 26

Tainted Mercy

If there is one characteristic that defines the average Christian, it is his love of bargaining with God.

- We want a contract with God; his covenant seems to be too restrictive, as he dictates all the terms. So we just tell him we are negotiating with him.
- We want to tell him what the end result of the process is going to be — we know how this is supposed to turn out, we know who lives and who dies and we know what we want — so it must be the right answer.
- In short, we want to be in charge of the discussion and relationship. The net result is that we expect God to think that we are indeed wonderful people. Sometimes we are puzzled with how God fails to be impressed with both our charity and our genius.

This is really not as much a surprise as it seems. We are dealing with God as if he were another person just like us. He is not. He is the creator of the universe, and by his will the laws of the universe were created and are kept. That includes the laws of physics as well as the laws of ethics. You might as well negotiate with God concerning right and wrong as negotiate with him about the strength of gravity.

One particular area that serves as a good example is the concept of mercy in the form of forgiveness. Our vision is that when we forgive others that we have put God in our debt — so much so that he is obliged to forgive us too. The foolishness of this can be seen by comparing the mercy we get for the mercy we give. Our mercy is tainted mercy; we are always putting conditions on it and frankly being sinners we are not capable of pure mercy. God, in return for this, promises us his holy mercy. He is the one who is offended by every sin; he is the one who is perfect and sinless. He does this by covenant, offered to all of his children — not by a contract negotiated with each one.

We are often proud of our forgiveness. We think how much it costs us to forgive someone who has grievously offended us. But whatever the cost to us, is a cost to a sinner. The mercy that God showed us at the cross is pure and holy — and was bought at a much greater price.

We find the reminders of this in communion. In the bread we see the body of Christ, nailed to a cross and hung there for an agonizing death. In the cup we see his blood, splattered all over the ground. It looks like a crime scene — and that is what it is. An innocent man should not be executed, but Christ endured it so that you might have forgiveness at his expense. So as you partake this morning, remember that his grace to you, his forgiveness, is given freely. It far exceeds anything you can do. It is not a bargain we make with God — it is the miracle of Grace.

June 2 Sodom

Genesis 18:23-32

Sodom was not a very nice city. Indeed, the scriptures describe it as “wicked exceedingly.” To give you an idea of just how bad the place was, the residents thought that the right way to greet the two visitors to Lot was to have them dragged out so they could be homosexually raped. So God decided to destroy the place. Which brings up an interesting question: if all of us are sinners, why did Abraham argue with God that it would be unjust to destroy the wicked and the righteous together?

The righteous are not perfect, nor are they sinless. They do believe in trying to do what God wants, and they try to fix their mistakes when they can. The wicked, by contrast, are not trying to do what God wants and are often very proud of the fact that they don't. Abraham in fact argues that the character of God, being a just God, should prevent him from slaying the righteous along with the wicked. In essence, God agrees.

This goes a long way to explaining why God doesn't take the simple solution of slaying the wicked to solve the problems of this world. He does slay the wicked from time to time. However, as we are taught in the parable of the wheat and the tares, in general it causes more harm than good to slay the individual wicked. Eventually we will arrive at Judgment Day. On that day God will face the divine dilemma: how can you send the wicked to hell and pardon the sinners who are known as righteous?

God will spare the righteous on judgment day because he has provided a path for them to become sinless in his eyes. In the Old Testament, sin had to be remedied with atonement — which included a sacrifice to “pay for” the sins of the people. Unfortunately, getting rid of your sins by sacrificing sheep and goats doesn't really work very well. It points the way to the real thing in the New Testament — the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. By his atonement the justice of God is satisfied, and the mercy of God triumphs.

Communion is a memorial of that atonement. The bread represents the body of Christ; the cup, his blood. By taking communion you proclaim that you have accepted the sacrifice of Christ as atonement for your sins. It would be pure hypocrisy to take this with no intention of acting like the righteous. When the Judgment Day arrives, Christ will separate the sheep and the goats. The sheep — the righteous — will be saved that day not just because they took communion, but also because they showed that they followed Christ's voice. They will be the ones who took communion as genuine followers of Christ. Therefore, examine yourself and see if there is anything in need of repentance. Then partake, with an honest heart.

June 9

Perfection

St. Anselm, who lived from 1033 to 1109 and was at one time the Archbishop of Canterbury, argued that God is the sum of all perfections. He brought this idea forward in the midst of the debate about what is now called the “ontological argument.” A communion meditation is far too short to discuss the philosophy. But we may pick up the central idea. In particular, may I point out three perfections of importance to us?

- There is the *perfection of kindness*. Christ, on the night in which He was betrayed, he stopped and took the time to pray specifically for Peter. Satan saw Peter as a prize and thought that in the stress of that night this one would slip through Jesus’ fingers. Jesus remembered his friend even in the midst of the terror of the night before the crucifixion.
- There is the *perfection of love*. Anyone could’ve told the disciples they should love one another. How much more perfect it is for the master to wash his disciples’ feet and then tell them to love one another!
- There is the *perfection of mercy*. Christ did not die just for his apostles, or for the friends he had — he died for “whosoever will.” It is fascinating to think that before I was born he was merciful to me.

We can see that perfection even today. In his kindness he compels no one to join the kingdom of God — we’re all volunteers. “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling...” His love is shown to us on the cross; no greater love than this. Perhaps most amazing of all is his mercy. Despite my sins ongoing, He always wants me back. If I will but turn in repentance he will take me back.

Communion is a reminder of these perfections. Like all reminders, it tells you about something you already know — and don’t want to forget! Therefore Christ told us to do this “in remembrance of Me.” Reminders are not normally issued for trivial things; it has to be something that is important in its own way. And — as anyone who owns a computer system that has reminders in it knows — those reminders can be repeated regularly.

So it is that Christ commands us to take the bread and the cup in remembrance of him. It is a reminder of his perfect kindness, his perfect love and his perfect mercy. Take it with an honest heart and be reminded of the love compared to which there is no greater.

June 16

Sinking

One of the most striking pictures from World War II concerns the sinking of the German battleship Bismark. After she was sunk, British warships moved in to rescue survivors. The photo showed the German sailors in the water reaching for the ropes hanging down from the British cruisers. Half an hour before this picture was taken, those sailors were the enemy. They served on the ship which sunk HMS Hood, the pride of the Royal Navy. Vengeance was the order of the day. Now they were fellow sailors, members of the brotherhood of seamen everywhere. A sailor is a sailor. So it was that the British sailors threw the ropes down to their fellow sailors below, and attach them to the rails of their ship.

In a metaphorical way we are very much like those sailors. We start out thinking our ship is unsinkable but soon find ourselves sinking in the sea of sin. If we are to maintain hope, we must look around and find another ship where the sailors are holding a rope for us to grasp. We swim, if you will, to salvation. You might ask why Christ “throws us a rope.” To continue the metaphor, here are some reasons:

- He is a sailor just like us — that is to say, he is human as we are human. Therefore he knows our weaknesses and can sympathize with us.
- He also knows our peril — the temptations of sin, for he has been tempted as we are tempted.
- Most of all, he rescues us because of God’s great love for his children.

In sin we were his enemies; now, in peril, we are his brothers.

Communion is the commemoration of our rescue. Our lifeline is God’s grace. He asks us to remember what he did.

- He asks us to remember his death on the cross, the price paid for our salvation.
- He asks us to remember his body, nailed to that cross, suffering for us. He asks us to remember his blood, shed for us.
- He asks us to take communion in a worthy manner. If you want to be rescued, you have to be swimming towards the rope, not away from it. In communion you should be examining your self and turning to the source of your salvation.

The Captain of the good ship Grace has had his sailors throw us the lifeline. We remember that in communion; may we help rescue those around us who also need a rope.



It

June 23

There I Was

Among the customs of the sea which every sailor knows, there is the “sea story.” A good sea story always begins the same way: “There I was...” We might ask why.

Well, first of all, it’s traditional. No doubt it has been handed down since the days of sail and often involves the same sea monsters. You can almost hear the captain saying, “there I was... This fellow named Jonah walked on board my ship and brought with him a storm the likes of which you will never see.” Now, for the landlubber and the naïve — children about six years of age are ideal for this — the personal nature of the opening lends some semblance of believability to the story. After all, you’re getting it from an eyewitness. Perhaps more important, it attaches the story to a person. When you repeat it you can say, “uncle Blowhard told me this story himself.” If the story is good enough it will soon be attached to somebody else and passed on down to the next generation of sailors. All of whom, of course, will start the same way and tell you they were there.

But what if you’re telling the truth — and you weren’t there? The standards are a bit higher. You do much better off with a written account by eyewitnesses rather than just tradition. That’s why we have the Gospels, for example. You also need some way of involving the listener — they’re not going to remember what they don’t think is important. In fact, the more commitment you can get from them, the better. But you do want to name names — it wasn’t “some guy” but Jesus of Nazareth. And if it’s really important, you include a ceremony of some sort. There is a reason that every day at sunset the lonely notes of Taps float over the watery grave of the USS Arizona, bringing tears to the patriot’s eyes. It’s not a sea story.

Bunch Which brings us to communion, then. The story is well known to all Christians and is of primary importance. It is the story of the faith: how Christ, on the cross, made the atonement for our sins and opened the gates of heaven to us. The story of the atonement is the story of forgiveness for mankind. Christ gave us instructions to link that story to a simple set of symbols, shared by all Christians. The cup is his blood; the bread, his body. The ceremony is a simple one, yet profound. It’s like Taps — a simple melody that touches the heart deeply.

It is our story. Let us pass it on to our children and their children in the way in which we received it: simple, touching the heart and profound.

June 30

Trumpet Calls

When your author was but a young lad, he had the wonderful privilege of living on a small army post that was the last one run with live bugle calls from a live bugler. This may seem impossible to you, but the post was small and it worked. Soldiers knew reveille, mess call, mail call, retreat and taps. The children did too; my mother made it very clear that you were home by retreat and woe betide if you played until after taps. The method sounds unusual today because we have loudspeakers and smart phones — but it did work.

It worked for the ancient Israelites as well. You will remember that the signal to go in and take Jericho was a loud trumpet blast. Gideon also summoned his men with the trumpet. Various kings of Israel announced their arrival as king with a trumpet. Interestingly, the Day of Atonement was also announced with a trumpet blast. A bugle call or a trumpet blast is a signal — a signal to take action.

Communion is like that; it is a signal to action for us. What kind of action?

- It is a call to examine ourselves. We are to pass judgment upon ourselves and see if there is anything which needs to be remedied. It is the bugle call for our own personal day of atonement.
- It is a call to repent. It does no good if you decide that you have sinned woefully but you're going to do nothing about it. It is a reminder that Christ died for your sins, and therefore you need to repent, both in words and in action.
- To the extent you can, it is a call for you to make amends. If you have given offense to someone, or worse, you can at least make apologies and fix what damage you can.

Remember, communion commemorates the atonement sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. That is both your forgiveness and your call to action.

The Lord, however, is not through with the bugle. The next great trumpet call will be at the return of Christ.

- The angels will gather together all of the elect from the earth, living and dead, to present them to their Lord and Savior.
- He himself will return in bodily form, just as he left.
- When he returns, he will judge the living and the dead for what they have done.

Communion prepares you for his return. If you examine yourself, repent and make amends your judgment will preclude his judging you. Therefore, do not treat this as a stale ritual, but rather the bugle call of self-examination, repentance and amendment.

July 7 Anniversary

My wife and I recently celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary. It has been interesting to hear what people say to that bit of information. There are three primary reactions:

- “Wow”
- Most are polite enough to offer us their hearty congratulations and wish us many more.
- There is also this: “How did you ever manage to do that?”

That last one is not so much their astonishment that we, in particular, would stay together that long. It is more along the lines of “how could anybody stayed married that long?” In our society today, divorce is often seen as the normal end of a marriage. A 50 year marriage seems to be a fluke, at best. Our answer usually is to tell them, “You have to work at it.”

One technique that has been very fruitful for us as been a weekly date night. It may be as modest as watching a favorite television show together, after the children are in bed. It may be going out to a nice restaurant — but either way, our emphasis is on strengthening our love for each other. You don’t let it just happen; you plan it. There are two things you do on date night:

- You look back. You talk about the week that you just went through; how your partner is holding up under the stress and what might be done to help the situation.
- You look forward. This is the time to talk about your plans for the future, whether that’s “what are we going to do this weekend” or planning your retirement.

This method, in a small way, gives you some insight into communion. Remember, the church is the bride of Christ. That implies that the church needs to be faithful to Christ while anticipating his return. You look back, remembering the past and you also focus on the future.

You remember the past by thinking about his sacrifice on the cross. For many hundreds of years before the time of Christ, God made it clear that an atonement sacrifice had to be made for sin. Christ is that sacrifice for us. It is the greatest example of love in the history of mankind.

You look forward as well. Communion will last until our Lord returns. Each time we take communion, we are proclaiming the truth that he will return to judge the living and the dead. It is a time to remember that you will either face the mercy of Christ, being one of God’s children or the judgment of Christ. It is well to remember also that those around us will face that same problem.

It is not something to be taken lightly or trivially, but in a worthy manner. Examine yourself and identify where repentance is needed. When you partake, see in the bread his body, and in the cup his blood. You are dealing with eternal things. If 50 years of marriage provokes admiration and wonder, consider the wedding ceremony of the Lamb. Those who attend will spend eternity with God. It’s that important.

July 14 Suffering

St. Peter, in his first letter, chapter 4, makes it very clear that a convert to Christianity is going to suffer a great deal of abuse from his secular friends for the privilege of being a Christian.

Here's just a brief quote:

For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; but they will give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

(1 Peter 4:3-5)

indeed, our Lord himself tells you that you are blessed when this happens.

"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5:11-12)

You may not have thought of it this way, but one of the things you do in communion is to identify with the sufferings of Christ and therefore accept the sufferings of the Christian. Any football fan understands this; you wear the school colors to the game, you suffer at every setback and rejoice at every score. We see the same thing in the suffering of the Christian; it is the badge of real Christianity, of someone who is really "in the game." In fact, Christ goes so far as to say that if you are not doing this you are not a real Christian:

"Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

(Luke 14:27)

Every time you partake of communion you are telling the world that you are his disciple — and that therefore you are willing to carry your own cross. If that's all we say about it, it sounds very negative. But we must remember that one goes through the cross to the light. If practice is easy, the team does not improve. But if practice is tough, the team gets better. You know what your Lord and Savior went through to provide for your atonement. You know that you are not greater than he is, but less. Therefore, you should expect to be treated by the world with the same contempt that they had for Jesus Christ. In communion, you say you are willing to suffer that for the cause of Christ.

Therefore, before you partake of communion this morning, may I ask that you examine your self and ask if you are prepared for the suffering which you know must come.

- Are you prepared for the suffering which comes from the things you don't get? All those things the world teaches you to desire — the bonus, the next promotion, the new boat — may not arrive. Are you prepared to deal with it as a Christian?
- Are you prepared for the suffering which comes from the things you do get? Are you ready for the ridicule, the lies and the strange accusations?

In communion you say you are willing to suffer as a Christian should. Before you partake, make sure you're telling the truth.

July 21

Pot Luck

I doubt that they have ever been worth writing down, but there are a set of rules concerning church potluck dinners.

- Everyone is invited. It may be restricted to a group, but everybody in the group is invited.
- By its very nature, everyone contributes to a potluck dinner. This includes those of us who are dead in the kitchen — we bring potato chips.
- While we all contribute, we don't all bring the same thing. A potluck dinner consisting of nothing but creamed spinach would be considered rather disciplinary.
- It is not a prideful competition, but a humble sharing. At least, it should be.

One of the reasons potluck dinners persist in churches is that they work. They achieve good results, some of which are related to food.

- The basic purpose of the dinner — to feed people — is satisfied. Usually, there is food left over. Grazing bachelors soon learn this is an excellent source for au gratin potatoes.
- Those who are newcomers to the church enjoy the hospitality. It helps them grow closer to the church.
- It also strengthens the bonds within the church. It does this by sharing — you eat what they brought — and by contributing — they eat what you brought.
- This is also a good example of the differing gifts given by the Spirit to the members of the church. Some are gifted at making excellent fried chicken; others of us know where Col. Sanders sells his wares.

Another shared meal in the church is that of Communion.

- It's an "everybody" meal. We all partake, without respect to what our spiritual gifts or position in the church might be. It's not a competition, it's a cooperation.
- Like the potluck, this can be used to welcome newcomers into the fellowship. When you take communion with us, you belong with us.

The basic purpose of communion is to remember the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This ties us together, but more importantly strengthens our ties to Christ. We feed on his body and his blood, a shared meal and a shared faith. In so doing we grow stronger as Christians, closer together and closer to Christ.

July 28 Offering

The preacher began his sermon that morning not expecting anything unusual to happen. He was surprised by the audience reaction about a third of the way through. He made the remark in passing, saying “of course, sex outside of marriage is wrong.” There was an audible gasp from the congregation — they could not imagine that the man could be so old-fashioned.

It might be suggested that the Lord God Almighty has a different standard than the congregation had. As an example, we might examine this from the Old Testament Levitical law:

"You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 23:18 NASB)

The language is a little bit old and perhaps deserve some clarification in these days. The phrase, “hire of a harlot” refers to the wages of a prostitute (equals “harlot”.) The word specifically refers to a female prostitute, or as they are known today “sex worker.” The phrase, “wages of a dog” is even more controversial today. In the original, it means the wages of a male prostitute performing homosexual services — some of the older translations use the word “sodomite” (which references Sodom and Gomorrah.) As many of the translators of the most popular new translations are homosexuals, a variety of phrases now appear in this verse to blur the original meaning.

God standard for sacrificial offering seems to be quite strict; he insists that it be, in that old phrase, “without blemish.” The phrase is mentioned eleven places in the Old Testament in reference to sacrifices.

The atonement by Christ which purchased our salvation is the prime example of this. It is the sacrifice which takes away the sins of the world (Hebrews 9:26); it is the only such sacrifice, and therefore you can see that it must be completely in accordance with God’s rules. So we find the Christ is an acceptable sacrifice because he is sinless (Hebrews 4:15). Likewise, the sacrifice is one made in a physical body — not a ghostly illusion (Hebrews 10:5). God would not be satisfied with a charade. In response to this, he asks us to give him the sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15).

As we celebrate communion this morning, we celebrate the sacrifice which makes it possible — the atonement of Christ. The bread and the cup represent the physical body and blood of Jesus, the Christ. He became flesh so that he might be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. So in taking communion we acknowledge the atonement, and we acknowledge the physical nature of the sacrifice. Also, we acknowledge the perfect, sinless nature of Christ as the only fitting sacrifice for our atonement. We are therefore counseled to examine ourselves carefully before taking; this is extremely serious.

But when you leave, carry with you the thought that you make a sacrifice in return — the sacrifice of praise. Do not take communion on Sunday morning and fail to even mention Christ Monday through Saturday. Rather, make your life one which is a life of praise to the Savior who loves you so much.

August 4

Rich Young Ruler

Matthew 19:16-22

It is one of those incidents in the Bible that touches the soul of every man. The rich young ruler comes to Jesus with a question. But it's no ordinary touch of theology; it is in fact the question that all of us long to have answered. What must I do to gain eternal life? It implies that the young man knows that he is lacking something — and that Christ knows what is lacking.

Christ tests him with what might be considered the standard questions of “ordinary holiness.” Has he been obeying the commandments? Has he done those things commanded by the law; both positive and negative? The young man passes this test — he is indeed one of the good guys. But as Christ points out, he's missing one thing: total commitment to Christ. Jesus tells him to sell everything, give it to the poor and follow Him.

Interestingly, the rich young man does not challenge Jesus by asking for where he got the authority to say such a thing. He recognizes the righteousness of Christ's answer. We might take a look at this too:

- Jesus is “God in the flesh.” As such, he has the authority to command obedience from his creation. Later he will tell us that all authority has been given to him, in heaven and on earth.
- How does Jesus know this is the right answer? It is because he is the agent who created all things. He knows what makes people tick. He designed you.
- There is also this: Jesus gave us everything he had, all that he is, when he died on the cross. There is no greater love. If you are his follower, that is the measure of the love you must have for Him.

Communion is a reminder of these things. Remember that the body and the blood are portrayed in the bread and the cup. When you partake of these things, you proclaim the physical nature of Christ. Fully God, fully man, he walked in the flesh like we do. You proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, was and is God in the flesh.

You also acknowledge in communion that Jesus created all things. That means that you acknowledge that we borrow the concept of existence from him, for he is the self-existent one, the creator God. Our God is an awesome God.

Finally, you acknowledge that he gave all for us, the supreme display of love. This being so, should you not respond with your total commitment to him? Something to think about.

August 11 Date Night

The nature of romantic love changes after childbirth. You hold your beloved's hand in your own, look tenderly into her eyes and suddenly hear the screech of a two-year-old whose diaper needs to be changed. It does not go down in history as one of the great romantic moments.

But still, the romantic nature of marriage must be preserved. Indeed, more than preserved it must be nourished. To that purpose, then, many couples have adopted the practice of a weekly date night. This doesn't necessarily mean tuxedo and gown; it may be as simple as watching one particular television program, special to both of you, after the children are asleep. Your author has been married for over 50 years, and my wife and I still keep date night every week. We love each other more now than we ever have in the past — because we nourished the relationship consistently and constantly. We plan to continue this practice as long as we both shall live.

Perhaps you haven't thought of it this way, but your relationship with Jesus Christ needs something of the same kind of nourishment. It's not a romantic relationship, but it is a love relationship — and such relationships either grow or die. Why would you take the effort to nourish that relationship?

- Nourishment is necessary for growth. If your relationship to God is to grow, then you must do some of the nourishing. He will do his part; but you cannot just sit back and watch.
- Nourishment increases resilience. Love is a delicate plant at the beginning, but if you tend to it it can become very tough and resilient. 50 years means my wife and I have been through a lot together. It has made us closer together and tougher to split.
- Nourishment is proof that you care. To give you a very minor example, a Christian gentleman opens the car door for his wife — and it's not because she doesn't know how to do it herself. It's because he cares, and it shows.

Communion is the date night of the soul.

- In communion you look back on the relationship, cherishing the memories of what has gone before. On Christ's part, you see the blood and body shed and broken for you.
- In communion you meet in the present, in love, strengthening the "now" in your relationship with Christ. You do this because he commanded it, and those who love him obey his commandments.
- In communion you look forward to the future of the relationship — the resurrection of the dead at his return.

Do not do this trivially or as just a matter of routine. Rather, examine yourself, prepare yourself and then come to your Lord's table to renew your love for him.

August 18

Alarm Clock

Those of a certain antiquity will remember the original design of the alarm clock. The clock usually had two brass bell structures on top, with a little hammer that oscillated between the two. You wound the clock; you wound the alarm mechanism and set it. When the hands of the clock got to the indicated hour the little hammer started vibrating, ringing the bells and in theory waking you up. At the time it was considered rather a nuisance — but this was because we didn't know what was coming. The next major revolution in this concept was to make everything electronic. This allowed the modern alarm clock to sound like a buffalo herd running through your house. (And as the old song puts it, "give me a home where the buffalo roam — and I'll show you a very messy house.") It could, of course, be worse. You could be in the Army and be awakened by the drill sergeant version of the alarm clock — a full-sized metal trashcan being beaten with a baseball bat.

So why do we put up with these things? The purpose of the alarm clock is relatively simple:

- It gets your eyes open.
- It puts your body into action.
- It does so giving you enough time to get something done.

Have you ever considered that communion is rather like an alarm clock for the spirit? It is to open your eyes, put you into action and give you enough time to get things done. Many of us view this is just some sort of ritual to be endured, but the truth is Christ instituted this so that you would remember what he did. In particular, that you would remember that he died, in the flesh, for sinners like you and me. He did not die just for the righteous people, but all of us. He wants you to do something about it.

- He wants you to open your eyes to the reality of sin in our world today. Our society has greatly deteriorated. Many no longer consider sin and judgment to be real.
- He wants you in action — faith without works is dead.
- He has given you the time to take action. That time is called "now." Use the time wisely; do not idle it away.

Communion reminds you of what Christ did for us. It also reminds us that we are his hands and feet carrying the good news of the Gospel to the world.

August 25 Greatness

Have you ever considered just how great, powerful and mighty the typical Christian is? Consider the following:

- You, the typical Christian, are *commanded* to approach boldly the throne of grace. The ruler of the universe has found it necessary to order you to come to his throne to seek his favor and his grace.
- You are also proclaimed to be an ambassador of reconciliation, an ambassador of Christ. You are the official representative of the kingdom of God.
- And should anyone ask why such honor has been bestowed on you, you might simply answer that you are a child of God, a joint heir of Christ.

Kindly note that these honors and titles are conferred upon us; they are not something we have earned. They are given with the injunction to humility. Indeed, Paul tells us that we have these treasures in vessels of clay so that those around us will not mistake the ambassador for the King. Humility is still required.

You are someone who regularly eats at God's table. And what a table it is!

- It was established by the divine authority of Christ, who told us that all authority in heaven and on earth was given to him. By that authority, we are commanded to partake.
- This table was established not just by authority but by paying the price. Indeed the greatest price possible was paid for this, the life of the Suffering Servant. You eat what his death made possible.
- This meal is of surpassing importance to the Christian, though we may not understand how this works. We are told that we are here to partake of the body and blood of Christ, thus joining us to him as tightly as possible.

Therefore, may I implore you to take communion seriously? It is not "just a ritual." It is not something that we do in blind obedience, not caring what it really means. Rather we know quite well that it means the body and blood of Christ. We are commanded therefore to take this meal with self-examination. That examination should lead to repentance, and a closer walk with God. When you have finished, you go forth from this place as one who has the power to intercede with Almighty God for those around you. You go forth as his ambassador of reconciliation; indeed you go forth as his child. Remember these things as you partake today.

September 1 Thanksgiving

It is a curious point. In meditating aloud on communion, it frequently occurs to us to praise God for the great things he has done. This is fitting and proper. But at the same time we sometimes forget to give thanks for these great things. We feel as if giving praise is the same thing as giving thanks, which it is not. If it is fitting and proper to praise God, it is fitting and proper to give thanks to God.

We might ask, what should we be thankful for? Here are a few things for which our thanks are fitting and proper:

- The atonement. It is the central fact of Christianity that Christ sacrificed himself on the Cross to atone for our sins. It is worthy of praise; it deserves thanks.
- You might also add thanks for including us. After all, the Old Testament makes it clear that God was dealing entirely with the Jews and nobody else. He could have limited salvation to the Jews. Of his love, he did not. We are on the team.
- He also could've left us alone after the atonement with a remark like, "I'll be back." He didn't; he left us the Holy Spirit to be our indwelling guide and comforter. Without the Cross this would not have happened.
- Communion is also a point of remembrance that he promised to return again, bringing all Christians of all times with him. There is much debate as to what this means, but we know that it means joy to all who are saved. We know how the mystery turns out; the church wins.

You might want to carry this thought through the week. It is a fitting point for any set of prayers to include being thankful for these things:

- That your sins are forgiven.
- That you are not alone, but are part of the fellowship of the church, Christ's body here on earth. Christianity is not a solo flight.
- That the day gets ever sooner when he shall return to judge the living and the dead.

Christ intended communion to be a memorial; "this do in remembrance of me." In your remembrance, do not forget your thanksgiving.

September 8

Murder

Most of us never actually get close to a murder. But your author has had that experience recently. We live a block away from a large college campus. Two days ago we found out through the press that one of the people working at the campus had been murdered in the parking lot closest to our house. We didn't know the man personally; he was an employee of the school working temporarily to register international students. He was stabbed to death at a good school in a nice neighborhood. It is exactly the kind of thing one does not expect in such a place. Apparently the motive was personal between murderer and the victim, so it could have happened anywhere. You begin to think of reasons for such a murder. You also give way to grief, fear and a goodly amount of outrage that it happened in your community.

Now, if this is our reaction to a murder of a rather mundane kind, can you imagine what our reaction should be to the murder of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a man of peace and justice; just the kind of man whose murder should outrage you. You see the trials that he went through — swift, rigged and conducted entirely in the middle of the night. This wasn't done by a lynch mob, but the duly constituted authorities in Jerusalem.

And what was the reaction of his disciples? First, there was fear — there was nothing to prevent those same authorities from coming after them, so they ran and hid. They obviously grieved for the loss of their friend, their teacher and Lord. Someone who had been the greatest influence in your life, after three years on the road teaching and healing is now suddenly taken from you. I suspect the dominant feeling among the apostles was one of despair. Despair comes from having no hope, and they had no hope that the execution of Jesus was going to turn out the way it did.

I bring this to your attention because communion is primarily designed to remind you of the death of Jesus Christ. It is to bring to your mind the price he paid for your salvation — his own death. It is interesting to note that Jesus never prayed for the resurrection. He knew that was God's will and it would be done. He prayed that he wouldn't have to go through the experience. We are to remember that. His sacrifice is often referred to as the Passion of Christ. Can you feel within you the passion that the disciples must've felt in contemplating the execution of Christ? Examine yourself. Think what Jesus did on the cross for you — the forgiveness of your sins, your entrance into the family of God and eternal life to come. We often forget this during communion, but we should not. As you partake today, remember his sacrifice not just as a footnote in history, but the central event in Western civilization — and the central event in your life.

September 15

Circus

Permit me to stretch your imagination. Let's suppose you have just moved to a new town and are going, for the first time, to a prominent church in this town. Somewhat to your surprise you discover that they believe in practicing "circus communion." The trays with the cups are passed out by young men on unicycles who are juggling three of the trays at a time. When they get to your aisle, they fling the tray as if it were a Frisbee, landing it neatly in your lap. The trays with the bread are passed by aerialists hanging from a trapeze swinging by you and dropping the tray in your lap with great precision. As you leave, you hear one of the church members complaining that they really missed the 600 electric guitars and the fireworks. But still, this is the best communion show in town.

The "best communion show" is something which never occurs to most churches, with very good reason. Besides the fact that finding enough unicycle riding jugglers will be somewhat difficult (and the practice sessions extremely messy) there are some good reasons not to do it this way.

- Such a show is not in the slightest conducive to the practice of self-examination. It distracts you while it entertains you.
- It also distracts you from one of its primary purposes: remembering the death of Christ. You are to remember his sacrifice until he comes, and this certainly would be a bad way to do it.
- Finally, it is not in God's style. He prefers his greatness to be displayed in "jars of clay" (2nd Corinthians 4:7) so that you will not focus on the talent of the human beings doing the work, but upon the work being done.

So then, how should we take communion?

- It should be done in a solemn manner, as befitting the remembrance of Christ's death.
- It should be done gratefully, as it shows to us the blood of Christ by which we have forgiveness of sins and therefore salvation.
- It should be taken with anticipation, for this is a sign that he will return to judge the living and the dead.

There are reasons we don't have "circus communion." But upon self-examination, we take it in a reverent and solemn way, remembering the Lord who gave it to us.

September 22

Suffering

It is a truism that communion is a memorial to Christ. For the most part we prefer to remember the resurrection of Christ above all else. This, of course, cannot be brought out without mentioning the fact that Christ died for us. But it is a fairly uncommon thing in communion meditations to recall that Christ suffered for us — greatly.

We acknowledge that the death of Christ performed the atonement which washes away our sin. If you look into it a little further, you will see that this atonement is in accordance with the Old Testament law, which dealt with animal sacrifices. Interestingly, the animal sacrifices involved very little suffering on the part of the animal. Indeed, cruelty to animals was something specifically condemned in the Old Testament law. So why then were things arranged so that Christ would suffer so much on the cross before his death and resurrection?

- The simplest explanation is that this was Christ's obedience to God the Father. On more than one occasion he stated that he had come to do his Father's will, and this was the will of the Father.
- We must also consider the vicarious nature of the atonement. He suffered for us as we should suffer. Think about it: we shoot horses, but we imprison people. Those of us who've done prison ministry no that being imprisoned is a form of suffering and can be quite cruel.
- There is also an element of humility in this. This was not a death with dignity; it was more like a legal lynch mob. It shows us that in the manner of his death there is nothing beneath Christ's dignity.

But perhaps the greatest reason for this is that Christ is our intercessor. To be an intercessor requires that you know what the other person is going through. Here's how I put it in one devotional, many years ago:

Have you ever been down to the point where the government had to get someone else to carry your load? A welfare case? Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Him. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been down to the point where those around you can think of nothing more to say than, "Buddy, I'll buy you a drink?" They offered Jesus drugged wine. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been to the point where the world takes away even your clothes? Have you had to watch total strangers pick through what used to be your clothes? Bankruptcy and the last garage sale, perhaps? They gambled for His clothes. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been in trouble with the law? To the point where the criminals around you gave you a hard time about it? They crucified him between two thieves, and even they insulted Him. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever been the victim of the insults of the mob? Just those looking on, laughing at you and calling you names? "Come down from the cross," they called to Him. He knows how you feel.

Have you ever had the “righteous” people insult you, calling you names and letting the world know just how rotten they think you are? Even the religious leaders insulted Him on the cross. He knows how you feel.

He knows how you feel, for it all happened to Him. Even though He had lived the sinless life, deserving none of this, that’s how they treated Him. So when you feel the world coming down on top of you, whether you deserve it or not, remember: He knows how you feel.

Take your troubles to Him. Go to Him in prayer and tell Him how it is within the depths of your soul. There is nothing you can say that He does not understand, for He is human just like us. There is nothing He cannot comprehend, for He is God. There is nothing He cannot forgive, for He went to the cross for you, that you might be forgiven. There is no hurt too deep for the Christ, by whose wounds you are healed. Love, in its purest form, awaits you. He knows how you feel.

So it is. Christ did not die a swift, painless death but a long, tortured one. He did this out of his great love for us. He is now our perfect intercessor — He knows how you feel.

September 29 Demonstration

Let us suppose that you are one of those rare individuals who is fabulously wealthy. It is not necessarily obvious that everyone else would see this. Your wealth might not be obvious — if you don't spend it. What kind of sign would others look for to tell if you are wealthy?

- They might look at your *clothing*. Most men can tell a custom-made suit from one which comes just off the rack.
- They might also look at the *car* you drive. If you're tooling around in a top-of-the-line Mercedes, it speaks of money.
- Of course, they could always look at the *cash* you spend. Particularly if you are generous with your money in a visible way, it becomes pretty obvious.

By contrast, if you hoard your wealth it's likely that the rest the world will not know that you are rich. If it doesn't show, how could they tell? Spending tells the world that you are rich. You have to demonstrate it if they are to believe it.

Consider, then, God's problem in communicating with us. What could we tell about God just by looking around in our surroundings?

- It doesn't take much in the way of observation — have you ever walked under the stars in a desert night — to discover that God is powerful. Whoever created all this must be such.
- A little more observation will tell you that he is righteous, for we live in a moral world. We believe certain things are intrinsically right, and others are intrinsically wrong. We detect in the universe a moral order which must come from a moral author.

So we believe in his power and his righteousness — but how about his patience and mercy? Paul dealt with this question in writing to the Romans:

Now if God wants to demonstrate his wrath and reveal his power, can't he be extremely patient with the objects of his wrath that are made for destruction? Can't he also reveal his glorious riches to the objects of his mercy that he has prepared ahead of time for glory--including us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but from the gentiles as well?
(Romans 9:22-24 ISV)

Notice something: it is not contradictory for God to be righteous and powerful and also be patient with those against whom his wrath should be displayed. If he wants to do it that way, that's his business. It's also his business, if he wants to, to reveal his love and mercy to us. It's his choice.

Communion reminds us that he has done just that. He has balanced what is seen by all with what he has demonstrated in his grace at the cross. He decided that you needed to know that God is powerful, God is righteous — and God is merciful. He gave us communion as that

reminder of the grace he showed at the cross. He knows, as we should, that men don't need to be taught as much as they need to be reminded.

Contemplate: the measure of his suffering is the measure of his love. You can measure his grace by the pain of the nails, the spear in the side and the agony of dying a criminal's death slowly and in wretched torture. He gives you this day, in the form of the cup and the bread, a reminder of his blood shed and his body broken for you. He died, so that you might be forgiven. So as you partake this morning, do so in a manner fitting of one who is remembering the greatest sacrifice ever made. The Son of God died so that mankind might live forever.

October 6 Homonyms

One of the things which confuses the English language learner is that we often have words which are pronounced in the same way but mean things which are very different. We shall look at a fortunate confluence of three such homonyms today and consider how God reins, God rains and God reigns in Communion.

God reins

The word for this homonym comes from the days of the horse and the buggy. Horses are controlled by reins, and we often speak of somebody being reined in. How is this related to Communion? We are taught to examine ourselves before we partake. This self-examination should reveal to us the various sins which we need to correct. So, in the presence of the body and blood of Christ, examine your self and repent. You will be making promises to change; remember that the Lord Almighty hears these and will hold you to them. There is a reason we pray, "lead us not into temptation." We are asking the Almighty to rein us in so that we might not need repentance.

God rains

Older Christians will remember the hymn, "Showers of Blessing." God rains down upon his people his many blessings. In Communion we see the greatest of those blessings: forgiveness and salvation. He is reminding you of what he has given you, for we are to take Communion in memory of him.

There is another sense to this. You will recall the Sermon on the Mount:

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
(Matthew 5:44-45 NASB)

God sends his rains to the just and the unjust; you should be like him and therefore love your enemies. How can we do this? We can remind those enemies that God does just exactly this, and wants everyone to repent. Communion is open to the repentant sinner; it is a measure of God's love. God wants everyone to be saved; spread the word.

God reigns

Communion also reminds us that the resurrection was not an afterthought by God. It was the plan from the very beginning of time. Ultimately, the will of God will prevail, even in the face of the greatest of evils. The resurrection shows God's supremacy in all things. But with regard to Communion, I would remind you that we are to celebrate communion "until he comes."
Communion is a constant reminder that Christ will return. As the old King James Version put it:

And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.
(Revelation 19:6 KJV)

At the return of Christ we will see that the Lord God omnipotent indeed does reign. As you partake this morning, consider that the Lord God reins you in, rains blessings upon you and ultimately will show that he reigns in omnipotence. Ponder these things in your heart.

October 13

Receipt

The California legislature, in its never ending quest to be at the absolute forefront of environmental knighthood, has lately taken aim at a common phenomenon. Certain drugstores have taken to issuing receipts for your purchases which are quite long. These receipts have printed on the back of them a number of coupons which you can use to purchase things at a discount the next time you come in. The original purpose of the paper, being a receipt, has been superseded by being a source of advertising for the store. The receipt now is sometimes several feet long to contain all those store coupons. What used to be a simple receipt has now changed purpose: it is now way of delivering coupons — and return customers. I leave it to the listener to decide whether or not this practice should be banned on environmental grounds.

Things change over time. What used to be a simple receipt transformed into a receipt containing your signature for your credit card. That has now transformed into a source of coupons to draw you back into the store. How do we decide when change is acceptable? Let's consider that as it relates to Communion. The apostles most certainly did not have communion trays; they did not have individual communion cups. These came about as a result of our understanding about bacteria. Is this an acceptable change?

Another variation is in when communion is offered. There are churches which offer it once a year; others which offer it once a month; others, weekly. There are even some who offer it every day. May I suggest a test by which you can know whether or not a change is acceptable: does the purpose of communion change?

Of course, to use this test you must know what the purpose of communion actually is. Why does it exist? "Do this in remembrance of me," the Scriptures say. But in remembrance of what? We are told specifically that we are to remember his body and his blood. His blood, we are told, is the blood of the covenant by which we receive forgiveness of sins. May I suggest these three things which we should remember:

- First, let us remember that we are now in an unchangeable covenant with God. It is not a contract we bargained for; it is his offer on his terms for salvation.
- Next, let us remember that we have forgiveness of sin through that covenant of blood. We are the recipients of his mercy.
- Finally, let us remember the price that was paid for our salvation and our forgiveness — the body and blood of Christ on the cross.

These are solemn purposes. Thus it is that communion is a solemn ceremony, not a festive one. Before you partake, examine yourself. As you partake, do so in full meaning in remembrance. Then go forward from here and be the body of Christ in the world.

October 20 Membership

Organizations usually develop a character all their own. This character can be seen and explored in phases. There is usually an entry ritual of some sort (think about being a new hire at a corporation.) Sometimes there's even a name for this, rookie.

Perhaps a bit more subtle is the fact that they usually have a ritual to confirm that people continue to be in the organization. Baseball fans sing *Take Me out to the Ballgame*, during the seventh inning stretch. Sometimes the organist will play *Three Blind Mice* when the umpires take the field. Very often the organist has a melody that he or she plays for each given player on the team. This contributes to team spirit; those who know which melody means which player are taken to be true fans.

These rituals define "who is in" and what they're doing. Some of them are "everybody" rituals; others are not. But the existence of these rituals define what kind of organization this is.

The Christian organization is the church. Baptism is the entry ritual; Communion is the ongoing ritual. We can take a look at communion's characteristics as they apply to our organization:

- Communion is not elaborate, but simple. This implies a clarity of purpose which all can understand.
- Communion is inexpensive, which implies the church is open to all, not just the rich.
- Communion is solemn, which implies that it is extremely important.
- Communion's purpose is to *remember*; therefore we all have a shared heritage.

So, as you partake of Communion today, may I suggest that you do the following:

- Give thanks that what you do is a simple act, transparent and honest. God knows you are a sinner; in the act of Communion you acknowledge it.
- Give thanks that there is no admission charge for communion; rather recognize the commitment of your life that this implies. It's not about money; it's about your soul.
- Do this in a worthy manner, befitting the solemnity of the occasion. Examine yourself in honesty and accept his forgiveness with gratitude.
- As you partake, bring to mind are shared heritage — the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

You are a part of the church; you belong. This is how everyone knows it.

October 27

One Body

It is an often repeated truth that the church is “one body.” This is portrayed in communion; it is interesting to take a look at this in a little more detail.

Humility

You don’t normally think of humility being associated with the Lord’s Supper. But recall that the original occasion started with our Lord washing the feet of his disciples. It is an example to us of humility which is baked into the original Lord’s Supper. One example of this comes from the requirement for self-examination. We are told to examine ourselves before partaking of communion. If we find something which is not right, we are required to repent. Repentance often involves confession. This may require humility on the part of someone else; pride typically doesn’t want to get involved in repentance and confession.

- Sometimes that’s a refusal to hear a confession — often because hearing such a confession would require you to forgive that person. Forgiveness is expensive to the one who is forgiving.
- More often the problem is quite a bit simpler. Confession gives rise to gossip — and the confession is usually inflated to make the gossip juicier.

Choosing Sides

Communion forces a choice. As Paul told the Corinthians,

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.
(1 Corinthians 10:21 NASB)

Perhaps this seems to you a problem only for the ancient Christian; after all, we haven’t had idols around for quite some time. But remember that when you take communion you proclaim the Lord’s death. In so doing you also proclaim his resurrection, and in proclaiming his resurrection you proclaim his grace for sinners (including you.) To take communion is to say that you are on the side of the angels.

You are to do this “until He comes.” When this comes out, it is clear that you are proclaiming to the world that you know who wins in the struggle between good and evil. You also proclaim that you are on the winning side.

Commitment to Help

Washing the feet of the disciples was not only a symbolic gesture of humility, but a very practical service to people of the time. No one had athletic shoes at that time; they wore

leather sandals. In so doing, they got their feet dirty. Washing them was a practical service. If we are one body, should we not assist the other members of that body? We are, in a sense, helping ourselves when we do this.

Perhaps you think this is something of a trivial issue. But do remember our Lord's parable of the good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite both had good reasons to go to the other side of the road and not touch that body that was wounded. Those were religious reasons. They could quote you chapter and verse as to why they had to move on. But we recognize an excuse as just that — an excuse.

Be one body. Be one body ceremonially, taking the same communion meal as your brothers and sisters do. Be one body intentionally, looking for the opportunity to help your fellow Christians. Be one body practically — don't just wish them well, help them out. Be One Body.

November 3

Why

Christians, especially those who have grown up in the church, seldom ask why they take communion. It's just something that happens and you participate. In fact, there are reasons for doing it and once in a while we need to remind ourselves of just how important this is.

First and foremost, there is the matter of obedience. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and commanded all his disciples to participate. Not only is it a matter of obedience, but in a very real sense it is a matter of sharing with Christ. Christ did not tell the disciples "you do it." Instead, he shared the meal with them, setting an example for us. In a very real sense we share that meal with him even yet today. In the same sense we share that meal with the church universal — all Christians in all places and all times are one with us; we are the church.

Maybe you have never thought of it this way, but communion is a required form of humility. If you take communion you are implicitly confessing that you are a sinner in need of forgiveness. If you are perfect and completely sinless, there is no sense for you in communion. Fortunately, this doesn't seem to be a danger for too many of us. If you are a sinner taking communion, you begin by examining yourself. Done properly, this means you find out what you need to change, and you make a determination to change it. After the ceremony is over you need to implement that change — which can get expensive. Expensive, but necessary.

Communion is also a form of your testimony. There are at least three things to which you testify:

- You testify that you believe the Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the Living God.
- You also testify that you believe that he forgives those who are repentant sinners who come to him.
- You testify that he will return to judge the living and the dead. We haven't seen this yet; but He said it and we believe it.

So as you take communion this morning, do it with integrity. Mean what you are doing. Remember that you are acting in obedience to his command, in humility as a testimony of his forgiveness and soon return.

November 10

Costly

2 Samuel 24:10-25

Towards the end of his life, King David finds himself in quite a stew — of his own making. You can read the details in Second Samuel 24, but David needs to do something to avert the punishment of the Lord. He has repented of his sin, but he has not yet paid for it. God gives him three choices; David picks the plague on the people of Israel. As the plague develops, David begins to take personal responsibility for his actions.

The drama peaks at one particular site: the threshing floor of Araunah. The site happens to be one of the most sacred in Old Testament theology. It is apparently the spot on which Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac. It ultimately will become the site of Solomon's Temple. It doesn't look like much at the moment; a flat smooth stone surface used for separating wheat from chaff. It's a good place to construct things on, such as the altar David wishes to build for sacrifices to stop the plague.

Apparently Araunah knows his way around the political world. He immediately offers to David the oxen (as burnt offering), the wooden sledges for the fire and the grain that is present for a grain offering. David rejects this; as he tells Araunah:

However, the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

(2 Samuel 24:24 NASB)

We come this morning to the moment in our services where we are to examine ourselves. I would ask you this morning to examine yourself in terms of the sacrifices you make for the Lord. Some of us are giving God the sleeves off of our vest. So please, consider as an example before you the sacrifice that God made for you. It was not something which cost him nothing; it cost him the life of his own dear Son. That sacrifice was given in extreme pain. That is what he has done for you, let it be an example.

Examine yourself. Look and see how your sacrifices of time, money, forgiveness and restoration are given. Do you give grudgingly or only when pressured? Or do you give freely and at your cost? Consider well how your example compares to His. Then partake of his body and blood, the memorial to his sacrifice for you.

November 17 On Genocide

One of the particularly nettlesome thorns in California politics has been the recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915. California is the home of many expatriate Armenians and citizens of Armenian descent. The Turkish government has long denied the existence of this genocide; the rest of the world doesn't quite see it that way. One politician put it this way:

"It is critical that we counteract Turkey's genocide denial because genocide denial is the last act of a genocide. First you obliterate a people, then you seek to obliterate their memory, and finally you seek to obliterate the memory of the obliteration."

This is just a specific case of how human beings treat sin. Think about it; see if this seems familiar:

- First, you commit the sin — often quite cheerfully, not thinking of the consequences but convinced that if you aren't in the right, at least you're not in the wrong.
- When, as is inevitable, you discover that you have sinned and you are guilty, you try as hard as you can to eliminate the memory of the sin. You just want it to go away so you won't have to deal with it.
- Then, when you have succeeded in suppressing the guilt of the sin, you go about forgetting that it ever happened at all. We seem to think that if we wait long enough sin will cease to be sin and turn into nothing but history.

Does any of this sound familiar? We don't need to get into specifics at this time, but if you feel something bubbling up from the bottom of your memory, this just might be the Holy Spirit trying to tell you something. Sin is to be dealt with, not denied.

That's why we have a period of self-examination as a part of Communion. That self-examination is not an afterthought.

- Self-examination is designed to bring up the problem of sin at a time when you are focused on the solution to sin — the grace given to us at the Cross.
- Because you are doing it at Communion, you are encouraged to take advantage of that grace while remembering the price paid to give it to you.
- You are encouraged to do this regularly, every time you take communion, so that sin will not grow in the absence of forgiveness.

So, as the time given you permits, examine yourself and bring forward those sins yet unforgiven. Bring them to the Cross of Christ, remembering the price of forgiveness — his body and blood. Repent of your sins knowing that Christ forgives. You are a child of God; petition your heavenly Father for your forgiveness, and give thanks for his grace.

November 24 Equal Share

1 Samuel 30

David has a problem. He's in the middle of the desert, chasing some Amalekite raiders who have stolen from him and his men. He's almost to the point of attacking them when he discovers that 200 of his 600 men are too tired to continue the pursuit. He goes on with the other 400, recovers all the plunder, wives and children and returns in triumph. Some of the troublemakers among the 400 tell David that he should not share the plunder with the 200 who were left behind. David's decision is to the contrary; all 600 will share. It's not just an immediate decision, but the text tells us that it is a "statute and ordinance" in Israel.

Why did David refuse this seemingly reasonable demand? The answer is found in verse 23, where David tells the men that they "must not do that with what the Lord has given us." David knows that he achieved this victory because of the Lord (he was quite well outnumbered.) What comes from the Lord cannot be distributed with partiality.

That principle applies in Communion as well. We all take from the same cup, with the same bread — there are no first-class seats for communion. Why? It is because this is something the Lord has given us. We are therefore to share and share alike with his gifts.

This carries with it some interesting implications for communion.

- It implies that we are one body. If he gave it to us collectively — and he did — then we are to use it as one body. There is no favoritism. We are united.
- Extending that somewhat further, God offers this gift of salvation and its representation (communion) to "whosoever will." It is our task to extend the boundaries of the church to encompass all who will accept his salvation.
- It reminds us that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female but all are one in Christ Jesus.

As you partake of communion today, keep this principle in mind. You might ask yourself these questions:

- Is there anything in your life which tends to fracture the body of Christ? If so, repent and seek forgiveness — and seek the unity of the church in your actions.
- Is there any burden you bear with which you need help? If so, look to the body of Christ for that help. Do not keep it a secret.
- Is there anyone to whom you owe thanks or blessing? If so, do not delay in delivering it.

Remember: communion is something we do. Our Lord and Savior established the church as his one body on earth — and we need to remember that.

December 1

Strong Grace

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.
(2 Timothy 2:1 NASB)

As far as I can tell, this is the only place where the word “strong” is in the same sentence with the word “grace”. The verse is seldom quoted. Perhaps the reason for this is that it is somewhat difficult to understand. We don’t understand grace as a source of strength.

- We understand grace as forgiveness. We know that God forgives his children their sins upon their confession and repentance. Communion is an opportunity for such confession and repentance.
- We also understand grace as a gift. We know there is nothing we can do that would earn this gift.
- But strength in grace?

But do recall that Christ once told Paul, “my grace is sufficient for you.” He goes on to say that his strength is made perfect in weakness. Perhaps it is strength we don’t understand.

Consider for a moment the metaphor that Christ gave us when he told us that he is the vine and we are the branches. Permit me an illustration of how His metaphor might teach us more. I have a vine in my backyard, the kind that clings to vertical surfaces, such as my block wall. Consider that vine:

- Even though it has grown over most of my block wall over the last twenty years or so, the leaves at the farthest end are the same as those at its tap root. So it is with us: the grace that makes us strong does so that we may produce the same fruit at our end as He does at the tap root of the Father.
- The vine and the root alike share whatever hardships come along. If it rains, both get wet. The leaf at the end has no reason to expect sunshine if the root is rained on. But – if the root is watered, the leaf also prospers. As Christ pours His grace through us (we are but a channel where His grace is poured) we take in his gift; it is fitting, therefore, that we suffer like Him as well.
- If the leaf is trimmed off, it no longer grows, nor can it render any benefit. It is fit only to be thrown away. If you wish to be strong in the Faith, remain in grace.

Communion is a picture of that kind of grace. From one end to the other it is the same grace being brought to us. The ancient Christian and the modern one, African, Asian or American share the strength of grace given to us in communion. We also share hardships, shown in the suffering of Christ as illustrated in communion. As He suffered, we will suffer too. And if we cease to stay connected with the church, ceased to partake in communion we are disconnected from the vine and die.

It is said that men need not so much to be taught as reminded. Communion is our reminder in how the grace of God gives us strength.

December 8

Dance of Life

The story is told of a ballet company in the Soviet Union. In that place and time, it was a fairly common occurrence that someone would be required to “denounce” another member of the group. The choice was always given publicly, so the victim had to choose between the ballet company and, in this instance, her lover. While the company waited for her answer, she gave it in the form of a small set of steps. She went en pointe, and fluttered over to her lover. She bowed her head and placed it on her lover’s shoulder. No words were required; the gesture was sufficient.

We often forget that our actions speak louder than our words. What is it that we say when we take communion? What do we proclaim?

- We proclaim the sacrificial death of Christ. He became sin who had no sin so that we might become righteous.
- It therefore logically follows that we proclaim the resurrection of Christ.
- And if we proclaim the resurrection of Christ it is a logical conclusion that we proclaim his return, his Second Coming.

These statements carry with them some implications.

- To proclaim his sacrificial death is to say that you are a sinner. It also says that your debt of sin is paid, and you are a child of God.
- To proclaim his resurrection implies that he has power over death — and therefore, as he promised, we shall be raised from the grave. Some of us will be raised to glory; others will be raised to judgment.
- To proclaim his Second Coming implies that we shall see victory over Satan and evil. Following that will be the Judgment. Some will be rewarded; others punished. It also means that we shall find our new home in heaven for eternity.

This is what we proclaim — but most of us will never get the chance to do it in words. We therefore must do it in our lives. How do we do this?

- Admit that you are a sinner. Seek to confess and repent as you examine yourself at communion. As a sinner, always challenge your right to judge.
- Live in the hope of the resurrection. Make it clear you think that death is not final. There’s a big difference between a funeral and a home-going.
- Live as if your Lord could return at any moment to judge the living and the dead — because that’s exactly the case.

You may never get the chance to stand up and speak from the pulpit. But you already have the chance to proclaim the truth by the way you dance through life.

December 15

Pilgrim

It is a fact: communion is a continuation of the ceremony known as Passover. It is instructive to look at Passover to learn the lessons that communion should teach.

One of the first of those lessons is that it took God an entire chapter of the book of Exodus to layout the regulations for eating dinner. You were to follow specific instructions, not just “eat dinner.” Those instructions included preparation for a journey — a pilgrimage, if you will. You would eat the meal in haste — you’re in a hurry to get going. And it was to be eaten while you were dressed ready to leave on this pilgrimage. Because that’s what it would be: a pilgrimage.

A pilgrim, you see, must travel light. That was the physical aspect of this, but it has a spiritual side too. It tells us that we are not to be burdened with the things of this world as we journey through. As the old hymn puts it, “This world is not my home, I’m just a’passing through.” Indeed, on a pilgrimage you are not really in control of your own path. As Christians, our path is chosen for us by our Lord. Many of us have made plans in life that God has turned in another direction. It’s just one more reason not to become enamored of the things of this world, but to set your mind on things above.

Medieval pilgrims — a much more common type than we have today — understood this. They went down a trail to a sacred place. The sacred place usually was one where you would be able to get closer to God; they often believed that their prayers would be heard more clearly if they prayed in such a place. The idea is not all that ancient; churches used to have no locks on the door so that if someone wanted to come in and pray there would be no obstacle. As these pilgrims found, it wasn’t just the sacred place that brought them closer to God, it was the journey of getting there. It’s often said that a pilgrimage is the destination, and they understood this well.

Communion is the start of this week’s pilgrimage. Each time you take communion you are starting again by partaking of a sacred meal. Each week you leave communion to carry on with the pilgrimage which is the Christian life. It is to prepare you for this week’s journey. It is the best preparation, for it is the one which puts the Christian in touch with the sacrifice of Christ. You go forth to be the living word of God, a channel through which His grace is poured.

One last thought for you: it is not uncommon for human beings to fear death. But if you look at life as being a pilgrimage to heaven, each night pitching your tent one day’s march closer to home, you see that that pilgrimage prepares you day by day for who you are going to be eternally. So, as you partake, prepare yourself for this week’s journey. Do not wander, but followed the trail he has laid out for you. Someday this pilgrimage will end, and you will be at that greatest of destinations — home.

December 22

Mary

The annual Christmas pageant at our former church had an unusual feature that year. It was unusual because of its absence, not its presence. The traditional Christmas pageant usually has somebody playing the part of Joseph. He gets to wear a bathrobe and if lucky lead a donkey. He rarely gets a speaking part. This year, however, Joseph was completely missing. Why? It seems that our new minister decided that a single, unmarried Mary would be much more attractive to young women than a married Mary on a donkey led by Joseph.

There is no denying, however, that Mary has a much more significant role than Joseph. If for nothing else than the fact that she bore Jesus. Ladies, we are talking about childbirth. Childbirth in a time with no anesthetics and a significant risk of mom dying with the baby. She is known to the Greek churches as the *theotokos* - the "God bearer." It might occur to you to ask why Jesus just didn't come down in a flying saucer as an adult. The reason is the incarnation.

The incarnation — the fact that Jesus came in the flesh like the rest of us, born in the poorest of circumstances and the most common of methods — is of extreme importance.

- The incarnation reveals what is hinted at in the Old Testament. Like the detective explaining the mystery at the end of the book, the incarnation explains many of the prophecies of the Old Testament.
- It prepares the way for the only truly effective sacrifice for sins. The blood of animals cannot atone for human sins; only human blood can do that. If Christ was not here in bodily form, we are not forgiven.

Therefore, we are commanded to remember the sacrifice made — a sacrifice made possible by the incarnation of Christ through a young woman named Mary.

- We must remember that this was the plan from the very beginning. It is not something that "just happened." It is not something that God did because the situation had gotten out of control. No; he planned it this way.
- We must remember the price that was paid. The human Jesus suffered in great pain for this; the divine Son of God suffered separation from God the Father.
- We must remember the greatness of the God who did this. His sacrifice was made so that any of us might receive salvation. Any of us — no matter who.

December 29

Turns

Consider, if you will, a rather ordinary sight on our roads: the T intersection. Your driving down a particular road and it ends in a street crossing at 90°. There are two lanes, clearly labeled for a left turn and a right turn. There's a sign on the streetlight above which says the same thing. The intersection illustrates the type of decision you're going to make.

- You must choose which way to go. Your choice probably depends on where you're trying to go, but you have to make it.
- You bear the consequences of this decision. If you choose the wrong turning you may wind up in the middle of nowhere. Is it possible you might want to consult a roadmap?
- If you pick the wrong direction, it's not the fault of the guy who made the street sign. Nor is it the fault of the fellow who painted the left and right turn arrows on the pavement. They simply made your decision clearer — you still made the decision.
- Finally, the result is easily visible to all who want to look at it. This includes backseat navigators, too.

Communion presents such a choice to you each Sunday. It is a decision point in your life.

- You must choose to partake, or refrain. There is no ambiguity in this.
- You bear the consequences. If you decide to partake, you bear the reproach of being a Christian. You will recall that all Christians are told that they will suffer some form of persecution in their life. Of course, you also know that he is both Lord and Savior, and you owe him your obedience.
- The choice is yours; it's not the fault of the guy offering the communion meditation. He's just painting the signs.
- The result of your choice is on display quite publicly, both here in the church and in your life throughout the next week.

Perhaps you have this choice down to being an automatic "yes". If so, may I encourage you to follow the steps that Christ has laid out for this ceremonial meal.

- Before anything else, examine your self. See if there is repentance required; if so, determine now that you will do it.
- As you take this meal, remember that it is in memory of his sacrifice on the cross — a sacrifice which bought your salvation.
- Take it in anticipation of his return on the Day of Judgment.

Communion — a milepost in the pilgrimage which is your life.