

January 5 Josiah

Buried in the later histories of the kings of Judah is the story of King Josiah. At eight years old he came to the throne by assassination. He grew to power in evil times. Despite this, there was a jar of manna and with the aid of the high priest, instituted a reform in religious affairs in Judah. He threw the Asherah pole out of the temple, along with the matching prostitutes. He also throughout the male prostitutes living in the temple. He also threw out the worship of the Sun God. (Does any of this sound familiar?) In short, he was a righteous king; the last one in Judah.

One day one of his secretaries brought to him what was not really well known at the time, a copy of the Scriptures to date. In a sign of great distress, he tore his robes and inquired of God what to do. Interestingly, he humbled himself to the point of asking a female prophet what to do. He stood in the gap for Judah. God's reply was not particularly welcome; the punishment for Judah was to be carried out anyway — but delayed because of the righteousness of Josiah.

It's interesting how Josiah reacts to this. He throws a magnificent Passover feast. Passover, as know, is the predecessor of communion. In it Josiah celebrates God's victories in the past and also puts the nation on the right track for repentance. What he does not do is plead with God on the basis that he did not know about the sins of Judah nor could they possibly be held to be his fault. He offered no excuses but praised God for the help he had.

I bring this to your attention because this is the first communion meditation of a new year. I would ask you to examine yourself:

- Is there sin in your life that you didn't know about, but was somehow pointed out? Do not fall to the temptation of saying, "it's not my fault." Rather, confess and repent.
- Is there sin in your life where you know that you are not 100% at fault — indeed, you might just be a minor contributor. Don't use that as an excuse to ignore what needs to be done.

Examine yourself this new year. If there is sin in your life, confess it. Repent of your sin and accept God's communion as a sign of his mercy — and your forgiveness.

January 12 Great Price

Mark 13:45-46

This parable of Jesus is usually known by its King James title: the Pearl of Great Price. In this parable Christ brings us one of the most important aspects of the church: the incredible risk taken by this merchant to get this incredible value. Becoming a Christian is not a halfway matter. To begin with, consider that the merchant here obviously was in the pearl business. He was looking for pearls. The sinner should be a seeker likewise. May we point out three things about this merchant?

- He found that pearl. He was doing the looking, and with the kingdom of God he who seeks, finds.
- He found one of great value. There is no sense given to the idea that we may pick and choose among religions, because it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. There is only one way to the Father.
- He found one of great value. The trivial didn't interest him. He was looking for something costly, and found it. This is a man who would not consider a yoga class to be true spiritual enlightenment.

Then please note the man's reaction.

- He went away. His purchase was not a spontaneous, spur of the moment emotional thing but rather one of thought, then action.
- He sold everything. He gave up all the other valuable things he had for this one item. If you do not put Christ first in your life, are you really a Christian?
- Then he made the commitment: he had the money in hand and he went and purchased the pearl. No "buyer's remorse," but determination to get the one thing of value. He did not wander into buying that pearl.

The kingdom of God, we are told, is that pearl of great price. So we might ask:

- Do you seek, or have you found, the one source of truth in this universe?
- Have you felt its value — the cost of Christ giving his life on the cross?
- Have you "sold everything?" Is Jesus Christ really number one in your life?

If so, then take communion with a good heart today. Remember that it recalls to your mind the great price that Christ paid — and the great price you pay for being a Christian. You are taught to examine yourself before doing this, so that you may repent as needed. Remember, that repentance restores your relationship to him. Seek the pearl; then do not let it slip away.

January 19

Martha

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

(John 11:25-27 NIV)

Most Christians will remember the circumstances surrounding this passage. Mary and Martha had lost their brother, Lazarus, to death. They had sent for Jesus, but he delayed in coming until Lazarus was dead. The circumstances were rather grim; in those circumstances we have the first confession of Christ as the Son of God. Jesus, and what has become his typical fashion, answers the question Martha did not ask but should have. He tells her that he is the resurrection and the life, and asks her if she believes this.

It's worth noting that Martha probably did not fully understand the ramifications of what Jesus just said to her. This is a reaction of not someone who is suddenly enlightened but rather the reaction of someone who believes that Jesus really is who he says he is. By telling her of the resurrection he is awakening her mind to the the logical consequences of the resurrection of Christ.

It is worth some time to consider just what "the resurrection", as it applies to us, really means. First, dispensed with the idea that this is just a form of immortality. We will not spend all of eternity floating on clouds with harps. The resurrection means the reuniting of the human soul with the human body. A human being is not a complete human being unless that person has a body; it's part of the definition of being human. Christ has promised us that this will happen, though we are a little short on details. For instance, we are told that the body will be a different one from the one we have now — and yet the same.

When you take communion, most of us know, you are acknowledging the price that Christ paid for our salvation — paid at the Cross. This he commands; this is fitting and just. At the same time, however, you also proclaim your faith in Christ — and thus your faith in the resurrection to come. He will return as he left; the saints will rise from the ground reunited with their bodies — whatever that means. For those who have been faithful, it will be a day of great joy.

Faithful. That is the key to the resurrection; it belongs to the faithful. It works that way in life to. As F. E. B. Meyer put it, "Christ always needed faith in some one, as the fulcrum on which to rest the lever of His mighty power." In this incident he found that person in Martha. As you partake this morning, ask yourself: does the power of Christ finding me a fulcrum? Can he use me to achieve his mighty purposes? Remember, it is not your strength and power that moves the kingdom forward. Not by might, nor by power but by His Spirit. As you proclaim your faith this morning by taking communion, do not think of how weak you are — but how willing you are to allow the power of Christ to flow through you.

January 26

High Priest

"It shall be on Aaron's forehead, and Aaron shall take away the iniquity of the holy things which the sons of Israel consecrate, with regard to all their holy gifts; and it shall always be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD.
(Exodus 28:38 NASB)

Some of us have a problem with communion. Actually, we all do — it's just that some of us have not thought of it. You would most commonly hear this problem expressed by an argument that said, "I'm not good enough to take communion." The argument is that you have to get to a certain level of holiness before God is going to allow you to participate. Some of you have never had this problem, and never will. Please, those of you who fall in that category, be assured that there are those who do. It springs from their desire to be pleasing to God.

The ancient Israelites had exactly the same problem. Before they could present offerings and sacrifices to the Lord God Almighty, those sacrifices had to be strictly acceptable under the Levitical law. If you want an idea of the difficulty, try obeying every traffic law in your state all the time for 20 years. Eventually some obscure little regulation is going to trip you up. You just aren't smart enough and detailed enough to make this work. The Israelites had the same problem; the Levitical law had lots of little details.

To get past this, God prescribed a portion of the High Priest's uniform. It was a medallion on the turban which was inscribed with the words, "Holiness to the Lord." Only the high priest wore it; everyone but him could see it. It expressed the highest aim in worship. But please note that little phrase: "that they may be accepted." This means that if there is any defect in their sacrifices which everybody missed, the responsibility lies with the High Priest. This is one reason he makes sacrifices for himself personally. In other words, even though you tried to get it right and missed, the High Priest covers the difference. He was to wear this little plate of gold all the time — symbolizing that you could offer sacrifices for forgiveness at any time and have them accepted.

The importance to us, as Christians, is that Jesus is our High Priest. We are not intrinsically holy; our perfection is too limited. If our participation is to be acceptable, somebody has to cover that lack of worthiness in our hearts. That "someone" is our High Priest, Jesus Christ. He does for us what Aaron did for the ancient Israelites. So — you are exactly correct: you are not worthy to take communion. Don't worry about it; our High Priest, Jesus Christ takes care of it for us. Do your best, and trust Christ for the rest.

February 2

Mighty to Save

Who is this who comes from Edom, With garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, This One who is majestic in His apparel, Marching in the greatness of His strength? "It is I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save."
(Isaiah 63:1 NASB)

In an eerie foreshadowing of the book of Revelation, Isaiah sees here in prophetic vision the coming of the Day of the Lord. It is a day of vengeance and punishment. He sees the Christ, as John did in Revelation, coming as if from battle. It is beyond the scope of a communion meditation to interpret chapter 63 of Isaiah. Indeed, the various commentators disagree quite a bit about how to do so. But I would bring your attention to the last sentence in the first verse. "It is I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save." These are red letter words.

He is mighty to save. Speaking just of those things which happen to a person who is already a Christian, this is quite clear.

- He is mighty to save, to keep his people holy. If you are beset by sin, have you appealed to him and his gracious mercy delivered in his magnificent power?
- He is mighty to save, to cause his people to grow in love and in righteousness. These are tender plants and must be watched over. A gardener knows that some plants must be kept out of the weather, at least at first. Your Lord knows this about your love and righteousness and will save them from being extinguished.
- He is mighty to save, to produce great works from the least of his people. Over and over again, Christ uses the least, the sinful, to do the great things of the church. Moses had murdered a man and complained of being unable to speak in public.

This is the Christ who speaks in righteousness. Power alone, without righteousness, is destruction. He speaks to us today through this communion.

- He speaks righteousness by way of example: he is the Suffering Servant. If he was willing to endure the cross to bring righteousness to his children, surely his children should be willing to follow his example. Communion reminds us of this.
- He speaks righteousness through his confidence in the resurrection. Despite the suffering of the cross, he knew that God the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would raise him from the grave. We too should have such confidence, and live in the power of the resurrection. Communion reminds us of this.
- He speaks righteousness by this great example of God's love. God loved us so much that he gave his only Son. Believe in him, and be a child of God. Communion reminds us of this.

Communion reminds us not only of the power of Christ, but also the righteousness of Christ. If you stay in his care, he is mighty to save. If you will listen to his words you will hear him speak in righteousness. You can see both in communion.

February 9

Drunk Driving

The bailiff had his hands full that morning. He had about 40 men to seat alongside the courthouse wall — in alphabetical order. This was complicated by the fact that the bailiff spoke no Spanish, and most of the people he was seating spoke no English. After much arm waving and name calling (no offense intended) he managed to get all of them seated.

The judge came in, followed by a clerk carrying a huge stack of manila folders. A translator approached the bench and introduced himself. The proceedings began. The judge would call a name. The individual stepped forward and approached the bench. We then heard something like this: “I see that you’ve attended all the required counseling sessions; I also see that you have not been in any further trouble. Since you have completed all the requirements, you are now permitted to say that you have never been convicted of drunk driving.”

The reaction of the visitors in court was fairly quick. “What do you mean you’ve never been convicted of drunk driving? What are you doing here if you weren’t a drunk driver?” It seemed outrageous at first. But please think along the lines of our court system for a moment. Nobody wants to hire a drunk driver. These men had families to support. How are they to get a job if they had to carry the label “drunk driver” around their necks? So our system had developed a way to forgive and forget this offense — and likely enough to prevent the man from getting into further trouble.

There is a parallel here to Christ’s forgiveness. It’s really fairly simple when you think about it:

- You are a sinner — no getting around it. If only at the Last Judgment you will face the court to account for your sins.
- He asks that you repent so that you might receive his forgiveness. Repentance includes changing your behavior. It also includes getting help to keep you from doing it again. He then asks you to follow him, rather than the way of the world.
- In response, he erases your sin from the record. You are now officially “not guilty.” It sounds a little outrageous, but remember that guilt is a fact, not just a feeling. By his authority, he changes that fact from guilty to not guilty.

But this forgiveness comes at a cost. Like all forgiveness, it is costly to the one who is doing the forgiving. Christ forgives you at the expense of his body and blood, given up for you on the Cross. He wants you to remember that. That’s why he gave us communion — so that we would remember.

Forgiveness is not cheap. This applies to his great example on the Cross, or our attempts to follow that great example. We cannot repay his grace — but we can pass it on.

February 16 Broken Arm

Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer, **Seek out his wickedness until You find none.**
(Psalms 10:15 NASB)

At some point in the Christian experience a combination of evil observed and frustration gives many Christians the viewpoint that God is missing an easy method for dealing with this. It's really simple, Lord. You just slay the wicked. Wipe them out. Think of the advantages!

- It's a very convenient solution, or so it seems. The wicked are dead, leaving only the righteous people. Okay, perhaps a bit messy in the cleanup but otherwise...
- It might just help the cause of evangelism. If it became commonly known that God was striking down the wicked — lightning bolt next time you go out the door — but the Christians were exempt, there would be lines forming to sign up. After all, think of the money it would save on life insurance.

The problem seems to be the righteous God might just do that — but not a loving God. Our God is both; therefore, some other solution must be sought.

God's solution to this problem is hinted at here in Psalm 10:15. The real problem is that the wicked often includes those of us who don't think we are among the wicked. We, too, are sinners. God's solution is to seek out such wickedness, destroying it as he goes until he finds no more. It's like your Sunday school teacher said: you have to hate the sin, but you have to love the sinner. So how do we get to this happy state where God finds no more wickedness?

We don't have the tools to solve this problem, but He does. His solution begins with repentance by the sinner. You have to turn around; change direction. You have to stop doing what you been doing and do what is right instead. That's your part of the solution. God's part of the solution is the more difficult one, as you would expect. He forgives you.

How can a righteous God do that? The answer is that the righteous, loving God sent his Son to bear the penalty for your sins. Jesus got what the wicked deserve — and therefore God forgives even the wicked. He reminds you of this in today's communion. The bread reminds you of his body; the cup reminds you of his blood, shed for you. It is a constant reminder of both God's love and his righteousness.

So, as you partake, examine yourself and see if the seeds of wickedness have taken root. Repent; make a U-turn from those ways which grow increasingly more wicked. You cannot be a perfectly righteous man; but you can be a perfectly forgiven one.

February 23

Friends of Mary

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a somewhat enigmatic figure in the New Testament. For someone who occupies such a unique position of importance she is mentioned at only a few occasions. One of those moments is at the Crucifixion. It is only recounted in John's Gospel. This is fitting, for the incident in question is when Christ assigns the care of Mary to his beloved apostle, John. There is much speculation as to why John was chosen, but I would draw your attention to another oddity: why did Jesus wait until he was being crucified? Was this a case of Christ waiting for just exactly the right moment?

One thing is certain: it is a great example of how Jesus cares for those he loves. Of all the women on earth, mother is probably the most precious. John is the best friend of Jesus, and now is tasked with taking care of Christ's mother. It is arguable that Christ might have forgotten this; after all, compared to dying it's a relatively trivial detail. That makes it an example of how much Jesus cares. Even when he is suffering and dying, his thought is for others.

There were at least three other women present at the time. On Easter Sunday, these women went to the tomb to embalm the body of their Lord. It seems curious that Mary was not along with them. Normally, embalming the dead is something done by the family. Mary is the matriarch of the family; normally it would be her responsibility. If you have ever seen a dead body of a traffic accident victim, you have an idea of how miserable a task this would be. Christ's body would not be a pleasant sight. It seems likely that these three women decided that as an act of kindness to Mary, they would take over that responsibility. We may even see it as Christ setting an example of his love, which was followed by these three women. It's a dirty job; there's no real reward — but the example of love and kindness set for them thus inspired them to do the dirty work.

Communion brings up the memory of the crucifixion to us. That memory should not only remind us of his sacrifice, but inspire us to imitate his love. There is no greater love than a man who gives up his life for his friends, and Christ did that for us. So I would ask you this morning: is there some task you can perform for one of your fellow Christians that would be a demonstration of love and imitation of Christ? As you leave this place this morning, remember his sacrifice and the example it sets. Then, "go and do likewise."

March 1

Mirror

The mirror is an ancient device. It was known in biblical times, though the object was not as clear in its reflections as the ones we have today. It's a matter of ordinary use that tells us that the small mirror is used to look at small things, and a large mirror is used to look at large things. We may examine the large things:

- You use it to examine the large things about you. It tells you what you are. If you are tall and skinny or short and fat, it shows. As far as the physical side of your existence is concerned, it shows you what others see, and that's a very useful thing. If what you see is pleasing, you accept it as being a picture of what you really are.
- If a mirror tells you what you are, it also tells you what you are not. Your author would like to have the mirror tell him that he is young, dashing, handsome and surrounded by beautiful women. Unfortunately, I do not have a mirror with that kind of talent. It tells me that I am not such a person; mirrors tell you what you are not.
- Most of us use a mirror to look at ourselves, but while you're there note that the mirror also tells you what is behind you. If you don't like the scenery in which you live, don't blame the mirror.

Of course, what you see in the mirror also depends on how you use it.

- If you're using the mirror to check the length of your tie, the size of your belly is nothing to notice. It's there if you want to see it, but it depends on you.
- You can also use it as a comparative device. Suppose you look at yourself in the mirror and say, "well, that doesn't look too bad — I've seen worse." You're looking at yourself, but what you're seeing is that Joe is a sloppier dresser than you. It's a comparison device!
- Other times, however, you can see something that you want very much. Charles Revson, the founder of Revlon cosmetics, once told his sales representatives that "we do not sell cosmetics — we sell hope." If things look just right, often we see hope.

Communion is a mirror to the soul. In taking communion you are instructed to examine yourself, which implies that you will take action to correct those things which your self-examination shows to be a problem. So let me ask you this morning:

- When you examine yourself, do you see the obvious? Or do you ignore it?
- When you examine yourself, do you see yourself in Christ's light, or the light of comparison to others?

Beyond all else, when you look at yourself in communion you need to know that he gave you this as a reminder of his sacrifice, to be taken regularly, until He comes again. No matter how wretched the picture you see in that mirror, that mirror also shows you the hope of the resurrection. Do not be afraid to look in the mirror and examine yourself, for in the same mirror there is forgiveness and ultimately resurrection.

March 8

Jigsaw Puzzle

Have you ever seen a small child trying to work out their first jigsaw puzzle? Usually it has no more than 6 to 8 pieces. The pieces are large to work with clumsy hands. There is an initial phase in which the kid wonders whether or not these things even fit together, and if so, why? But eventually the process becomes straightforward and as the child grows he can enjoy puzzles with many more pieces. It is intrinsically satisfying to the human mind to be able to solve a puzzle. This may be why God gave us so many.

Of course, to solve a jigsaw puzzle there are some requirements:

- First, you must have all the pieces. It sounds a little obvious but if you ever tried to work one of these puzzles with 20 or 30 pieces missing you know how difficult this can be.
- The puzzle itself must be solvable. Take away a few pieces and add a few more from some other puzzle and it is not.
- Finally, you must know what the assembled puzzle looks like. If you think you're putting together a puzzle that shows the Cathedral of Notre Dame but actually has the Statue of Liberty in it, you're going to have some real difficulty.

Communion is the jigsaw puzzle of the Bible. It's given to us so that we may know some very important facts, but it is simple enough for our clumsy minds to handle.

- It has very few pieces. We recognize the cup as being representative of the blood of Christ, shed on the cross for our sins. We know that it comes from the Passover feast where it represents the blood of the animals sacrificed for sins. The bread represents his body, broken for us. The puzzle pieces are simple; the meaning very deep.
- The puzzle is solvable. If we just had communion as it's given to us in the New Testament it might not be. But we have a guide; we have Passover from the Old Testament to show us what God was doing. You look at the lamb sacrificed in Passover and you see the Lamb sacrificed at the cross. As you look forward into the future — for communion lasts until he comes again — you see with the eyes of a prophet. We don't see everything that's coming; but we know who does.
- And who is it that knows what all of human history is going to look like? Is it not the God who holds time in his hands? The cross is the pivot point of human history, just as God planned it. Moses told of a prophet who would arise in Israel who must be listened to; Christ tells us that he is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Plan on it.

So what is the picture? The picture that man was designed to love God and serve him forever. That relationship was broken in the garden of Eden — but not without hope. Even then, God foretold the coming of one who would restore this relationship. That restoration happened at the Cross. God gave us this picture puzzle so that we might be reminded and remember the

sacrifice he made for us. If you are a Christian you know the ultimate answer portrayed here in communion. Live like it.

March 15 Government

In a phrase cherished by Americans, governments derive their “just powers” from the “consent of the governed.” In longer words, we give our government authority to perform various functions which are beneficial to us. There is a subtle connection here, in that the more beneficial we see that arm of government to be, the more likely we are to be in submission to its authority. For example, most of us would have no hesitation in arguing with the tax people about their misinterpretation of our tax returns. But that same “most of us” would unhesitatingly and immediately pull over to the side of the road to let a fire truck with sirens and lights blazing go by. Our various governments perform many different functions, but we generally respond by respecting the ones who deliver most. Assuming some reasonable amount of efficiency, we respect and acknowledge the authority of a government in proportion to the effort they put forward and benefit they bring to us.

The same type of test can be applied to the authority of Christ. We can at least examine the effort and cost of Christ’s coming, and the benefits it has brought us.

- Consider first the price of the Incarnation. The one who considered himself equal with God, for all of eternity, became a human being. CS Lewis used the analogy that this is like one of us becoming a barnacle to save the barnacles.
- For this we have been given direct access to God — your prayers are heard — and the forgiveness of sins leading to salvation. This is not the limit of what God has given us, but it far outweighs anything any government will ever do for us.
- All of this was done at the expense of the Cross. It is the greatest sacrifice a human being can make, particularly a human being who didn’t deserve it.

The result of this is, as Matthew tells us, that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ. He then commissions us to take the gospel to the world. But he also gave us communion — so that we might remember this price paid. I would have you look at communion this morning in a different light: it is a sign that you are indeed a practicing Christian, and therefore accept Christ as the supreme authority in your life.

Just how does a Christian symbolizes acceptance of Christ? Look around you. You will see some wearing a pendant in the shape of a cross. Others are wearing a pin shaped like a cross. Most of us carry a Bible. Some of us have a Christian bumper sticker on our car. But the one thing Jesus gave us that declares we are His is communion. In communion we acknowledge the sacrifice of his body, symbolized by the bread. In communion we acknowledge the sacrifice of his blood, symbolized by the cup. The apostle Thomas put it into words: “my Lord and my God.” That’s what were saying when we take communion: “my Lord and my God.”

March 22

Scarlet Cord

One of the uses of communion is as a symbol or sign. In a sense, it is parallel to the scarlet cord that Rahab hung out of her window, as sign to the Israelites. You can read the entire story in the second chapter of Joshua. Let me point out some similarities, from Rahab's point of view:

- It required her to be in obedience. This obedience was grounded in faith. She believed that the spies would keep their word — and then took action on that belief.
- She did not see a miracle or heavenly sign to produce this faith. Rather, like most of us dealing with communion, she trusted the words of God's people. If you take communion, you are God's ambassador.
- She took the risk of being found out. We are not sure whether the ruler saw the scarlet cord, but he knew that the first place someone from out of town would stop would be Rahab's. She should have expected this; after all, he was only "rounding up the usual suspects."

The spies also give some meaning to communion.

- They were required by their commitment to look for that scarlet cord — the sign of a sinner. Once they found it, they were required to take that family into safety. So too we are to take sinners into our community of saints.
- In the course of this they committed the nation of Israel to honor the safety of Rahab and her family. They did this without consulting anyone else; they didn't check it with the boss. They knew God's will and made the commitment. When we take sinners into our community we are to love them the same way.
- They also took the personal risk: "our lives for your lives."

So I encourage you as you take Communion this morning — follow these examples.

- Take the risk; pay the price and do not fear being known as one of His disciples. Join with God's people in doing this, sharing the risk of persecution and the blessing of God.
- Let Communion be a regular reminder to you to follow through in your commitment to Christ. He committed his life for your salvation; surely you can follow through on your commitments to him.

The bread reminds you of his body; the cup, his blood. It is our version of Rahab's scarlet cord, a lifeline for sinners.

March 29 Fishy Finance

Matthew 17:24-27

Tucked away at the end of the monumental 17th chapter of Matthew — which contains the Transfiguration — is the story of Christ paying the temple tax. The tax originates in the Old Testament Levitical law (see Exodus 30:11-16). It is originally an atonement tax, and as such each Jewish male pays the same amount, no matter how rich or poor he happens to be. As such, the sinless Christ should not have to pay for his own atonement. But he is considerate to the tax collectors; he does not wish to offend them. A similar incident happened at his baptism by John the Baptist. John challenged his desire to be baptized on the grounds that Christ should baptize John, not the other way around. But Christ simply said it was necessary to fulfill all righteousness. This is a similar instance. He does not have to pay the tax; he is not required to decline it either.

There are many things can be said about this incident. It is, strictly speaking, not a miracle but a providence. There is no violation of physical law here, but the laws of probability do get stretched quite a bit. There is also evidence of the divine sense of humor in this; the fish, you will recall, delivered exact change. I would focus your attention however on the fact that there was one coin, not two. It would have been no less a providence had there been two coins. It is actually an important point.

Look at it this way: if you go out to a fine restaurant, you expect that your food will be cooked to your order. That is what a restaurant does for a customer. But if you go to someone's house for a family gathering, you expect to be served the same thing as everyone else; you are sharing a meal. You are one of the family. Here, the same coin pays for both Peter and Christ — a little detail that tells you that Peter is one of the family. Just like us; we are the family of God.

From before time began, it was God's plan that Jesus would come in the form of a man. He would be one of us, knowing the hot desert sun and the freezing desert night and all the other experiences of man except sin. Because he knows what it is to be human he can sympathize with us. He has become our High Priest, and is able to intercede for us because he knows what it's like to be us. We are now the human members of his family. Consider well then, the price that he paid to make this available to us. His suffering on the cross — his body, his blood — that we remember when we take communion allows us to be the children of God.

It is his body on the cross; his blood shed there that provides us the pathway of salvation. This is how God showed his love to us, by sending his Son to die. That same Christ shares with us the suffering of being human, and therefore is able to intercede for us as our High Priest. As you partake this morning, remember what he has done for you. You are one of the family; he has shared with you the payment for your atonement.

April 5 Adultery

John 8:1-11

If you have a Bible with extensive footnotes, you will probably see that this passage is noted as not being in the earliest manuscripts. The reason is rather simple. In the early days of the church it was felt that this story might tell people that Christianity approved of adultery. As strange as it sounds to modern ears, righteous people of that time, both Christian and non-Christian, knew that adultery was a sin. Even today there are those of us who think that it is a sin, and a most serious one. The early church fathers kept it out so that no one would be mistaken about this. However, the story is universally taken as one which displays Christ authentically.

To understand this story well we may ask some questions. First, just who is it that has the right to accuse someone else — in this case, of adultery? I submit there are three primary qualifications to being an accuser.

- First, you must in some way be connected with the person who is offended. The Pharisees in this instance have at least a theoretical appeal by her husband.
- Next, you must be someone with clean hands. That's why in our criminal justice system we assign people named "district attorney" to do the accusing. They represent the public, but they were not involved in the actual crime itself in any way.
- Finally, you must be someone whose facts are not clouded by a hidden motive. The Pharisees here want to trap Jesus much more than they want to punish adultery.

It should be fairly clear that Christ is quite well-qualified to be an accuser; often enough, we are not. The second question might be, how is it that we acquired the attitude that Christ had in this instance? He did not deny that adultery is a sin, but gave the sinner of the mercy of God. I do you get to be a person like that?

- You might take a look at verse one and see where Christ spent the night before — in prayer, on the Mount of Olives. The closer you are to God, the more you will take his point of view as to what should be done.
- See also his patience! He does not immediately denounce the Pharisees; whatever he was writing on the ground convicted them and they left one by one. Patience is not buffaloes by hurried agitation.
- As always, the courage to do the right thing is obvious. Here Christ exemplifies for us the saying that courage is the foundation of all virtue.

The scene sets before us something which is similar to communion. If you will please note the sinner does not pay for the sin — just as Christ paid for our sins on the cross. There is no sense of mystical separation from the world here either. She is commanded to "go." In other words, she is sent back to the community she lives in. She is sent back with a command, however. She

is told to “sin no more.” That’s us at communion. It’s not an entryway to a monastery; after we partake, we go back to our normal lives. But we are sent back with the command, “sin no more.” I submit this involves these three things.

- It obviously involves our repentance of our sins.
- To the extent that it is possible, it also obligates us to reconcile with our fellow Christians.
- It gives us the chance to renew our relationship with God. We go from one hiding from the light to one basking in it.

Remember that the elements of communion remind you of his body and his blood, that you might be saved. The lady in this little story is an example of how God wants to deal with you.

April 12

Hosea

The book of Hosea in the Old Testament is largely one of God prophesying his punishment for Israel and Judah for their idolatrous behavior. But squeezed within the pages is one of the more prominent allegories of the Old Testament. God commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute.

This comes a somewhat of a surprise to the average Christian. It carries with it some lessons:

- Not everything God puts on your to do list is pleasant. As a matter fact God sometimes needs someone to do the dirty work, and you just might be someone.
- Your pain-and-suffering might just be there for God's purposes, not as a punishment to you or somebody else. You will remember the man born blind in John chapter 9? The disciples asked Christ, "who sinned", to cause this man to be born blind. His answer was, "the glory of God." He was blind so that your eyes might be opened.
- In this instance God uses Hosea and his wife, Gomer, as a living illustration of his love for the nation of Israel and his hatred of its idolatry.

In the third chapter of Hosea we find out that Hosea is ordered to go and get his wife back. To do this, he has to purchase her out of slavery. The common opinion today is that Gomer had lived a wonderful life — all those men, all that money. Modern feminism considers this wonderful; evidently it didn't work out too well for Gomer. She started out as a slave to sin and wound up being just a slave.¹ And not just any ordinary slave either; she was considered damaged goods and was sold for about half the price of an ordinary female slave. Yet her husband bought her back.

God purchased us much the same way. We see in the Scripture that God told Hosea to buy her back as an illustration of his love for Israel and by implication his love for us. But please consider at what price: Hosea purchased her as damaged goods for half the going rate. You and I were purchased at the price of God's own son, hanging on a cross, dying for our sins.

So as you partake this morning, remember that the bread represents his body broken for you. Remember that the cup represents his blood, shed for you. And not just for you and me, but the sacrifice was made for "whosoever will." Christ made the ultimate sacrifice so that everyone who wants to can be saved. Rejoice in your salvation; be grateful for your redemption and remember who did this for you.

¹ You think this doesn't happen today? Hundreds of thousands of children are sold into sexual slavery every year. If you'd like to learn more, I suggest a trip to recoveryofchildren.org.

April 19 Gettysburg

Students of English prose recognize the opening immediately: “Four score and seven years ago...” It is, of course, the opening of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. If you will read through the entire speech — it takes no more than three or four minutes — you will discover that it is a commemoration of suffering and sacrifice. The battle of Gettysburg itself was the turning point in the American Civil War. “Turning point” is not the same thing as victory. Winston Churchill remarked upon the battle of Gettysburg this way:

It was the decisive battle of the American Civil War. No one after Gettysburg doubted which way the dread balance of war would incline, yet far more blood was shed after the Union victory than in all the fighting which went before.

For the Christian, the Cross is the Gettysburg in the history of mankind’s dealing with sin. It is a point in time in which there is great suffering and sacrifice — and it is the point in time which marks the beginning of the end for the accuser of mankind, Satan. The suffering of Christ on the cross guaranteed the victory over evil.

This does not mean that the Christian will not suffer. Suffering for the name of Christ is a part of the Christian life. You may recall from the book of Acts that when Ananias was sent to Paul he was told to tell Paul how much he would suffer for the name of Christ. Ananias was given no vision of the greatness that Paul would achieve in the church; just the suffering. Throughout the New Testament there is the idea that those who serve Christ will be persecuted (2 Timothy 2:12) . We are also told that if we are suffering with him we will be glorified with him (Romans 8:7).

Communion is a picture of Christ’s suffering. As such, it reminds us that his sacrifice on the Cross was the greatest proof of his love for mankind (John 15:13). We are reminded every time we take Communion of his body being sacrificed for us (the bread) and his blood being shed for us (the cup). As you partake of Communion today, you proclaim your self willing to suffer for the name of Christ. Therefore, as the old hymn puts it,

Take the name of Jesus with you

Child of sorrow and woe

It will joy and comfort give you

Take it then where’ ere you go.

The war is won. The battle rages on, and you are part of it. Accept your suffering and sacrifice willingly; look forward to the glory to come.

April 26

Pregnant

Permit me, if you will, to pose to you a hypothetical problem. The problem comes in the form of a person, as these things often do. She is 16 years old, not yet out of high school, and she is pregnant. Her male partner is nowhere to be found, having left the area at the first hint of the word "baby." What is your reaction to this? Let me submit to you three possible answers.

- You may look at this as a taxpayer. And therefore it may be obvious to you that this is a situation in which you would waste the taxpayers money, but given the times it is probably unavoidable. You don't like it, but you're a taxpayer and you're going to have to pay for it.
- Perhaps you might say something like this: isn't there some agency affiliated with the church that handles these things? A counseling service of some sort? If it's not associated with the church, there are certainly some charities that handle these things, right? Get their business card and give it to her.
- But what if she knows your name? I don't mean your first or last name, I mean the name she has called you by for all of her life: "grandpa." Think that one over.

There are some principles we can see in action here.

- Your response to the situation depends on how you see the young lady. If you see her as foolish, wasteful and in need of being straightened out, your reaction will be rather stern. Being her grandfather, however, changes your response.
- The more you love the young lady, the more expensive your response is going to be. Love never comes cheaply. She is no less a sinner for it, but you do see the problem differently.
- Love in any flavor carries with it a financial cost but also carries in this instance a cost of forgiveness. There is no sense lecturing your new great-granddaughter about how foolish her mother was. Forgiveness will ultimately be necessary; it usually easier to arrange it as soon as possible.

Let me submit to you that the example of Christ, our Savior, is highly instructive. He too sees us as sinners; his sacrifice on the Cross shows us his love for us. More than that it shows us his forgiveness for us, bought at the price of the crucifixion. Forgiveness is expensive; what a blessing it is for us.

In the elements of communion you see the body of Christ, the bread, and the blood of Christ, the cup. You are to take these with serious self-examination, but also with joy: the God of the universe loves you and forgives you. He is your Heavenly Father and he wants you home. Examine yourself; remember the sacrifice and rejoice in the love.

May 3 Golden

(The story which follows is probably apocryphal.) A certain minister was giving a tour of his new church building to a group of ministers from other churches. The building had been built on a lavish scale, using only the finest materials. At the end of the tour the minister pointed to the cross on the top of the steeple. "Solid gold plated," he said, "Cost us ten thousand dollars."

"You were cheated," said a minister from the poor side of town. "Time was, a Christian could get one of those, free."

There is a curious fact pointed out in this story. The cross as it was originally designed was a rough and crude instrument of torture and death. We, the Christians, have turned it into a beautiful symbol. We make crosses out of silver and gold; we have even made crosses out of prison bars. In each instance we have tried to convert the crude instrument of torture into something beautiful and very meaningful. Why do we do that?

- In some instances, it is a form of honor. Most wedding rings are made of silver or gold, and this emphasizes the importance and permanence of marriage. A similar thing can be said of a gold or silver cross.
- In some instances it is a form of gratitude. At the cross we receive salvation; at the cross we receive forgiveness; at the cross we become children of God. For these things, gratitude is a perfectly natural and righteous response.
- Sometimes it's just that we are doing our best. We are, as Oswald Chambers once put it, doing our utmost for His Highest. The best deserves the best.

This may be why Christ never asked us to make gold and silver crosses. Instead, the memorial he left us is quite the opposite — it is symbolic of suffering and death.

- The bread symbolizes to us the bodily suffering of Christ. It reminds us of the nails through his hands and feet. It reminds us of the spear in his side. It reminds us of the pain he endured for our sakes.
- The cup symbolizes to us the blood of Christ, shed for our sins. We remember that blood is itself the very life of a human being. If you let it leak long enough, the victim dies. Christ died an agonizing death as his blood slowly left his body.

We look at the cross and make it beautiful. It may be elaborate; it may be made of precious metals. It reminds us not only of his sacrifice but of his resurrection, and the great resurrection to come. It is altogether fitting that we make a cross which is a reminder of his victory over death. It is also fitting that he has left us the reminder: the beauty of the cross was obtained by the suffering of the man who died on it.

May 10
Style

Colossians 3:12-13

Perhaps you haven't noticed, but Jesus has a very distinctive style of doing things. He will not change stones into bread, but he will change water into wine. It is the divine style; through natural processes water can become wine but stones cannot become bread. As the old hymn put it, "Jesus do with all things well."

Nowhere is this more evident than in the crucifixion. Consider:

- Jesus went through the entire suffering of the cross, patiently enduring it. He did not shortcut the process.
- You will recall that in the middle of being crucified he gave the care of his mother, Mary, to the apostle John. "Woman, behold thy son." There is a tender gentleness there, concern for his mother who could have been left to his stepbrothers.
- The King of Kings and Lord of Lords went through this process speaking as little as could as was appropriate. He treated his torturers not from his position as the Lord of the universe, but rather the Son of Man. It is a stunning display of humility.
- Throughout the entire process of trial and crucifixion, Jesus was concerned for his disciples. When they came to arrest him he insisted that the gendarmes let his disciples go — which they did. Instead of misery loves company, he had the kindness to suffer alone.
- It is a stunning display of compassion but the Lord of the universe was incarnate as a baby, grew to a man and offered himself as our sacrifice.

In our passage of Scripture this morning, Paul recommends these to us as virtues that we should adopt.

- Compassion — the art of "painful sympathy" or suffering with others.
- Kindness, the handmaiden which always accompanies Love.
- Humility — Noah Webster defines this as being freedom from pride and arrogance.
- Gentleness — that certain mildness of temper, resembling a strong man picking up and cuddling a little baby.
- Patience — Mr. Webster again: suffering with a calm unruffled temper. In other words, despite being tortured, the patient man is the adult in the room.

I submit to you that Christ set this example deliberately. He acted in this way as an example, a shepherd showing the flock how to behave. When you take communion, you are acknowledging this example, this style, as being the source of your salvation. It is also instructional to you. For what you see in Christ, you should imitate. You call him Lord; do you follow his example?

May 17

Mercy Seat

Students of the Scriptures quickly come to realize that God is very fond of using pictures. In the New Testament these pictures take the form of parables; earthly stories with a heavenly meaning, as I was told when I was a youngster. In the Old Testament, however, he often used physical objects to make his meaning clear. The design of the Tabernacle is one instance of this; the design of the Temple is an even more elaborate one. Both of these structures had at their center the famed Ark of the Covenant. Here is one artist's conception of what it looked like:



Of particular interest to us during communion is the lid of this box. It is called the “Mercy Seat.” It is also referred to as the Atonement Cover. The reason for this is that the cover of this box is on top of three things which indicate the sinfulness of Israel.

- First, there are the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments on them. Sin became specific with the Ten Commandments.
- A jar of manna was there also. It testified to the ingratitude of Israel in rejecting God's provision.
- Finally, there was Aaron's rod, a reminder that the people of Israel had rejected the authority God had set over them.

You will note that the cover was overlaid with pure gold. Gold does not rust or tarnish, and is therefore used symbolically to indicate something which is eternal. In this instance that which is eternal is God's mercy. Without God's mercy, mankind cannot approach God, for God will not tolerate the presence of sin. Therefore Moses, and the high priests who followed, spoke to God at the Mercy Seat.

You can see the parallels in Christ, our atonement. God cannot see our sin when it is covered by the blood of Christ's atoning sacrifice. Christ died not only for all who were present but all mankind — no matter how long we last. It is a form of eternal atonement. And it is through Christ, our High Priest, that we speak to God. In a very real sense, the cross is our atonement cover.

Which brings us to communion. The bread reminds us of his body; the cup reminds us of his blood so that we might see the sacrifice which covers our sins physically present for us. We might even say, colloquially, that at the Cross, Christ has us covered. The Mercy Seat was a picture of the Christ to come.

Mercy is the act of overlooking offense. It is the privilege of those who are great to ignore the offenses of those who are not. If this is true among men, then how much more is it the pleasure of God to overlook the sins of those who have become his children? Partake; remember; be grateful and follow his example.

May 24

Necessity

It sometimes occurs to a new Christian to ask why the Cross was necessary. After all, if God just wants to forgive us, couldn't he just send out an angel with a notice and a trumpet? The answer to this has to do with the relationship between justice, mercy and humility.

Mercy requires justice

It is in the very definition of mercy that justice is required. Mercy is the mitigation of the penalty for something that is justly deserved. Look at it this way: if you are a judge in a criminal case, is it mercy to give an innocent defendant only half the usual sentence? No, you should release the innocent defendant. It is not mercy to give him punishment for something he did not do. So if there is to be real mercy, there must first be real justice.

Sometimes justice simply isn't done, and mercy is an excuse for our laziness. This tends to produce a change in what we think is right and wrong towards what we think is popular. Opinion polls then replace the 10 Commandments.

Even worse, sometimes mercy becomes a habitual reaction. Grace becomes cheap, and the sinner becomes a cynic about it. But grace is not cheap; grace is extremely expensive. It cost Christ his life. If there is to be mercy, there must be judgment first.

Mercy requires humility

May I first remind you of the incredible humility of Jesus Christ? It started with the Incarnation where the Son of God became a human being; a tremendous condescension. But not just any human being; the one who was to be the perfect sacrifice on the Cross. It was an incredibly merciful thing to do to secure our forgiveness and return to God's family. In that, there is a temptation to pious pride. Pious pride sees the forgiven as so much scum; humility sees the forgiven as "one of us."

More than that, if mercy is to be accepted it must be given with humility. If God's mercy were always delivered with a thunderous judgmental look, how many of us would apply? By doing it the way Christ did he avoids this judgmental-ism. It is his desire that all should be saved, not that many should be rejected because they would not ask for mercy from the stern, thunderous God. Christ gave us mercy, mercifully.

Body and blood

God spent several thousand years dealing with the people of the Old Testament. One of the consistent lessons is that sin requires atonement if God is to be merciful. More than that, if there is to be atonement for all sins once and for all, it must be a perfect atonement. A perfect atonement means a perfect sacrifice, and the only example of that is Christ on the Cross. As you partake this morning, remember that you are handling the body and blood of Christ given for

you as an atoning sacrifice. May I suggest, therefore, that you examine how will you imitate your Lord in giving mercy, doing justice and walking in humility.

May 31

Triumph

James 2:13

It has been 40 years; only the old folks really remember it. It's known as the "Miracle on Ice." Sports Illustrated called it the greatest sports moment of the 20th century. Millions of older sports fans remember Al Michaels, of ABC, and his pronouncement at the end of the game: "Do you believe in miracles? YES!" The American Olympic hockey team, composed entirely of amateur players, had defeated the heavily favored Soviet juggernaut full of paid professionals.

Triumph. May we ask how one measures triumph in the field of athletics?

- The greater your opponent, the greater your triumph.
- The greater the difficulty of your tasks, the greater your triumph.
- The longer the struggle to achieve victory, the greater your triumph.

In this lens of athletic triumph we may also measure the greatness of the triumph of the Cross.

- How great was the opponent? The Cross was the triumph of mercy over the justice of the Lord God Almighty.
- How difficult was it to achieve? The Cross took the life of Jesus, the only sinless man as an atonement sacrifice for us.
- How long did it take? It started with God's first contact with Adam and continues through the Cross till the day when Christ returns — essentially the entire history of mankind.

Communion is a memorial to this achievement. It is not a trophy; trophies get put on shelves and gather dust. It is a memorial of what it took, for we partake of the body and blood of Christ in memory of the price paid. The symbol of triumph of God is a symbol of sacrifice.

It is also a reminder to us that we should "go and do likewise." We are to be the merciful on earth. As the apostle James told us,

For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

(James 2:13 NASB)

Therefore, before you partake this morning, examine yourself. See if you are following the example of Christ in giving mercy. If you are, then know that mercy triumphs over judgment and God will be merciful to you on the day of Christ's return. The merciful need no other lesson.

June 7

PowerPoint

First Corinthians 10:16-17

Those who spend their days within office walls are undoubtedly familiar with a product known as Microsoft PowerPoint. Its purpose is to provide an easy way to make a presentation to other people with the best possible introduction for your ideas. It is composed of two general items:

- The bulk of the presentation is given in an outline format. The idea is that you will catch the main bullets from the slide on the screen, which is then explained by the presenter in his talk. He may also hand you other reference materials for further reading. The primary idea, however, is that you understand his thesis by seeing it outlined in big, bold letters. This technique is most successful when it is short and to the point.
- Accompanying these outlines are various graphics, which illustrate the point being made. For example, if the speaker is trying to present to you an idea which he thinks will be overwhelmingly successful, he might present a picture of someone hitting a homerun. The illustration must be something which is easy to connect to the outline, and serve as an aid to your memory of the presentation.

The objectives of a PowerPoint presentation are simple: that you will understand what the presenter wanted you to know, and that you will remember it.

In today's Scripture we come upon an argument that Paul is making concerning meat sacrificed to idols. It's a problem that hasn't bothered Christians for about 1500 years, so we will spend no great time on it. But in the middle of that presentation he makes a point worth noting today. Please remember that in his time communion would be taken with a common cup, shared by everyone, and a common loaf of bread. (This method is still used in many churches today.) Paul uses that common nature to make his point. Partaking from the same cup implies that we are sharing in the blood of Christ. Partaking from the same loaf, that we are sharing from the body of Christ. You are what you eat; you are therefore the body of Christ. The loaf, the cup are pictures of the body and blood of Christ. Since he is one, and wants us to be one as He and the Father are one, we are to be one body of Christ

This is stronger than you suspect. Listen to Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,
(Ephesians 3:4-6 NASB)

The mystery Paul refers to here is not that the Gentiles will be saved; the Jews knew that from the Old Testament. The mystery is that they will become one and the same with the Jews —

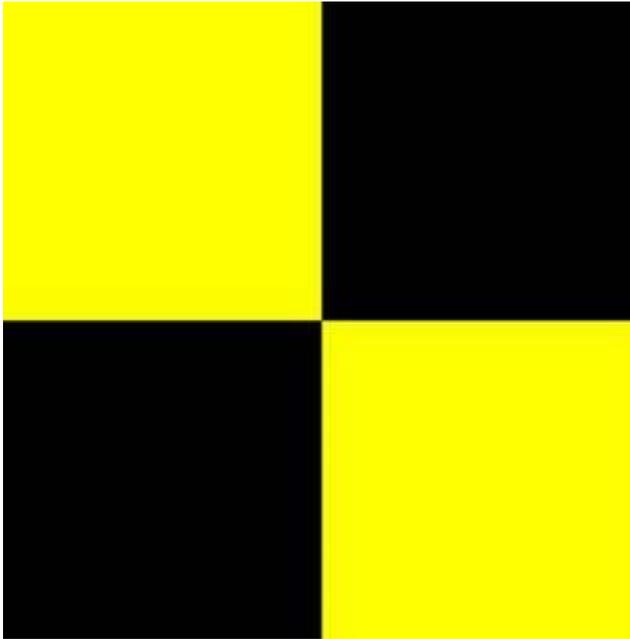
one body. When you partake of communion, you proclaim Christ's desire that we are all one, joint heirs with Jesus. Thus the Christian should be wary of belonging to a faction in his church, for Christ desires us to be one.

How do we achieve this? We must deliberately lay aside divisions in the church. More than that, we must practice forgiveness of each other, followed by reconciliation. We are to be God's family; not his Civil War. So, as you partake today, examine yourself and see if there is anyone with whom you are at odds in the church. Practice forgiveness, work at reconciliation. Be one body!

June 14

Quarantine

To those who are weekend sailors, the flag usually is interpreted as “Lima.” It’s usually flown in a series of flags to indicate the letter “L.” If, however, you look in the manual you will find this flag has a different meaning when flown all by itself:



When flown by itself it means that the ship in question is under quarantine. The word “quarantine” comes from an Italian expression meaning “40 days.” Flying such a flag meant that no one on board could come ashore until the port authorities permitted. The idea of quarantine itself dates back at least to the time of the Levitical law. In the Old Testament, however, quarantine usually lasted seven days, not 40.

There is a problem with the concept of quarantine; an ethical problem. In theory at least, quarantine saves the lives of those who are not exposed to the disease. That’s the good news. But it also increases the risk of death for those who are on board the ship. A ship involves close quarters and the chance of being exposed is greatly increased. So it appears that we are sacrificing the lives of those on board ship to save those who are not. But I would point out to you a specific moral dilemma: what about the doctor? If you’re a medical professional, do you go aboard a plague ship? Or do you just wait out the 40 days and see who’s left? With modern equipment the answer usually is the doctor will go aboard, but the moral dilemma hasn’t really left us.

In a much greater sense there is a divine dilemma which is quite similar. If you are God Almighty, what do you do with a planet full of sinners? You might argue that we’ve already been quarantined; outer space is big and we are small. But there is the dilemma: you have a

planet full of sinners. Do you just wait until the disease works itself out — say, in an all-out nuclear war? Or do you go down to the planet and try to fix things?

You know the answer. God came to earth in the person of Jesus, his Son. The solution to his moral dilemma was that mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13). By his sacrifice on the cross Christ resolved the divine dilemma. But at what price? Remember what it cost for you to be rescued from quarantine: the body and blood of Jesus Christ. As you partake this morning, remember. He died so that you might live, abundantly and eternally. Consider these things well, and then partake.

June 21

Self Examination

It is a curious fact about communion meditations: we are often told that we should examine ourselves so that we might partake of communion in a worthy manner. This comes directly from the Scriptures:

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

(1 Corinthians 11:28 NASB)

This verse is frequently quoted but seldom explained. Most of us are content with that; we want to let sleeping worms lie. This morning, we will look at looking at ourselves.

Recognition

The first thing we must do is this: we must recognize that all of us are sinners. This begins with the idea that I personally am a sinner, and therefore I need to do something about it. Sin separates us from God, and therefore requires some maintenance to get things back in working order.

We also must recognize that everyone else is a sinner. We therefore have no privilege of making a comparison with someone else (“I’m a better man than...”) Whether or not I am less of a sinner than you is completely irrelevant. Indeed, how can I condemn you when the Scripture tells me that you are under no condemnation?

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

(Romans 8:1 NASB)

If you are in Christ Jesus you are not condemned. If Christ Jesus will not condemn you, who am I to make the accusation? Seriously, I have enough problems of my own and I **don’t** need to worry about your list of sins. Let each man examine himself, not others.

Confession

Most of us can understand recognizing our own sins. But why confession? After all, God already knows all about it. I’m not delivering anything in the way of news to Him. And besides, it hurts my pride to have to admit this. Which, of course, is exactly the point; it hurts your pride and enhances your humility.

One good reason for confession is that it tells some other persons that you are a sinner and you know it. It’s a good antidote to “holier-than-thou.” It helps them to know that you struggle with sin just like they do. Another reason is that confession helps you secure their assistance. We are a body, a united body, and if one of us has a problem with a particular sin the rest of us should be willing to help — if we know about it.

There is a particular instance where public confession is required. This is usually the case when it involves leadership of the church and the sin is quite serious. The principle here is that we do not sweep the dirt under the rug, for doing that just leaves more dirt under the rug.

Repentance

This is the follow through to confession. Golfers understand the principle; hitting the golf ball requires that you follow through correctly, or you will not hit the ball where you

wanted it to go. The same is true with regard to sin; you can confess all day long but if you do not repent and follow through it is of no use. Simply, ask forgiveness of those whom you might have offended, if possible. Then let your actions speak louder than your words; change what you do to avoid sinning again. This may be a very repetitive process, another reason to seek the help of the church.

Body and blood

You are given the body and blood of Christ so that you might remember what he did for you. It should not be a mere memorial, but a call to action. Examine yourself — and then partake.

June 28

Photography

With the advent of the digital photograph, the practice of photography has become quite a bit more ordinary. We seem to be willing to pull out our smart phones on the least of occasions and take several pictures. But like most of the things we do, photography is done with the purpose. Let's take a look at three such purposes.

Transition

We like to photograph certain occasions such as weddings and graduations. One of the reasons for this is that these occasions mark a transition in human lives. There's a very good example of this from World War II:



The occasion is a very memorable one: the transition from war to peace on V-J Day, the end of World War II. Unlike most pictures of transitions, this one is most notable for the sheer exuberance shown — at least on the part of the sailor. It captures the emotions of the moment.

Communion likewise is a marker of transition. It is a mark of the transition from the law of the Old Testament to the grace of the New Testament. For us each personally, it is a marker of our transition from the death of this world to the life eternal. As for our sailor, it is a cause for joy.

Reminder

Some photographs are meant to remind us of a particular person. Often enough we cherish the photographs of those who are deceased but were precious to us in life. Here's a good example from World War II:



There are hundreds of portraits of Winston Churchill. This is the most remembered one. Why? Because it captures the bulldog spirit of the man who led Great Britain out of its darkest hour, or as he himself put it, “their finest hour.” He did that with unshakable will to victory, wielding the English language as his bright, sharp sword. The picture captures his likeness, but more than that it captures his spirit. Communion does that for us in portraying Christ. He loved us so much that he gave his life that we might be free from the curse of sin. It is our picture of his love.

Inspiration

Perhaps the highest purpose of the photograph would be to inspire the viewer to action. The photograph which prompts you to “go and do likewise” is a powerful one indeed. Here is an example from World War II:



The photograph was taken during the battle for Iwo Jima. Its power of inspiration was shown in a similar photograph taken of the New York Fire Department, raising the flag over the rubble of the World Trade Center after 9/11. Both photos stir the hearts of patriots. The firefighters most certainly did “go and do likewise.”

Communion serves the same purposes as these photographs. It marks the transition from law to grace, and from death to life. It reminds us of the one who made that

transition possible; it is our picture of his body and blood. It is an inspiration to go and love as Christ has loved us. As you partake this morning, remember from where you came in the transition to where you are now. Remember the Lord who made that transition possible, and let him be your inspiration for greater acts of love.

July 5

Time Machine

It is a staple of science fiction: time travel. Since the time of H. G. Wells, writers have regularly use the idea of time travel in their fiction. It may seem curious, but the idea has fascinated many a physics professor as well. It is their dream to create a machine that will allow us to travel backwards in time. (The ability to travel forward in time is already well proven.) But since no such machine exists, we have no real picture of what it would look like.

This, of course, has not stopped the artists from trying. In 1960 there was a movie made based on H. G. Wells book and a whirling wheel contraption was used as the Time Machine. For those who watch Star Trek, entire starships are known to go backwards in time. But just where does science begin and art stop?

It is the problem of representation. Everybody gets to have his own idea of what it would look like. The question, of course, is whether or not the representation will resonate with the audience — that they will look at it and say, yes — Time Machine. One of the artist that has tackled this problem is a fellow by the name of Bill Waterson. You will know him by his creation: the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes. Here's what a Time Machine looks like to him:



Any parent will recognize this as a perfectly valid Time Machine — for your kids. (If you turn this box upside down, it becomes a transmogrifier.) How is it the children can accept this as a Time Machine and the rest of us see a cardboard box? Simply put, they know the difference between what a thing is and what it is made of. Once they know what it is, it doesn't matter what it's made of.

Perhaps this is what Christ is referring to in Matthew 18:3 when he tells us to become like little children. It applies to communion as well. We know what our communion meal is made of: we know that the bread is unleavened bread, purchased at the grocery store. We know that the cup is grape juice/wine. In other words, we see the cardboard box. But if we look at communion and ask, what is it — the answer is quite different. In the cup we see the blood of Christ; in the bread we see the body of Christ. In the combination we also see the grace of our Lord poured out for us, for the salvation from our sins.

Communion is our Time Machine which allows us to see back into the past to the hill of Calvary so many years ago. As you partake this morning, look at the elements and perceive the “what it is” beyond the “what it is made of.” Treat it with the honor and respect you should, examining yourself before hand to make peace with your Lord. Be a

child — of God.

July 12

Pomp and Ceremony

One of the things which is consistent across multiple cultures and people groups is the fact that human beings place a great deal of importance on pomp and ceremony. There are good reasons for this.

- A well done ceremony says something important — something that needs saying. It may be something we say to the world or just to each other. But the fact that we put it into a ceremony means that we think it needs to be said.
- Ceremony is one way in which we pass on the truth to the next generation. The wedding ceremony for example is very instructive; even young children can learn from it. We may not think of that as the primary purpose, but often it is the most valuable use of ceremony.
- One of the most common uses of ceremony is to confirm that we still belong or believe. A simple example of this happens in my neighborhood every morning. Those of us who are patriots go outside and put the flag in the flag holder. It shows which of us are patriots.

A good ceremony can be seen in the following characteristics:

- Generally speaking, it is short with a long explanation. The ceremony condenses the truth that is being told into a short time. A marriage ceremony can be done in about 15 minutes; the marriage takes quite a bit longer. But in that 15 minutes we tell the world what we believe about marriage.
- This is done, of course, by the use of symbols. In communion, for example, the cup represents his blood; the bread, his body. This is a very compact form of communication and is crucial to keeping the ceremonies short.
- Interestingly, it seems that human beings have an opinion of the proper way for the ceremony to be done. They are offended when it is not done according to the “proper” way. It is a measure of the importance of the ceremony that we know the “right” way to do it.

Communion may just be the highest ceremony in which most of us will ever be involved. It meets these criteria rather nicely. For example, it is short and highly symbolic. It is also very important to the Christian, for it tells us the truth of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By the very act of taking it, we confirm that we believe and are still part of the group — namely, the Church. It is the ceremony that says the right thing in the right way.

It is not just a “meaningless ritual.” In pomp and ceremony human beings communicate what is in the depth of their hearts. As you partake this morning, remember that the ceremony tells the world you believe. It also tells the church that you are part of the body of Christ. And it reinforces for you that you have accepted his sacrifice on the cross as the price of your salvation.

July 19

Hero

Philippians 4:8-9

The word “hero” has undergone a bit of a change in my lifetime. May I remind you of its older definitions.

- A hero is someone you admire, or look up to. For the most part in our time this is now someone who is a movie character or found on television.
- The thought being a spur to the action, it is also someone that you imitate. Little children in my youth were often found with a towel tied around their neck so that they might be Superman.
- Perhaps most important, a hero is one you think about and imagine yourself being like him.

Jimmy Cagney, just before his death, was asked to compare the films of his day and those of our own. He thought for a moment, then said, “Our villains were better men than your heroes.” A sad comment, but it spurs us to think: just what should a hero look like?

Paul gives us a list here:

- *True*. The foundation stone of things admirable—they must first be true.
- *Noble*. The meaning of the word is almost lost in English; newer translations use “honorable.” That which is worthy of being praised. In older times a sportsman might applaud a brilliant play by the opposing team; that carries the meaning.
- *Right*. The word refers to that which is just, or fair. We still like to know that someone gets his “just deserts” - whether punishment for crime or reward for good deeds.
- *Pure*. The word in the original meant moral purity, or chastity. Chastity and modesty are not much admired these days. But those who are married might consider the alternative in their own wives. Praise her, think well of her, for her modesty.
- *Lovely*. The word means something like “friendly towards.” Hard to understand? Try this: when a pretty girl smiles at an old man it lights his whole day.
- *Admirable, excellent or praiseworthy*. Some things we know about only by reputation. A good reputation is a blessing both to the owner and those who know him.

He then gives us the proper response to the true hero:

The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

(Philippians 4:9 NASB)

We don’t often think of Christ as a “hero.” May I suggest that we should look at Him this way.

- We should admire him for what he has done.
- To the extent that we can, we should most definitely imitate him. “What Would Jesus Do” is still a valid question today. Train your imagination; see yourself as

- one who does what Jesus does.
- Surprisingly perhaps, he is one on whom we should meditate — “think on these things.”

The ultimate heroic act was performed at the Cross. There the innocent one was sacrificed as our Passover lamb. In communion we take the time to remember this. We remember his body on the cross in the bread; remember his blood in the cup. In so doing we remember the real hero of the human race.

July 26

Repentance

Ezekiel 33:18-20

The Old Testament brings to us a number of concepts which are completed in the New Testament. This can sometimes give rise to misconceptions. Let's take a look at the scripture in this case and carry the thought through to the New Testament.

When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."
(Ezekiel 33:18-20 ESV)

If you don't pay attention to what else is going on here, you might go in for the "cosmic bean counter" theory. The idea is that God somehow is going to add up your good deeds and your bad deeds and see which is heavier. The result determines whether you go to heaven or hell. But if you read what he says here, it's much more like a question of what is your direction. If you are headed in the way of wickedness, God wants you to turn around and go into the way of righteousness — and promises you that you will live if you do this. Likewise, if you are righteous and then decide that God has enough white beans, you can go ahead and do some wickedness, you lose — you die. Note that what seems to count here is not what you have done (or haven't) but which direction you're headed.

The cosmic bean counter types at this point begin to make a fine haired distinction: some sins are important, while others are trivial. Just stick to the trivial and you'll be fine. This theory ignores the ultimate wickedness of sin itself. God does not want you to be a lightweight sinner — he wants you to be a heavyweight saint. The cost of sin and the love of God who wants you to repent are both shown at the Cross.

Let us turn our minds to understand this in communion. In the bread we see his body. Remember what that body went through: the lashings, the crown of thorns, the beatings and the humiliation. He did not go through this so that you could get away with lightweight sins. He did it so that all your sins might be forgiven. His body was racked with pain and beaten to the point where he was almost — but not quite — dead. Then he was nailed to the cross and died in agony.

In the cup we see his blood. The people of his time would've understood that in the blood there is the life. If someone let all of your blood leak out, you would die. He knew he would be giving his very life, bleeding through the strokes of the lash. This is not a minor adjustment to your sins — it is God saying that he loves us so much that he would give his only begotten son on the cross so that we might be forgiven.

Therefore, as you partake, do so in a solemn manner. You are remembering his death; you are remembering his love that caused it; you are remembering his resurrection; you are remembering that he will return in glory.

August 2
Perfection

James 5:9

The church has never suffered from a lack of critics. One of the most annoying sorts is the wearisome soul whose motto is, “Nothing avails but perfection.” This is annoying enough when applied to the various programs and activities of the church. It is more serious, however, when it is applied to other Christians.

We might take this humorously. (I am indebted to Winston Churchill for the story.) It seems there was a sailor walking down the street which was next to a canal. He looked over at the canal and saw a young boy drowning. Heroically, he kicked off his shoes, jumped into the canal and rescued the young lad. About a week later he was walking down the same street when he was stopped by a woman. She asked him, “Are you the sailor that rescued my young lad from the canal?” He modestly allowed us to how he was in fact the sailor who did that. “You’re just the man I’m looking for — where is his hat?” Expectations — we all have them and often enough they are not very reasonable. Pure perfection is something which is seldom attained by humankind. The result for the perfectionist is a sense of constant disappointment in the Christians around him. It’s actually worse than that; as James points out here:

Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.
(James 5:9 NASB)

Why is it that we are so frequently disappointed? There are number of possible reasons.

- We may be making our judgment on an partial set of facts.
- It’s also just possible that our own standard of perfection — isn’t perfect.
- It’s likely enough that we forget that all of us are sinners; none of us is going to hit the mark every time.

Communion is a reminder that this type of judgment is dangerous. Sometimes we forget that the crucifixion is the only atonement for sin. Christ’s body (the bread) and blood (the cup) are the only real cure for imperfection. The next time the temptation to judge your Christian brother comes up, remember that Christ died on the cross for this sinner that you want to judge. May I suggest that you be generous in judging your Christian brother, for Christ was generous in judging you.

August 9

Proclamation

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:26 NASB)

When we think of the word “proclamation” we usually bring up an image of a town crier from the 18th century ringing a bell and yelling, “Hear ye, hear ye...” Here we are told that when we take communion we are making a proclamation.

The town crier is not a bad picture of that. Proclamation is not something you do by accident, or that somebody just happens to notice. It is a deliberate, intentional and active event. We are not just showing something, but actively attempting to make it clear what we have to say. Naturally, in such circumstances, what we do is done publicly. It is not done in a hidden manner, but in such a manner that people will be prompted to ask, “what’s that all about?”

It also carries with it the implication that what I am proclaiming is something that I believe. I’m not just an advertising spokesman, but one who genuinely believes what he is proclaiming and invites question. It is a fine thing if someone sees us taking communion and asks, “what are you doing?” That opens the door for Christ.

Just what is it that we proclaim?

- The most obvious point is that we proclaim his death. It often surprises Christians that we don’t use communion as a method of proclaiming his resurrection, which is of course implicit in that. But we proclaim his death; first of all, the physical fact that it happened. More than that we proclaim his death as the atonement for sins. We are forgiven because he paid the price.
- Perhaps it’s not as obvious, but we also proclaim his humanity. Jesus was not just God walking the earth, but a human being like the rest of us. He knows what it is to be irritated, hungry, cold or in pain. He knows how we feel.
- Maybe you didn’t think of it this way, but it’s not just that “we are forgiven.” It’s that I, personally, have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, shed at Calvary on the cross. And if I proclaim my personal salvation, then I can assure you that you can have it too.

Note, please, that there is a time limit for this proclamation: “until He comes.” This too carries consequences.

- First, and perhaps most obvious, is that Christ will return to judge the living and the dead. Your relationship with him determines whether or not you will line up with those seeking his mercy or those to be judged outside of it.
- That, of course, carries with it the idea that there is a time limit during which grace is available. Some people seem to think that God will wait for eternity for the human race to get its act together. It may seem like eternity, but he tells us it has an end. And at that end, there is the Judgment.
- Finally, that time limit also means that those who celebrate communion — the church — will be there when he comes. These are the ones who will welcome him

joyfully, having anticipated his arrival for so many years. For those who partake, this will be a wonderful, joyous event. For those who do not,... Judgment.

So as you take this cup and eat this bread, do so with the full knowledge of what you are proclaiming to the world as you do it. This is the message of the church in one simple ceremony. It is up to us to spread the word.

August 16
Snakebite

Acts 28:1-6

One of the points of pride in the Roman Empire was that a country, conquered by the Romans, would now have a sense of justice — indeed a system of justice — that wasn't there before. In this passage, the pagans on Malta exhibit such a sense of justice.

- At first, Paul is just a poor innocent shipwreck victim. Along with the others from his ship, the Maltese build a fire for them. No doubt it was a simple, but very welcome, form of charity.
- But then the snake bites. These people would be accustomed to the idea that justice would not allow a murderer to live — and therefore Paul was bitten by the snake so that justice might be done. Nature was often seen as delivering the justice of the gods. This is very similar to what the friends of Job told him about his problem: the reason you are afflicted is that you are a secret sinner. In short, they think Paul deserved it.
- When the snake falls off into the fire, and Paul is unharmed, they change their mind. Since he didn't die, he must be innocent. The innocent sufferer is then presumed to be a god. It's not something they see as "just natural causes."

Suffering, in a sense, is a form of trial by combat. It's you versus what can go wrong in this world. Suffering exposes the guilty. Remember Job's friends? They urged him to confess and repent because they assumed he was guilty of some secret sin. Their argument was that there was no sense in denying it, the suffering had exposed him. But what happens when you discover that the sufferer is innocent? What happens when somebody starts to ask, "what did she ever do to deserve that?" We are quick in that instance to say that the suffering is from God, and it is for his purposes. When we conclude that the person is innocent and suffering, our attitude changes greatly. Such suffering provokes our great sympathy and raises the question, "why?" The common answer is that the innocent suffer for some divine purpose decreed by God.

The ultimate example of the innocent sufferer is Jesus Christ. In his case the suffering is worse because it was imposed by the judicial system of the time. That's the very same system that the people on Malta would've told you was a great idea. An idea of how this innocent suffering affects people may be gained from Attila the Hun. Yes, I know he's not exactly an example of moral philosopher, but you might want to hear his reaction to being told that the innocent Christ had been executed:

"If I and my men had been there, they would not have dared!"

In your own case, think of your reaction if an innocent man is executed by our criminal justice system. There is nothing you can do about it at this point, but your reaction is the such a thing should not happen. You are — or should be — outraged.

Consider then the memorial. The bread you are about to partake represents the body of an innocent man who died for the express purpose of being your substitute. He got what you deserve. The cup is the symbol of his innocent blood, dripping in great drops from his body, so that you might be forgiven. The Innocent One died so that you might live.

Let your sense of justice inform this morning as you partake of the body and blood of Christ. It is outrageous that the innocent should die; especially in place of those who

are guilty. Remember, then, we are the guilty. It is outrageous; outrageous love.

August 23

On Judgment

It is a difficulty of the Christian life: our rule of conduct is the imitation of Christ, and therefore we are imitating what is already perfect. It is no surprise when our conduct falls short of the glory of God.

We may briefly examine today the difference between human judgment and divine judgment. Human judgment has its failings:

- We have a tendency to be absolutely unmerciful towards other human beings, while being extremely lenient towards ourselves.
- Perhaps out of a lack of confidence in our own authority to judge, we tend to be very legalistic in making our judgments. This is particularly true when you can cite a convenient Scripture — “2nd Hezekiah 3:16 clearly states...”
- Appearances are very important in our judgment. No one wants to be seen as being “soft on crime,” for example. But it is easy to be merciful to the beautiful.
- The standard of our righteous judgment — is our own! When we die, that standardize with us. The elderly among us will remember a day when their leadership condemned any number of things which now pass without notice.

Divine judgment starts with a very different objective. Divine judgment is a step towards mercy and grace. It is God’s will that no one should be lost in hell, and therefore he offers salvation to everyone who will accept it. That difference in objective changes the approach in judgment:

- Judgment is based upon God’s eternal character. His character is that he loves his children and seeks their return to his fold. Therefore he tells the widow in John chapter 8 that he does not condemn her — but he also tells her to go and sin no more.
- Appearances do not make much difference to God, for his way is much higher than ours. I am reminded that he told me that this is so — but he never told me that I would see how.
- As his righteousness is eternal, his justice never changes.

Most of all, his judgment comes through his desires and objectives. He wants you to repent; confess and receive the grace of his salvation.

We see this at the cross most particularly. There is no mercy without justice; you see the justice when you remember that he is dying for our sins there. By his death he paid the price of our sins. By doing this once and for all he shows us that God wants all of us to come to salvation in Christ. He wants everyone to be saved.

Appearances? The cross was known to be a shameful death; Jesus despised the shame and accepted it for our sake. God’s judgment is shown to be done His way.

As you partake this morning remember that God has executed judgment upon Jesus on your behalf. He asks you to remember what he did; the bread, his body. The cup, his blood. Take it — seriously. He has shown you his justice so that you might receive his mercy. Therefore examine yourself. Repent what must be repented; confess what must be confessed. Receive again the mercy and grace of the Righteous God.

August 30

Drill and Ceremony

Military veterans will recall a constant feature of military life: drill and ceremony. It is almost the definition of the word “military.”

The manuals will tell you that the purpose of drill is to instill good habits into the serviceman. This is done by a constant repetition, often with the rhythm or cadence to it so that the body remembers what is being done. In the American military, the practice dates to the Revolutionary war. George Washington, via our ambassador to France, Benjamin Franklin, asked for some assistance in drilling his forces. He received one Gen. von Steuben, who wrote out drill instructions each night and taught them the following day to a model company of 120 men. These men later became the first drill instructors in the United States Army.

Christians have drill, also. We may not see it quite that way, but anything that we repeat to gain good habits as a Christian is a form of drill. For example-

- Scripture reading is a form of drill for the Christian. We should do it regularly so that we will be familiar with the Scriptures, reciting them as required in the circumstances. Think how often it is beneficial to be able to quote the Bible to someone in distress or to someone who is not really familiar with what Christians do believe.
- Giving is another such drill. As God places opportunities for giving in your daily path, you have the opportunity to practice being one who is an imitator of Christ. You give at his command. It is something to be practiced — drilled.
- Prayer is another such habit that is structured by drill. It is not just that we repeat this at the same time each day, but very often when we don't know what to pray we fall back on prayer found in Scripture, particularly the Lord's Prayer.

Ceremony plays its part as well. Ceremonies are essentially an opportunity to show the unity of those producing the ceremony, along with a proclamation. In ceremony we show the world that we are united, and that we mean to be united — it didn't “just happen.” Ceremonies are meant to be seen. Ceremonies are meant to give people who watch them a conclusion about those presenting them. Christian ceremonies are designed to show the important doctrines of Christ. We have something to say; ceremony is very often a good way to say it.

Unity and proclamation work very well together. If you think not, remember back to the days when choirs were allowed to meet together and practice together, face-to-face before the virus hit. There is something almost humorous about a choir practicing in a Zoom meeting.

Communion also is a ceremony which has something to proclaim and which shows our unity. But it begins with drill.

- You start by confessing what you need to change.
- You move then to repentance, keeping your action consistent with your words.
- To the extent possible, you then restore whatever relationship might be broken.

That's the drill part. Because we take the same cup in the same bread, we demonstrate our unity in Christ. There is no special communion for those who are officers of the church; rather, communion is designed for sinners seeking salvation. That's pretty inclusive, and we are united in that.

Finally, communion has something to say — a proclamation. It proclaims the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It proclaims that this death is satisfactory atonement. It proclaims that Jesus Christ is coming again, to judge the living and the dead. It proclaims not only what has been done and what will occur but most importantly Who has done this for us.

Therefore, in honor of the one who has died on our behalf and is now Lord, examine yourself carefully and then participate.

September 6

Slavery

Romans 6:16-18, 23

Most Christians do not believe that slavery is much of a problem today. After all, we fought the American Civil War over the subject, and the abolitionists won. (This ignores the significant problem of sexual slavery in the world today.) Our Scripture passage, however, comes from a time in which slavery was very common.

Slave and Master

In Paul's time the best way to tell to whom a slave belonged was simply to observe who that slave served. While this can get a little complicated it holds very well as a basic principle. You are the slave to the one you serve. This is reinforced at that time by having a slave wear a particularly distinctive multicolored belt. The combination of colors indicated which particular owner claimed him. Please note that this enabled the public to reinforce the slavery; such slavery was a very public proclamation. It's not something that happens in secret but is part of ordinary experience.

Perhaps most important is this: there is no end to slavery except death. It is only by death that you could be released from slavery.

Modern Times

Okay, nice history lesson. But what has that to do with us today? I submit that slavery is still quite common in our society.

- You can be a slave to the flesh. Always on the lookout for the better (or at least next) sexual partner, or just the next drink.
- More commonly, you can be a slave to the world. This is rather subtle; it may be keeping up with the Joneses, needing a bigger fishing boat or more expensive car. It may just be simply whatever you have to do to get the next promotion.
- Worst of all, you can be a slave to your pride. It is the sin of Satan himself.

Remember that I said that slavery is public? Do any of these things show in your life?

Ending Slavery: the Price

Paul tells us here that we are no longer slaves to the flesh, the world or our pride. Our slavery was ended by the free gift of God. But do you remember that I said that slavery only ends by death? It's true here too. The price of our release was paid by God in the form of the atonement sacrifice on the Cross. His death, rather than ours, has set us free from the enslavement to the world. The sinless one was sacrificed so that we might not die in our sins. We are now slaves to righteousness.

In communion we symbolically acknowledge that sacrifice. The bread represents his body; the blood is represented by the cup. Taking communion is an act of obedience to righteousness. You should therefore do it in a righteous manner; with self-examination,

repentance and restoration. But your life also shows your obedience to righteousness. It also is a public, observable thing. So as you examine yourself this morning consider well whether or not your life accurately reflects your proclamation in communion.

September 13

Rich Man

Matthew 19:16-22

Christians are sometimes confronted by the question, “can you be a righteous man without believing in Jesus Christ?” If you’d like to see the answer to that in person, check out this passage. Most of the people Jesus associated with would’ve had no trouble telling you that this rich young man was a righteous person; after all, his wealth was a sign that God had blessed him. As we see here, he was in the habit of being obedient to the Old Testament Law. It is not difficult to imagine that he was a consistent student of the Torah. In short, he is what every one of the time would’ve agreed was a righteous man.

This goes some way to explaining his question to Christ. He doesn’t ask how he can become more righteous; he’s not there to get his halo polished. He asks “what good thing” he must do to get eternal life. It’s an intelligent question. There’s not much sense in being righteous in this life if you’re not going to have eternal life at the end of it. It is one of those “ultimate” questions.

Christ begins his reply by challenging the idea that being good, or righteous, is somehow sufficient. He points him to the true source of righteousness, and therefore places the discussion on a different level. It’s not about some obscure passage in the Old Testament; it’s about you and God. Just to make the point clear, Christ tests him on the subject of his obedience, and apparently accepts that he has been in fact the obedient believer that he claims to be. This qualifies him to hear the answer to his question — but not necessarily to carry it out.

The “one good thing” that Christ tells him he lacks is to sell everything he has, give it to the poor and follow Christ. It is the one thing that a prudent businessman would not want to hear. We don’t like taking risks; here is an irreversible risk that costs everything.

Let’s look at it in a post-resurrection light. One of the characteristics of great leaders is that they would not ask you to do something they would not be willing to do themselves. Christ is asking for all his material possessions to be given away. Christ himself, however, is on the way to the cross. This is his last trip to Jerusalem. He is about to demonstrate to the rich man that he is willing to give all he has.

On Good Friday Christ gave it all. The soldiers got his clothing, but you and I will be receiving his body and his blood this morning. The bread you will take represents his body; the cup, his blood. You are receiving everything he possibly could give.

He has set you the example. He made his total commitment to you, so that you might have eternal life. That’s what the young man was asking about. The answer didn’t come till a few days later. But you have that answer now; you have that example before you. The only real question is, will you follow that example? If there is something in your life that prevents you from being completely committed to Christ, then purge it from your

life now. The question is not one of life and death; it's more important than that. Take his body; take his blood — and follow his example.

September 20
Compassion

Jonah 3:10

The city of Nineveh made a brief appearance on the biblical stage. The town was a working definition of evil. The chief deity of the place was Ishtar, the goddess of sex and war (now there's a combination!) She was not the goddess of marriage and certainly not of peace. It was a rough, evil place. The city was a prominent place for about 50 years and then declined into just another spot on the map. For the time it was pretty large, but perhaps most amazing of all was the fact that it was primed for repentance. Jonah showed up — you can almost imagine him carrying a signboard and ringing a bell — and the whole place, from top to bottom, went into sackcloth and ashes. Because of their repentance, God had compassion upon them and did not deliver them to the destruction he had planned for them.

You might well ask why. Most people would see no reason for God to be merciful to these folks. They were arrogant, they were almost casually wicked and showed no sign of being righteous or having any intention to become that way. Why, then, did God have compassion upon them?

- One reason is that the people of Nineveh were the work of God's hands just as we are. (See Psalm 103:13). They were his children and he longed to have them close to him.
- If it seems unreasonable to you, perhaps it is. God's ways are much higher than our ways. Often, what seems completely unreasonable to us God sees is the logical way forward.
- God's compassion, unlike that of many of us, extends not only to those who love him but to those who are his enemies. God knows the battle is over when you win the victory — but the war is over when your enemy becomes your friend.

The ultimate example of God's compassion comes at the cross. Christ wept over the city — "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" (Matthew 23:37) — a sign of how much he longed to have his children come to him. The cross and the resurrection were unexpected by all those around Jesus; God's ways are higher than our ways. He saw what we did not: to reach the light of the world you must go through the cross. His compassion extended there even to his enemies. Some of the people who were jeering him as he hung on the cross would soon become members of his kingdom.

We now partake in the memorial of God's compassion. The cup represents his blood; the bread his body, given for us that we might no longer be his enemies but his children. In so doing he has said this the ultimate example of compassion. As his children, we should go forward and do likewise. The imitation of Christ compels our compassion on one and all.

September 27

Many Sins

“our sins they are many,

His mercy is more”

(lines above are from a contemporary Christian chorus.)

It is a common characteristic among Christians that we don't want to face our sins. This reluctance comes in a variety of flavors.

- We certainly don't want to face the ones that are frequent, or common to us. If it's something we do every day we tend to bury it in our mind and hope that God doesn't notice that we haven't changed.
- Sometimes we ignore the ones that are the variety in our lives. We may have one major besetting sin which disguises the fact that we have a wide variety of other ones. We don't see them as a web in which one species of sin supports the others, but very often that is what we really have.
- If we are good at ignoring our sins in and of themselves, we are even better at ignoring their effects. Sins, by and large, we recognize as being our own fault somehow. But when those sins affect others around us it is very convenient to blame the others for the results.

Our Lord's mercy responds to these things. One of the immense advantages of Christ's incarnation is that he understands what it is like to be a human being. His understanding of our sins is not a view from the throne of heaven as much as it is a personal experience. He walked among us; he knows what we are like; he has experienced the same temptations. Therefore, his mercy covers the things that are real about our sins, not just theoretical.

- Do we sin repeatedly? His mercy is new every morning. He instructed Peter to forgive not seven times but 7 times 70. Surely his mercy is greater even than that.
- Are our sins widely varied? Are they the kinds of things you think no one else in the world has ever done this? He has no list of sins to forgive, but forgiveness is offered for all of them.
- It is not just a legalistic “certificate of forgiveness” mercy. Our Lord offers not just formal forgiveness but help in the healing of the effects of sin.

Such forgiveness does not come without a price. The Old Testament is quite clear; if there is sin, there must be atonement or there is no forgiveness. It is also quite clear that atonement for sin is blood sacrifice. To satisfy that law Christ needed to die on the Cross for us. But such a sacrifice is also must be pure — “without blemish”, as the Old Testament law as it. Therefore it had to be Christ who paid this, for he is the only one among us who was without sin.

As we celebrate communion this morning, we are commanded to remember that sacrifice. In the bread we see his body hanging on the Cross. In the cup we perceive his blood. This is the price paid. The result is what we started with:

“our sins they are many,

His mercy is more”

October 4

Aroma

John 12:1-8

Twenty-three times in the Old Testament the instructions that are included for offering animal sacrifices mentioned that the smoke from the fat burning on the altar is a “soothing aroma to the Lord.” It would seem that the Lord God Almighty appreciates a good barbecue just like we do. Beyond that, however, he mentions that aroma for a reason. In the story in which Mary of Bethany anoints the feet of Jesus in preparation for his burial, the apostle John tells us that the aroma of the perfume filled the room. It is a known fact that certain memories can be triggered just by an aroma. The apostle John is calling to our minds what happened this particular night. It’s clear that Mary intended to honor Christ, in anticipation of his burial. Reality involves all five senses, and this night the apostles experienced one in particular. Matthew and Mark also mentioned this incident, while Luke does not — probably because he wasn’t there. The aroma served as a marker of the occasion. This might just be why in both Passover and communion the cup is not filled with water, but with the fruit of the vine. God wants you to remember.

See indeed how Mary of Bethany made her devotion to Christ apparent. Not with words but with actions, she pours the perfume on his head — an act which all understood was to honor Jesus. But then she followed this with an act of extravagance: pouring the perfume on his feet. More than that she let her hair down — something no good Jewish woman would do in the presence of men other than her husband — and used them to wipe those feet.

It shows us her sense of what is important.

- First, of course, it shows us the importance of Christ. No greater man has ever walked the planet.
- It shows is also the importance of the crucifixion, for the crucifixion is our atonement for sin. Without atonement, there is no forgiveness.
- Beyond that it shows us the importance of the resurrection, so that we might know who it is who holds the keys to heaven and hell.

As you partake this morning, do so with Christ in mind. Examine yourself, and see if you have need of repentance. If so, plan your repentance and then plan the restoration of fellowship that follows it. Then, with your mind devoted to Christ, take this communion in a worthy manner. As the cup passes beneath your nose, mark the aroma. Communion is a reality, not an empty ritual. Remember that when the reality hits your nose.

October 11
Four Days

Exodus 12:6

There is a curious fact which is mentioned about the implementation of Passover.

- The Lamb to be sacrificed is to be taken into your home on the 10th day of the month — but not slaughtered until the 14th day of the month. The Lamb will be in your home for four days before being eaten.
- As far as the records indicate, this procedure was done only one time. Passover, after the initial implementation, does not require this.

The fact seems to be somewhat mysterious, and most of the commentators who do mention it (very few) tie it vaguely to the last week of Christ on earth. In so doing they are rather hesitant and tentative. There seems to be no really solid prophetic connection between this and the crucifixion of Christ. So why indeed did God tell Moses and Aaron to have the people follow this instruction?

Cast your mind back to the story of David and Bathsheba. You will remember that the prophet Nathan confronted David about his adultery and murder. He did so by telling him a little story about a man with a small lamb. He described the relationship between the man and the lamb this way:

"But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb Which he bought and nourished; And it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, And was like a daughter to him.
(2 Samuel 12:3 NASB)

It is just a speculation, but is it not possible with having the lamb in your home for four days it becomes very much a family pet? It goes from being just another animal in the flock to a creature with a name. Perhaps the implementation of Passover requires the agony of slaughtering the new family pet — something you love.

Something you love? The slaughter of Christ on the cross was in agony to those who loved him.

- We don't see it referenced, but can you imagine the feelings of God the Father would have watching the slaughter of his son?
- Consider his disciples feelings — something's gone terribly wrong and they are losing their best friend as well as their master and teacher.
- We may also consider "the little people" — people like Mary of Bethany, who anointed his feet. He was the hope with the sinner and therefore loved greatly by those who had sinned much.

As you partake of communion today, do you feel any sense of what it must've been like?

- Is there pain in your heart, because the sinless one had to die for you?

- Is there hope in your mind because Christ conquered the grave and you two shall rise from the dead?

We may put it simply. This is communion; is your beloved Lord and Master in it?

October 18

Sergeant

It must be admitted that “Sarge” did not start his Army career too well. He was a ghetto loser from Detroit, a high school dropout hooked on drugs and eventually busted for it. The judge offered him a choice: three years in prison or six years in the Army. He decided the Army sounded much better.

The first few years in the Army didn’t seem to be too much better than his life in Detroit. He had a few minor run-ins with the Army’s judicial system, mostly over his attitude about drugs. His mind was on parties, drugs and beer. But on his second tour in Vietnam, things changed. His best friend was killed in combat; he lost several other buddies there too. He started think about life and decided he wanted to change his direction.

He went into the captain’s office, unbidden, saluted and asked the captain what he had to do to get promoted. The answer, it seemed, was in the chart posted on the wall. It showed the requirements for promotion in each rank. The captain was pleased to point out the details. After this little talk, Sarge saluted, thanked the captain, then turned his life around.

The United States Army is not particularly noted as a forgiving institution. But I would have you note why this process worked the way it did:

- The Army did not care where Sarge had been — as long as he was headed in the right direction.
- The process was posted on the wall. It was not a secret held by some inner circle, but something that everyone could read. In short, it was public knowledge.
- Why did they do it this way? There was a war on.

Communion reminds us of this attitude.

- Christ want you to repent. He didn’t ask you to atone for your own sins; He took care of that. Where you have been doesn’t matter very much compared to where you are going.
- The process is not secret. Indeed the church is told to go and preach the gospel to all peoples so that no one will lack this knowledge — and the blessings it brings. Anyone who wants to come to Christ should get plenty of help from the church.
- Why did Jesus do it this way? There is a war on, the war between good and evil. By the way, you are already in that war.

Therefore, as you partake this morning, remember the price of salvation: the Cross. Examine yourself and see if there is some need for repentance. Then partake in a worthy manner. Finally, follow through: make your promise of repentance here and now and deliver on it during the week.

October 25

Example

Cast your mind back to the time when Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized. If you will recall, John objected to this. His opinion was that it would be much more logical that Jesus baptize him. In one of those cryptic replies in which Jesus tells the truth without explanation, he told John that this was fitting “to fulfill all righteousness.” The theology behind this puzzled the early church for years.

Eventually the church came up with an explanation that made sense. Jesus was not being baptized for the forgiveness of sin — he had none — but as an example to the rest of us. It’s the solution to a problem we no longer encounter. But in the early days of the church it would be a common occurrence that someone who was a member of the aristocracy might refuse to be baptized. After all, the lower class peasants needed it, but surely not the local Duke or Prince. The answer to this objection is simply this: if the King of Kings and Lord of lords was baptized, do you think you are so high and mighty as to refuse?

It lays out for us the concept of Christ as supreme example. In many ways he sets an example for us, or sometimes we can look at it more clearly if we see him as the Pathfinder. He is our leader by example in overcoming death.

On the night of the Last Supper, one of the first things Jesus did was to wash the feet of his disciples. This is something that was done as a gesture of hospitality — but it was always done by the lowest servant in the household. It was considered a rather dirty job and it went to the low man on the totem pole. But Christ himself took up the towel and washed their feet, then he explained explicitly that this was an example that they should go and do likewise. Most of Christianity does not take this as implementing a ritual of foot washing, but rather that there is no task too low or menial for the Christian to perform.

We can see this as a sacrifice on the part of Christ. It certainly took him some time and effort to do this. If you or I were to do this, it would certainly be a sacrifice of pride. It would also reveal to those around us an aspect of our character we might not want to be seen: just how do we behave when doing something that is “beneath” us. It is an interesting possibility.

When you take communion, you acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Master, Savior — and as well, example.

- As Lord and Master, you have promised to obey his commands. That implies that you will study the word of God so that you will know what those commands are. It also implies your obedience to those commands, and your willingness to spread this practice to all your brother and sister Christians.
- As Savior, you accept communion as being the symbol of his body and blood. His body is represented by the bread; his blood, by the cup. You are making the explicit proclamation that he died that you might live.

- You are also taking Christ as your example. He tells us that he came to serve, not to be served. You and I are to live the same way; Christianity is a life of service. The greatest example of service was at the Cross, represented here by the body and blood.

As we partake of communion this morning, remember that you are telling the world that you really mean it. Let there be no hypocrisy: mean it.

November 1

Tumbleweed

The lights in the theater grow dim; the screen lights up and an image forms. In the background a single harmonica begins to wail. The sound of the wind blowing introduces a round plant rolling by — it's a tumbleweed. It's the icon of the Old West.

The tumbleweed is a curious plant. It spreads by generating seeds in amongst its thorns, snapping off of its roots and letting the wind take it where it will, spreading seeds along the way. Wherever the wind is blowing, that's where it's going. Do you know people like that? Whatever today's wind says for direction, that's the way they go. Keep up with the latest fashion, moved to the right neighborhood, make more money than your neighbor does.

Sometimes it's hard to tell a tumbleweed from a pilgrim. Both of them appear to be wanderers. Neither of them seems to be in charge of its direction or path. The one great distinction between the pilgrim and the tumbleweed is this: destination. The wind may know where the tumbleweed is going, but the tumbleweed does not, nor does it care. The pilgrim, on the other hand, knows precisely where he is going. How is this?

At the Last Supper, Christ told us where the pilgrims are all going. After taking the bread and the wine, Christ made this statement:

"But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom."

(Matthew 26:29 NASB)

We are told later, in Revelation, more about the destination: the New Heaven and New Earth. To take communion is to proclaim that Christ is returning to judge the living and the dead and to welcome his followers into his kingdom for all of eternity. At that time the pilgrim's wandering will cease; he will be home.

As you partake this morning, remember what you are saying to the world. You proclaim that this bread represents his body, broken for you and all who love him. You proclaim this cup represents his blood, shed for you and all who love him. You proclaim that you are a pilgrim, going home. Remember the price he paid so that you might be welcomed in your new home.

November 8

Self Examination

Psalm 15

A Psalm of David. O LORD, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill?

(Psalms 15:1 NASB)

One of the frequent parts of a good communion meditation is the injunction to “examine yourself.” It is commanded in the Scriptures; it is also good sense. But it is a curious fact about examinations: to be effective, they need some sort of standard against which you can be compared. Such a standard is found in Psalm 15. We shall take it piece by piece.

Your Walk

He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart.

(Psalms 15:2 NASB)

Let's look at these three standards.

- Integrity. Are you the same person on the road that you are at home? Are you the same person at the office or the factory that you are at home?
- Working Righteousness. Do you do what's right, or you one who just praises what's right?
- Truth. Do you speak the truth from your heart — and thus always maintain consistency — or is your speech tailored to the occasion?

Your Neighbor

He does not slander with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

(Psalms 15:3 NASB)

This gets a little more personal.

- Slander. Slander is a juicy little morsel; and it feels good to take petty vengeance knowing that the only consequence is the spreading of the slander. Do you do that, or are you careful to be truthful about those you know?
- Evil toward your neighbor. Have you ever caused pain or trouble for your neighbor just because it was fun to do it? How does your fun justify their pain?
- Take up a reproach. Suppose you hear a rumor accusing your neighbor or friend of some particularly foul conduct. Do you repeated automatically? Or do you raise the eyebrow that says, “not until proven.”

Your Coworkers

In whose eyes a reprobate is despised, But who honors those who fear the LORD; He swears to his own hurt and does not change;

(Psalms 15:4 NASB)

A little training for the job.

- Do you have the sense not to trust an evil person? Or do you treat them as a convenient way to get things done in an underhanded way?
- Do you honor your fellow Christians at work? Or are they sometimes inconvenient?

- When you give your word, even if you know you may lose on the deal, do you follow through with what you said? Or do you try to weasel out of it?

Your Money

He does not put out his money at interest, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

(Psalms 15:5 NASB)

It is interesting that David saves this to the end of the Psalm.

- Unless you happen to be a bank, you will eventually be approached for a loan by someone you should love. Is it in accord with love, or does your lawyer have to approve the deal?
- Does everyone around you know that you are someone who can't be bribed? Particularly not for money, but also for favors or the next promotion?

If you are not the kind of person who "will never be shaken," perhaps now would be a very good time to start to become one.

November 15

Ghost Ship

The owners of the old warehouse no doubt prided themselves on being sharp businessmen. They had taken an old warehouse and converted it into an artist's commune. The place had a definite vibe to it. The owners ignored things like building permits and licenses — such things are expensive. They ignored the need for fire extinguishers and sprinklers — even more money. There were two stairways in the building; the main one was nothing but a stack of wooden pallets. It was laid-back, cool — and profitable. It even had a cool name: Ghost Ship.

December 3, 2016: someone had scheduled a concert in the building that night. So in addition to the usual collection of artists there were several guests. A fire broke out. Before anyone could use the wooden pallet stairway it was consumed in the fire. People were trapped on the second floor. A total of 36 people died that night.

Firefighters are heroes. Fire inspectors are nuisances. The building had not been inspected in over 30 years. One fire inspector would've been enough to tell them what might happen.

“Might happen.” It is a natural human tendency to think that the worst will not occur; if it might happen, it also might not. But there are some events that don't fit into the category of “might happen.” They fit into the category of “definitely will happen.” Think about it; you're going to die, unless the Lord returns first. You don't know when; you probably don't know how. But you know enough to prepare for it. Unfortunately, you can put off the preparation until it's too late. Sometimes that's not wanting to think about it; other times it's just simply a failure to remember. Which is why you get reminders.

Communion is one such reminder. You take it regularly; one aspect of it is that Christ said he would not partake of it until he did it anew in the kingdom. Communion is a reminder that Christ is coming again — and you need to prepare for it.

- He said he would come like “a thief in the night.” When we are least expecting it, at exactly the wrong time, He will arrive. You can't make up your mind at the last minute because you won't know when it is really the last minute.
- He tells us explicitly that no one knows the hour of his coming. Many people have made bold predictions of his coming, and the date has come and gone. We just don't know when — but we know He's coming.

How can we be sure? In communion you see one of the guarantees of this: the body and blood of Christ. He makes it clear that this is necessary for his return in triumph. The resurrection is another such guarantee: he tells you that you will be raised from the dead — and he's the only one who ever predicted his own resurrection before hand. Finally, you have his promise on the matter. He will return to judge the living and the dead.

So He is coming back. Take this communion as a reminder: we need to be ready.

November 22

One Cup

It is sometimes interesting to speculate on what the apostles would think if they were to come back now and walk into a typical church service on a Sunday morning in the 21st century. There are no doubt many things that would impress them. One which might puzzle them, however, is the use of those little plastic communion cups which are so common in many churches today. The idea that the cup is disposable and used only by one person might be rather perturbing to them. We shall take their point of view in this meditation. (I leave to the reader the thorny problem of whether or not they would be upset with the use of grape juice instead of wine in so many churches.)

Remember, the apostles would have had no concept of germs as we understand them. To them, the single cup used in communion was a sign of the unity of the church. They might perceive the single cups of plastic as being something which threatened the fundamental unity of the church that Christ so much wanted.

A cup has an inside and an outside. We may first consider the cup as a representation of how we appear to the outside world. Paul had this problem with the Corinthians; you'll recall he admonished them not to be participants in the cup of demons as well as the cup of the Lord. This was with respect to eating meat which had already been sacrificed to idols, a problem which Christians have not had for quite some time. But the principle remains the same: you cannot be both a Christian and, for example, a hedonist at the same time. At least, you can't do that without a monumental dose of hypocrisy. When you take the cup of Christ you declare to the world which side you are on. You declare that you are a Christian, with all that that means. So I might ask you: does the world see you that way? Does what you proclaim in communion flow through to the rest of your week?

The inside of the cup represents the relationship of Christians with each other. We, the church, are tasked with caring for our brothers and sisters, our fellow Christians, no matter where they are in the world. Most of such care is done locally, but there is a fair amount of time, money and effort given to those in faraway places. This is as it should be. We're in this together! We are commanded by our Lord to "love one another." So I may ask you this morning to look at yourself and decide whether or not you do love one another. When you take the cup of communion you proclaim to your fellow Christians that you do. Would they agree?

One cup: the test of our unity in the face of the world and amongst ourselves. When you take that cup you declare yourself to be a Christian, both to the world and to the church. Before you partake this morning, take the time to examine your self and see if you measure up to what you proclaim by taking communion.

November 29

Marker

Sitting innocently in the middle of the letters of the New Testament is a tiny book named Philemon. The book was well known to the ancient church, which accepted it unquestioningly as being inspired Scripture. Athanasius, who is generally credited with having formalized the canon of Scripture, accepted it because it met one of his criteria: the book was useful in the pastoral work of the church. It was not until the 19th century that the canonicity of this book was challenged. Scholars then viewed it as nothing more than a personal letter of St. Paul. Ultimately, however, the test of Athanasius stood the test of time. This book is useful to the church because it shows the power of Christ to change lives.

Now for those of you who are wondering if there's going to be a quiz on Philemon, let me outline briefly what occurred. Paul was in Rome under house arrest. He met and brought to Christ a runaway slave named Onesimus. A runaway slave in those days was viewed as a terrible criminal, betraying a master who fed, clothed and housed him. Paul wrote to Philemon asking permission to have Onesimus with him. Onesimus was to carry the letter back to Philemon. This was extremely risky, in the world's view, for a runaway slave who returned risked being branded, castrated and forced to fight a wild animal in the arena. But Paul was confident of Philemon's faithfulness and persuaded Onesimus to go. Things turned out well; both Philemon and Onesimus became prominent in the early church; both were martyred under the Emperor Nero.

I don't know about you, but I'd have serious reservations about going back if I were Onesimus. Castration? Branding? It shows us here that Onesimus is a marker, an example, of what Christ can do to change lives. Philemon, too, is such a marker. One can simply state that if Onesimus was changed so much as to be willing to go back, it is an example for the rest of us of what the power of Christ can be in changing lives.

This morning at communion we set forward another marker of Christ's power to change lives. You think not?

- In communion you proclaim the atonement — the death of Christ being sufficient for your sins. No longer do you have the burden of sin to bear yourself; rather, Christ is bearing it for you. That's what you're telling the world by taking communion.
- In communion you proclaim the resurrection — that Christ has power over death and the grave. He has promised that at the end he will raise you from the dead as he was raised from the dead. You should not fear death. That's what you're telling the world by taking communion.
- In communion you proclaim the ascension — the Christ is now at the right hand of the father, interceding for us. This also proclaims that someday he will return to judge the living and the dead. And that proclaims that you are ready for his return. That's what you're telling the world by taking communion.

That's what you're telling the world — this morning. May I suggest that you live your life in such a manner that you tell the world the same thing all week long. Examine yourself this morning and see if what you proclaim is what you believe.

December 5 Inspection

Veterans of the military services will know that the word “inspection” carries a particular meaning which is unique to the military.

- An inspection may be something which is scheduled on a regular basis, or announced before hand. However, it may also be something which is a surprise. Both types of inspection occur, and they occur frequently.
- Usually, an inspection is a very thorough process. The person or unit being inspected can expect to have everything under their control examined — no limits.
- This system of inspection supports a purpose — namely, that the unit in question is ready for combat. It is the business of the military to fight wars and win them. You don't win a war with unprepared soldiers.

At communion we have a similar system: self-examination.

- This too has a purpose. It is a much more serious one. The purpose of self-examination is to turn you into a Christian worthy of taking communion — and therefore one who is worthy to face the Day of Judgment.
- This is a regularly scheduled event. But there are surprise inspections here as well. The world is always looking for a hypocrite in Christian clothing.
- Like the military inspection, this one should be thorough. Look for sin through all parts of your life.

So before you partake this morning, you should look for sins of the flesh (lust, gluttony), and sins of the world (envy and greed). Most of all, you should look for sins of pride — Satan's own downfall. Then what? There is nothing for it but to repent and, as you can, seek forgiveness. Some forgiveness sought often comes with forgiveness given. Let the Lord know you are serious.

You are preparing yourself for life through the next week. So as you go from this place, remember you are to live like a Christian for the entire week. The world will conduct its surprise inspections on you throughout that week. Be prepared for this; examine yourself.

December 13

While You Were Out

Those of us whose experience predates the takeover by computers will remember a simple system used to track phone calls that you missed while you were out. It was based around a simple form, printed on pink paper, with the heading at the top, “While You Were Out.” On this form your secretary would write the details of whatever phone call you missed, or whoever stop by or any other events of significance. These were then placed on a spindle — a bluntly pointed spike — on top of your desk.

Note, please, that this meant that these messages were in last arrived, first seen order. That meant that if you got down to the bottom of the pile you could suddenly discover that you had been working on the wrong things. Gahan Wilson, a cartoonist for whom the word “bizarre” was a mild and modest description, once demonstrated this quite nicely. His cartoon shows an executive looking at the next pink slip on the spindle. He has a horrified expression on his face. Deservedly so; the entire message is written in Egyptian hieroglyphics.

The computer has taken over this task, but the use of reminders is still very important. It seems we can't run our lives without reminders. Communion is just such a reminder, and exhibits to us why we need them.

- Communion is a recurring reminder. It comes up at regular intervals. Experience has shown that we need such reminders for even the simplest things.
- It's also something important. It reminds us of the body and blood of Christ; of his atonement which is at the center of the Christian faith.
- Perhaps most important of all, communion is a personal reminder. It is a one on one meeting with Christ, not a committee meeting. Like most of the important things in life, it's personal.

If we are reminded, the purpose is for us to remember something. Communion carries with it its own remembrances.

- It causes us to remember the crucifixion, death and burial of Christ. That brings to memory the price of the atonement. It also teaches us that Christ was fully human; he died like one of us.
- It causes us to remember the Resurrection. This is the proof that Christ has power over death and the grave, and that he has promised to use that power to raise those who love him from the dead. It also shows us that Christ was fully God, for only God can command the grave.
- It causes us to remember that he is coming again. This is not just a reunion; it is also the start of the Judgment. He will come to judge the living and the dead, bringing his reward in his hand.

Do not dismiss Communion as just something we do every week, or every month. It is the recurring reminder of the essentials of the faith.

December 20

In Charge

One of the more memorable moments in my military career was my introduction to Col. Robinson. He came around to the question of exactly who was in charge of our section, which was responsible for computer programming. The dialogue went something like this:

“Just exactly who is in charge down there?”

“Well sir, there is a civilian professor who...”

“No, no, no, who is our person in charge? Who is the OIC?”

“Uhhh, there is no OIC, sir.”

“Well then, who is the NCOIC?”

“There is no NCOIC either.”

“Just who the (insert military language here) IS in charge?”

“I guess I am, sir.”

The Colonel then proceeded to throw everybody but me out of the room. He then put the matter bluntly: “From now on, troop, you don’t GUESS you are in charge. You ARE in charge!”

That’s how I found out I was in charge. In the military it’s easier to determine who’s in charge; they usually post the names on the wall. In the church it’s a little more subtle. Particularly as regards to doctrine, there are a number of possible answers:

- Sometimes, there is a vague coalition of prominent people in the church. They usually express what they don’t want to be said from the pulpit, leaving the preacher to pick from the remaining topics.
- Sometimes it’s the latest and greatest thought that is available from Christian magazines, or somebody who has a large church. If he can build a 20,000 member church by using naked dancing girls to serve communion, so can we.
- Most of the time people will tell you that it’s the elders of the church, also known in some groups as bishops or presbyters. In a sense that’s true, but it’s parallel to a traffic cop making a traffic stop. The cop makes the stop and writes the ticket — but the legislature makes the laws. So who’s really in charge here?

The church as a whole has always held that Christ is in charge of the church; He is our Lord. The reason is simple: He is the one who commanded his disciples to go forth to the world and preach the gospel. He commissioned the church. He also bought the church with his body and blood at the crucifixion. The church is his by right of establishment and by right of purchase.

We commemorate that purchase, the atonement, in communion this morning. We remember the price that he paid for our salvation. As you do this, give thought to his

authority over the church. Carry that thought with you all through the week; remember that he is not only Savior but Lord.

December 27

New Year

Despite all the restrictions on social gatherings which are now in force, I am planning to attend somebody's New Year's Eve party. It's not so much that I want to welcome in 2021; it's that I want to make sure 2020 leaves.

It's a common characteristic of human beings: hope. We imagine the future coming in and somehow we decide it is going to be better than what we have now. Often enough, we are right. The plain fact is that humanity cannot live without hope. We live in a sinful world, and our natural reaction is that it's got to get better. This isn't always true, but it almost always is what we want.

Did you know that hope is a theological virtue? You will recall the 13th chapter of First Corinthians ending with the three things that abide: faith, hope and love. CS Lewis put it this way.

"Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

So it is that the Christian is to keep his mind on the world to come. How do we strengthen hope?

- We strengthen it in prayer. When you go to pray, you bring in a number of assumptions. Be sure that they include the things that the Lord has promised with regard to eternity.
- We strengthen it in fellowship. It's hard to be full of hope when you're the guy who's stranded on a desert island. But God has given us the church to strengthen us in these matters.
- Believe it or not, one of the best methods of brightening your outlook on the hope of the church is in song. Many of the old hymns remind us of our great hope.

If you will keep your mind on what God has promised, strengthening your hope in the future is much easier. And what is it that God has promised?

- He has promised us the return of Christ — that we shall see our Lord and Savior in the flesh, face-to-face. The faith will become sight.
- He has promised us the resurrection of the dead; victory over the grave.

- He has promised us the Great Judgment, when the wrongs of this world will be righted and those who have worked hard for the kingdom rewarded.
- He has promised us the reign of Christ — forever. Remember the words from the Hallelujah Chorus: “King of Kings, forever and ever.”

Communion looks forward to these things. As you partake this morning, you proclaim the hope of Christians everywhere. You should also remember the price paid. As one old hymn put it,

“my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.”

Our hope was secured by the body and blood of Christ on the Cross. It was his payment; it is our promise.