

*January 3*

## **Compassion**

Luke 10:33-34 NASB "But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, (34) and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him.

The passage is an old and familiar one to most of us. It concerns the Good Samaritan. Most of us see it simply as a challenge to our own compassion and charity. But I would point out some things which are familiar to you in communion as well as in compassion.

Let's look at the Samaritan first. There are a few interesting characteristics that this man has beyond the fact that Samaritans and Jews hate each other. Please note:

- He came prepared. He had his first aid kit and was willing to use it. There is no record that he debated about what he would do.
- He followed through. Nothing was left undone. The man was placed on the Samaritan's donkey while the Samaritan walked. When he got to the end, he took care of the man himself. He then paid the innkeeper to continue the job until the man was well.
- That last deserves some comment. It means that the Samaritan's credit was good! The innkeeper trusted the man.

Compassion, in general, has its little problems.

- It's almost always risky. The beaten man could be a trap set by the robbers. There is the open-ended commitment that it takes to give this man healing.
- Often enough, it's expensive, too. That may be personal monetary expense, or it may be a commitment of time, or perhaps an emotional investment.
- One thing seldom noticed: it also has the possibility of heavy impact on others. The innkeeper may have felt he had no choice but to do this for a regular customer.

Christ ended this parable with, "go thou and do likewise." But it's also a model of what he did in coming to us to suffer on the Cross. Look at it this way:

- He was incarnate with a purpose — to die for our sins. He came prepared to do that. Despite the agony of the death he followed through and completed the atonement. And his credit was good with God the Father!
- It was the sacrifice which involved risk. What if things didn't go according to plan? More than that it was expensive, for it cost Christ his life. And he was not afraid to impose an impact on others — namely, his followers. They are given the command to love one another; they are commanded to take the gospel into all the world.

## In communion

In communion you can see the full measure of compassion of Christ. He paid the penalty for our sins, an act of love completely unparalleled in all of human history. So when you partake of the bread this morning, think of the love that drove him to endure the cross, an agonizing death. When you partake of the cup, remember the agonizing slowness with which he bled until he died. Then remember that he has placed upon you his burden which is light. You are to love one another; you are to take the gospel to the world.

January 10

## A Ransom Shared

Exodus 30:15 NASB "The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the LORD to make atonement for yourselves.

It is a statement cherished by all free men, but most particularly by Americans: "we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal..." It is no great secret that the Founding Fathers were Christians and were greatly familiar with the ideas of the Scripture. Here, from the time of Moses, we see the fundamental equality of all people. How so?

- *We are equal in Christ.* God is no respecter of persons; the ransom to be paid is the same for the rich and the poor.
- *We are equal in sin.* All of us are sinners, and have fallen short of the glory of God. We are also equally in danger of the fires of hell.
- *We are equal in the value of our souls before God.* He has made it clear here that he values us equally; we know that Christ died for all.

It is interesting here that the poor and the rich must bring the same amount. It's not a very large amount of money; indeed, the medieval Jewish sage Maimonides said that this amount was so small that even a beggar should bring it — and it was permissible for him to beg for it first.

We see the same equality in communion as well. Our atonement is the sacrifice of Christ. Therefore we all take the bread, which represents his body. We all share in the cup, which represents his blood. None of us is so favored as to get more, or less, than anyone else. This is a ceremony in which we are all, inherently, equal. Christ is our atonement; therefore there is no respect with regard to what you might or might not have done in your life. You are not being evaluated; you are being forgiven.

Interestingly, in the New Testament this atonement becomes known as the "Temple tax." Peter is challenged on this, as to whether or not Christ will pay this tax (Matthew 17:24-27.) In that familiar passage Jesus tells Peter that he, Jesus, is exempt from paying this tax. This is a reflection of the fact that the Christ is sinless, and is therefore suitable to be an atonement.

But notice what Christ does with it. He takes it upon himself to pay that tax, not only for himself but also for Peter. Now, it must be admitted that his method (going fishing for shekels) is designed to make the point. But within this we must also see that Christ voluntarily submits to the law of Moses. He is setting the example for one and all, just as he did at his baptism. It is a ransom, but it is a ransom shared. He took upon himself human form, sharing it with us, in order that he might pay the price of human sin — yours and mine. As you partake this morning, remember the price he paid voluntarily that he might be the atonement of our sins.

January 17

## A Curious Incident

John 12:20-23 NAS77 Now there were certain Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; (21) these therefore came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." (22) Philip \*came and \*told Andrew; Andrew and Philip \*came, and they \*told Jesus. (23) And Jesus \*answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

This is one of the most curious incidents in the Bible. We may begin by looking at the Greeks in question; the original language tells us something about them.

- They are Gentiles, who are not circumcised. They came to worship at Passover, so they are God-fearing people. They would not be allowed to go into the courts of the temple. Jesus would've been speaking in the Court of Women, so as to be able to speak to all Jews, male and female. These men approached but could not enter that area.
- There is no thought here that these people view religion as a "what" but rather as a "who." They start with Philip, who has a Greek name, in the hopes of getting closer.
- Interestingly, their approach to the Christ is that of "a friend of a friend." This is person-to-person religion.

Philip went to get Andrew (also a Greek name) and the two of them approached Jesus together. Jesus then gives one of those answers that utterly mystifies people. You have to remember that he's answering the question the Greeks should have asked, not the one they did ask (whatever that was.)

- He tells them they've arrived at just the right time. The hour has arrived. It's interesting to note that until this time Jesus has no interest in the Gentiles. But now, just before the crucifixion, he welcomes them.
- Indeed, this is a sign of how the church will reach to the world — the Herald of a new age, characterized by "whosoever will."

And what we may ask is this great hour? It is the hour of the sacrifice of Christ, when he became our atonement. Here then is the significance.

- His sacrifice is open to one and all — Jews and Greeks. This is a thought that would've been seen as foolishness by his Jewish followers. It is foolishness — God's foolishness, which is greater than the wisdom of man.
- In this sacrifice he is glorified by God the father, and is honored by all who believe.

The life of Christians sacrifice starts with His sacrifice — and continues with our own. That sacrifice is what we remember at communion. It is not only a reminder of the price he paid for our redemption; it is also an example held up for each and every Christian. Your Lord and Savior, out of his great love for you, sacrificed himself to the point of death. As you partake of communion this morning, ask yourself: am I following that great example? Is my life one of Christian sacrifice?

*January 24*

## **Dead Man's Curve**

Driving in the Mojave Desert bears little resemblance to driving in the wooded areas of eastern America. You can almost always see for several miles ahead. Speed limit signs are few and far between, and often ignored. Desert highways are often straight lines and the temptation to speed is ever present. One particular highway, State Highway 58, offers a very unpleasant surprise in that respect. It parallels a railroad line for many miles. For some reason, it suddenly crosses the railroad and runs parallel to it again on the other side. The crossing is well marked with flashing lights. But if you're racing a railroad train these things tend to be ignored. When you get to the crossing, very bad things can happen. The authorities frown upon it, but occasionally you will see a wooden white cross next to the crossing, with a name on it, and flowers beside it.

Oh, there are warning signs. A few hundred yards before the curve there is a large sign with flashing yellow lights that go on when a train is approaching. That's like the warning signs we see throughout most of our lives; they come in three different types. There are the large ones, of course. But most of the warning signs we encounter are small — but constantly with us. How many times have you heard that bear proclaim, "only you can prevent forest fires"? The authorities attempt to warn us of the consequences of our behavior by repetition.

But there's a third type of warning. It's like those crosses alongside the roadway. These warnings are not big and impersonal, nor are they repeated very often. But they have a tremendous impact on those who know them. These are the personal warning signs in life. They are the things that tell you that you shouldn't do something. Some of those personal warnings happen only once or twice; some of them are small things that happen over and over again. The real question is, do we listen?

Communion is that personal type of warning. You are to examine your self at communion. You're not here to examine somebody else in the congregation, bemoaning their sins. Nor is the other person in the congregation here to examine your sins. It's personal.

What are you supposed to do after you take warning? May I suggest that you might begin by promising the Lord your repentance, and then following up with action. This should be accompanied by asking for his forgiveness. That forgiveness is granted to you on the basis of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. You are reminded — and warned — by the simple elements, the bread and the cup, that he paid a tremendous price for you to be able to seek forgiveness. There is no suggestion you can do so without repentance. But as you listen to his warning, remember what it cost him to provide you with his forgiveness. That cross in the desert is a small pair of sticks, bleached white. But even the smallest of things can carry a large warning.

*January 31*

## **Waiting in Court**

A courtroom proceeds at its own pace. We were waiting in the courtroom for the trial of a friend of ours, and the judge decided to begin the day by reviewing a very large stack of manila folders that had been placed on his desk. Along the wall on one side there was a row of chairs; each chair occupied by a man who looked just a little worried. They were in alphabetical order, as were the folders. As I found out fairly quickly, these men had been arrested and convicted of drunk driving.

The judge would take each folder and examine it. He looked for two things: first, had the individual in question stayed out of trouble (nothing more than parking tickets). He also looked to see whether or not the individual had completed certain required courses. He was looking to see what you didn't do and what you did. If the examination was successful, he would call the individual up in front of the desk and tell him, "you may now say that you have never been convicted of drunk driving."

My first reaction to this was, "You have got to be kidding me!" After all, if you haven't been convicted of drunk driving, what are you doing in this courtroom getting your folder examined? But then I began to think about the practical consequences of this. It's very difficult for a man who has been convicted of drunk driving to get a job. You would certainly not hire him unless he had been thoroughly rehabilitated. Drunk drivers are human beings too, and they have wives and children. If we did not have something like this, such a man would be very prone to despair. It is likely enough he would take up a life of crime just to have money for food. So I saw the wisdom of the procedure of this court. If you stay out of trouble, and do the things we tell you to do, we're going to give you the chance to get a decent job.

This is very much parallel to the way that God forgives us. We "enter the program" by baptism, promising that we will take up the life of the Christian. God, for his part, expects both positive and negative things. He expects us to stay out of trouble by following him; thus we are responsible for the things we do not do. We are also responsible for the things we should do; the life of the Christian carries with it prayer, study of the Scriptures, fellowship, service and much else. But we must remember that the forgiveness we get is not something we earn, but something for which Christ paid a great price.

How can we know the price of grace? Let's start with the obvious: God's justice is perfect. Like the judge in that court, he expects that all that is commanded will be done. God's justice cannot be satisfied with anything less than a perfect atonement. That atonement is what Christ did for us on the Cross. So that we might be reminded of the price of the sacrifice, he has given us the Lord's Supper as a memorial. The cup represents his blood, shed for us. The bread represents his body, broken for us. As he commanded, take and eat. The result will be that on Judgment Day you will be able to say to the judge, "I am not guilty" — for your sins will be covered by the atoning blood of Christ. Do this, in remembrance of Him.

*February 7*

## **Jonah's Prayer**

The story of Jonah, as recorded in the Old Testament, includes the prayer that Jonah prayed upon being thrown overboard. We might take a short look at that prayer, for its elements are much more common than we think.

- If you recall, Jonah had been thrown overboard after he admitted that he is the source of the problem. He's been running away from God. And yet the first thing he tells us in his prayer is this: "I called... He answered me."
- He even recognizes (verse four) that he has been expelled from God's sight. It seems as if God has utterly and completely rejected him. Then comes the word, "nevertheless." Despite all that he has done wrong, Jonah is appealing to God.
- You will note too that everything in this prayer is written in the past tense — until we get the verse nine. The point in that verse is in the last sentence: "Salvation is from the LORD."

Listen to Jonah with your heart. Have you ever been in a situation like that?

- Your plight was so bad that you overcome your reluctance to admit your own sin. You called out to him despite the fact that your situation is rooted in your own fault.
- You knew that your circumstances came from God's justice and discipline. In short, you're getting what you deserved. But still, "nevertheless..."
- So you said to yourself, "Salvation is from the LORD." But how can you be sure of that? How do you trust him to reverse his own discipline for your sake? How do you know that God is willing to do that?

Consider the evidence that is being presented to you in Communion. It is a form of evidence that he presents to you each week.

- The Cross shows us his love towards us. Remember, many of the people who were laughing at and sneering at Christ on the cross would, about seven weeks later, become charter members of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem. Did he threaten them? No, he asked his Father to forgive them.
- His death paid the atonement price. We have been redeemed; mercy has triumphed over judgment. He will forgive.

It is a fact that human beings are much more in need of reminding than they are of instruction. That's why he asked us to take Communion on a regular basis. One reason is so that we will never forget that no matter how desperate our plight, no matter how much it's our fault, nevertheless he will still come to our aid. He only asks that you remember the price he paid to do that.

*February 14*

## **Second Class**

(This story is not apocryphal.)

She sat in the back of the church. After all, the church couldn't very well keep her out of the building. She was a young mother, alone, and in need of help. More than just physical help; she needed the advice of good Christian women. After all, Jesus came to seek and save the lost — and here was one of the lost. So in good Christian charity the church could not deny her entrance.

But not quite all the way into the church — after all, there are the circumstances to consider. What about the example she would set for the young girls in the church? What would her presence do for the “character of our witness?” People expect the church to be a model of righteousness. So it was best to keep her at the back of the church, and out of the more prominent lady's groups.

You might ask why. The answer is quite simple: in a time when the church still believed that divorce was generally a sin, she had divorced her drunken, womanizing husband. There is much more to the story, but there was the blatant bad example she had set.

Christ's method was somewhat different. You might remember the woman taken in adultery. Jesus drove off her accusers — we're not quite sure how — and his parting remark was simply, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” Even today there are some of us who still think that adultery is sinful. But it seems that Christ did indeed come to seek and save the lost.

In fact — if you will remember the story of Levi, also known as Matthew — you will find one of the central accusations against Jesus of Nazareth. He partied too hearty, too often, with all the wrong people. The folks at the party received him very gladly; the religious authorities were utterly scandalized. Worse yet, Matthew turned out to be an apostle! So perhaps an unblemished life is not quite the requirement for being a Christian that we might think.

This is clearly seen in the Lord's Supper. You recall that Christ washed the feet of his disciples — a task usually assigned to the lowest servant in the household. He made clear that the kingdom of God is open even to the lowest, and its members should be open to the lowest of service. Having done that, he invested what had been the Passover meal with a new significance. He said, “this is my body; this is my blood.” In so doing he made this a memorial feast for all Christians.

But I might point out something to you: I have never been in a church that use more than one type of communion tray. Whether for the cup or the bread, everyone uses the same set of trays. There is no thought that we will have one type of tray for the first class Christian, and another for the second class Christian. Why? Because in Christ's kingdom, there are no second-class citizens. His kingdom is open to “whosoever will.” In the simple act of providing the same memorial meal to all, we proclaim the equality of his kingdom. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female — and no second-class either. We are one in Christ, for we are the church, his body.

*February 21*

## **Blown Away**

Isaiah 44:22 NIV I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."

You will note that the Lord, speaking here to Judah, seems to divide their problems into two categories: offenses and sins. It's an interesting distinction.

- Offenses, taken in the original Hebrew, cover such things as treacherous conduct, rebellion and disobedience. Those things in your life where you tell Him it doesn't matter what he says; you're going to do what you want to do anyway.
- Sins, on the other hand, are those things in which we failed to hit the mark. Have you ever walked away from a social situation telling yourself, "I should've been more kind. I should've been more understanding." We knew the right thing to do; we just didn't have the courage or the insight to do it correctly.

Our problem is described with the use of nouns; its solution is described in verbs.

- You will note that he says, "I have swept..." — Note the past tense. It's already been done. All you need to do is claim the result.
- "Swept away" is sometimes translated "blotted out." You get the picture of some sticky gray fog surrounding you early in the morning — and then the sun comes up, and the breeze picks up and the clouds are gone. It's just that quick.
- So what is it that the Lord wants us to do? He wants us to return to Him. If you're going the wrong way, he wants you to turn around and go the right way. So why should we do that?
- The answer is simple: because he has redeemed us (note the past tense again.) That word redeemed is the same root word that occurs in the phrase "kinsman redeemer." It's not an impersonal transaction; it was done by a friend of ours. We repent because he has already redeemed us.

In the Lord's Supper we see the symbols of that redemption. Christ, our kinsman redeemer, one who is a human being just like us, has paid the price of our redemption. What he asks you to do in this ceremony is to remember that fact. Remember that he sacrificed for you, before you were born. Then, as you leave this place, remember what you should be doing for him. The cup and the bread are symbols of his sacrifice; but they are also spurs to the repentant life.

*February 28*

## **Down to My Level**

It is hard to think about things for which you have no experience. That may be the reason why the incarnation of our Lord is a subject which is mostly neglected. But let's look into it; just what was it like for Jesus to come to earth from heaven?

- It was an entry into time. God is eternal; the original meaning of that word is that he is unaffected by time, not subject to its boundaries. He went from that state to one in which he accepted the same boundaries of time that we have. We cannot forecast the future; we cannot fix the past.
- He accepted the limits of space. If he wanted to go somewhere, he walked. In his ministry he never left the boundaries of ancient Israel, as given to Moses. We have no record have him even riding a horse. This limit was accepted by the creator of the universe.
- He also accepted the boundaries of our thought. It is not possible for us to say how God communicates with the angels, but if he wants to communicate with us he has to use simple English. Perhaps that's why he was so fond of parables; they translate well. But the fact is that divine thought had to accept human boundaries.

All this could be done if he had wanted to descend and pass out a new set of rules. After all, he called Moses up onto the mountain, wrote the Ten Commandments, and sent him back down. He could've floated down, spoken what he had to say and left. He didn't. Why? Because he came to seek and save the lost.

- Giving us a new set of commandments might've been a nice thing to do; coming in the form of a human being was an act of pure love. "God so loved the world..." is the why of the incarnation.
- Note, please, that he came to save the lost. He could've come to save those who were moderately righteous sinners, people who sins were socially acceptable. He never attempted to define what a worthy sinner would look like. Rather, he ate and drank and partied with the most disreputable ones he could find. If you seek and save the lost, you get the righteous ones thrown in.
- Perhaps it is divine modesty that Christ never left the boundaries of Israel, for he was sent to the house of Israel. But to us he gave the task of taking his message to the world; we are to seek and save all the lost that we can find.

He did this so fully and so completely that he even experienced the one universal fate of each man: he died. He died a horrible death on a cross. So it was that we saw his incarnation; we saw him seek and save the lost and then we saw him die for us. He came down to our level so that we might ascend to his Father's house above. He asks us to commemorate this in the body and blood shown in communion. As you partake, remember what it cost him to end at the cross, after starting in heaven.

*March 6*

## **Pilgrimage**

A common experience among our ancestors was the pilgrimage. They considered certain places to be sacred; very often the burial place of a saint. So pilgrimage was simply the act of going to a sacred place. A pilgrimage was not without its problems:

- At the very least, you were at risk of being alone on the road. In those days, you would walk. At times it would seem there was no one else you could count on for help.
- If you aren't alone, you're with someone. That might not be the someone you had in mind; robbers were not unknown on the road.
- And you were definitely going to have sore feet.

To make this trip there were a few things you were going to need. There were some physical items — a staff, a stout backpack and rations along the way, though you would pick up most of your food from vendors along the road. You also needed a map of some sort; often not to scale and just listing the main points along the road. Because of that you also needed something else: a way to know where you are. Road rallyists call it a checkpoint. There is that moment of relief when you look up at the road signs and say, “aha! Now I know where we are!”

One of the reasons for the enduring appeal of pilgrimage is that life itself is a pilgrimage. We are going to a sacred place; Christ has assured us that he has gone on before us to prepare a place for us. If Christ prepares it, it is indeed a sacred place. There are risks along the pilgrimage of life; some of the people are pleasant and some are not. Pain, it seems, is inevitable in one form or another. And you need the material things of life. Do recall that your heavenly father knows you need these things, but has given you a map (the Bible) that tells you how unimportant they are. It seems a contradiction; it actually is just a right ordering of priorities. But it's easy enough to get lost along the way; you need one of those checkpoints every now and then.

Life is a pilgrimage; the Christian knows that Jesus is the way. Without the way, there is no going; without the truth, there is no knowing; without the life, there is no living. Scripture tells us how to handle the life along the way, the people we meet and the stuff we have — but we still need a checkpoint. That's what communion is for. We are taught that in communion we are to begin by examining ourselves. We are to look around at our spiritual environment, and see where we are. If we're not where the map wants us to be, we need to repent and headed in the right direction. The road signs are within us.

Our pilgrimage is a journey down a trail to a sacred place. Someone blazed that trail for us 2000 years ago. We need to remember what He sacrificed to open that trail for all the pilgrims who have followed.

*March 13*

## **Kinsman Redeemer**

Ruth 2:12 NASB "May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge."

The Old Testament contains many items of history, one of which is the Book of Ruth. It's a love story, which also introduces to us the idea of the "Kinsman Redeemer." We are presented with a young lady by the name of Ruth, a stranger in a strange land. She is of the tribe of Moab, which is not one of the tribes of Israel. She was married to an Israelite, and with her mother-in-law Naomi returned to the area of Bethlehem. She is what my mother would've called a "shirttail relation." From the context we can also deduce that she is a somewhat older woman, and of course a widow and an alien — and therefore someone with very little hope.

Boaz, the male lead in this romance, is introduced to us as a man who is rich, a pillar of the community, a kindly man given to generosity and a very devout follower of God. It's important to note that Boaz himself has no obligation under the Old Testament law to be of any assistance to Ruth. He could just wash his hands of whatever he sees in need and say it's the other man's problem. All of these things are detailed quite carefully in the Old Testament law. To exceed this would be somewhat unusual. But it is the nature of Boaz that he does not skimp when he tries to help. So he goes to the man who is first in line and asks him to do what is required under the law. The man cannot afford to do it; he therefore passes the privilege on to Boaz.

Boaz therefore becomes what is known as the "Kinsman Redeemer." The actual details are rather technical, having to do with sale of land in Israel. But the short of it is that Boaz rescues her from her poverty and marries her at the same time. We are not told, but we must assume that they lived happily ever after.

The story is given to us as a model. We, collectively, are like Ruth. We have no real claim upon the Lord God Almighty; we're not even in the family. We have no standing on which we can claim his help as a matter of right. But out of God's great love for us he sent his son, our "kinsman Redeemer," to rescue us. He was not obligated to do this; he did it out of love. We, like Ruth, are under the wings of God Almighty, seeking refuge.

That refuge was granted to us at the Cross. Christ asked that we remember the sacrifice he made for us. So we find in the bread, which represents his body and the cup which represents his blood a simple picture of the sacrifice he made. Like many things simple, it is also profound: a picture of what he has done for us.

*March 20*

## **Hole In the Ground**

The US Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration has a rather unique problem. They are responsible not only for the safety of miners in an active mine, but also for those intrepid fools who decide to explore an abandoned mine.

It's not hard to list the dangers of exploring such a place. The gas in such an old hole may not be breathable — but it might be explosive. You can drown; they are often filled with water. You can simply step into them and drop several hundred feet. The walls can collapse; you can fall onto old rusty machinery; very often you'll find some old and rather unstable explosives in them. And if that's not sufficient for you, rattlesnakes love the place.

So you would think that persuading people to keep out of them would be easy. It's not. As the government has discovered, such a mine is "alluring, mysterious and intriguing."

The government's problem is not a new one; it goes back to the beginning of human history. The oldest lie recorded in human history is simply this: evil is enlightening. Think of the things you'll find down there! After all, you are strong and confident; you can handle any trouble that will come along. There it is: evil seems to be alluring, mysterious and intriguing — and with no downside. Not even a rattlesnake.

Evil may seem enlightening, but it's the truth that will set you free. That's one of the reasons we have been given communion. It starts with the fact that we are all sinners. The myth of the superbly confident, "I can handle anything" kind of Christian is just that: a myth. You think not? If we are not all sinners in need of a Savior, why would you take communion?

There is more to it than that. A mine is something that's easy to get in and often hard to get out of. Communion is parallel to this; it reminds you that sin is something that's easy to get in to and hard to leave. Indeed, our sin is forgiven at the price of Christ on the Cross; neither cheap nor easy. In taking communion you are reminded of who you really are: a sinner, saved by grace.

So as you partake this morning, examine yourself. Is there something that's alluring, mysterious and intriguing in your life? Are you working up the self-justification to say that you can handle it? Remember, you are a sinner saved by grace. An abandoned mine looks very much like a hole in the ground and nothing more. Sin often looks enlightening. If it really was enlightening you would not need forgiveness. Grace reminds us that we have something for which to be grateful — and something else which we need to continue to avoid.

*March 27*

## **Washing Her Feet**

Most of us have been to a traditional wedding which involves the custom of tossing the garter. It's generally a ribald time in the wedding; the bride is encouraged where the garter as far up her leg as possible, for example. It is a source of sensuality and suggestiveness which, if you think about it, is rather inappropriate for a Christian wedding.

One young man has done something about this, and rather started a trend. He substituted something else for the tossing of the garter, something which he thought would be much more significant. He washed his bride's feet. At first glance this might seem to be rather odd, but you will recall that Christ washed the disciples feet. This is not a gesture of starting your marriage with a "yes, dear" attitude. It is rather the statement in action of a husband who is assuming the servant-leadership of his family.

The example is quite clear. Christ, who describes his church as the "bride of Christ", washed the feet of his apostles on the night before the crucifixion. Christ, as husband, is granted full authority over his bride. Indeed, all authority is given to Christ. In a way, we can see Christ "taking ownership" of his new bride by the act of washing the apostle's feet. He takes act by an act of service. He confirms that ownership by his sacrifice on the cross the next day. He thus sets an example for all Christian leaders — and that includes husbands.

We often hear the word "sacrifice" when talking about the Christian life. We think about the sacrifice of Christ as an example for our own lives, for example. But servant leadership is also modeled for us. At communion we often remember the sacrifice of Christ, but we casually pass over the example of servant leadership the night before. May I submit that when you take communion you are not only remembering the sacrifice which Christ made on the cross, but you are also remembering that he is Lord as well as Savior. When you take this communion, then, do so in obedience to your Lord. Take it as he commanded you to take it; in self-examination. Ask yourself whether or not Christ is genuinely the Lord of your life. If the answer is no, then this is a time for reflection and repentance for you. If you accept his sacrifice on the cross for your salvation, you must accept his Lordship in your life.

*April 3*

## Slide Whistle

One of the constant bits of humor in a Roadrunner cartoon is Wile E. Coyote falling off the cliff. This is almost always accompanied by a long blast on a slide whistle — that's that funny sound that keeps going down in pitch until the puff of dust arises from the canyon below. Most of the time you also see the coyote suddenly realize what's about to happen. You, of course, saw it just a little bit before he did. You know what's coming, and come it does. Have you ever asked yourself why Wile E. never seems to learn that this is going to happen? Hasn't he fallen off enough cliffs yet to understand that this is going to occur? No. So why is that? Simple. Wile E. Coyote is a genius; indeed, a super genius. This is coupled with the fact that he seems to forget everything that happened in the last cartoon. Genius plus forgetfulness equals pratfall.

Some people live like that. Comedy and tragedy are the same art, said Aristotle. And in some lives it's not comic, it's tragic. Sometimes it starts simply with, "hey y'all, hold my beer and watch this!" Sometimes it's planned out in detail. It doesn't matter; my mother's advice still applies: "don't do dumb things." Why is this? You may be a genius, you may have all the knowledge in the world, but the slide whistle still applies if you have no wisdom. But the solution is at hand. James put it this way:

**James 1:5 NASB** But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

So the wisdom is available — but it doesn't do you much good if you forget it at the end of the cartoon. It's the same thing in life; if you forget the wisdom you have been given, it is of no use to you.

God knows this. For the most important wisdom in your life he has given you a reminder, called Communion. It is a reminder of some of the things you really need to remember:

- No, you cannot handle sin and trouble by yourself. You will need God's help, which often comes through His church.
- By the power of his shed blood, forgiveness is at hand. He asks you for your repentance, freely offering his forgiveness.
- Ultimately, Communion reminds you of this: the God of the universe, creator of all things, loves you with a love beyond your comprehension.

As you partake, remember the love and sacrifice it took to bring you into a right relationship with God. It's not funny, it's not tragic, but it is holy.

*April 10*

## **Sinful Nature**

### **1 John 2:1 – 11**

A primary difficulty for modern converts to Christianity is this: man, by his very nature, is sinful. It's not just that we commit sins; we could probably come up with a good set of excuses for that. Certainly none of us has ever been free of beginners' mistakes. It's just that it's not a "one-shot" thing; it's a part of us. We try to deny it; remember Lucy telling Linus that she thought she made a mistake once, but she was wrong? We are human; we are sinners.

This wouldn't be too much difficulty except for the fact that we can't fix it. That doesn't mean we shouldn't make a sincere effort to fix what we can; restitution and forgiveness should be part of a Christian's life. But it is necessary to recognize that we cannot fix our sinful nature — and therefore God must.

Perhaps the most discouraging thing of all is that just when we think we've gotten it sorted out, repented of and fixed as best we can — we repeat. This can be very unpleasant, but we need to remember that we have an advocate to present our case to God, not on the basis of what goodness we have but upon what sacrifice He has made.

Forgiveness is not without its problems, either. Just how is it that we know that we have been forgiven? Some people will tell you that forgiveness is only for the good people. We need to remember that "righteous sinners" is an oxymoron. Others will tell you that you need to be obedient to be forgiven. If you think about it, this makes no sense. If you are being obedient, by definition you wouldn't have sinned. The reason it doesn't work is that it confuses the result (obedience) with the cause (forgiveness.) It is quite true that if there is no obedience it is because you have not sought the forgiveness of God; you are still walking in sin. So just how is it that you know that you have been sufficiently obedient that God is in position to forgive you? You can test this. The apostle John tells us that you should be "walking in the light." The symptom which tells you that you are is that you love your Christian brothers; we love one another.

The high example of this is Jesus Christ Himself.

- Once and for all, Christ made the atonement sacrifice on which God for gives us.
- Even as he made this sacrifice, hanging on the cross, he demonstrated that practice of "love one another." Some of those jeering him that day — of whom he said, "Father forgive them" — were to become members of his church just a few weeks later.

Communion is first and foremost a reminder of that sacrifice he made for us. It is also an example of the obedience He had to his Father. Likewise it is the beacon of his love towards us. Remember your sins; but also remember your salvation. This is his body; this is his blood — take, eat in remembrance of Him.

April 17

## Reality Check

### 2 Corinthians 4:7

Have you ever considered the power that the average Christian possesses? Consider this:

- Such a person has direct access to the throne of grace. Not only is he permitted to talk to God, he is commanded to approach that throne boldly.
- By the appointment of God, such a person is an ambassador of Christ — which is to say, an ambassador of reconciliation. You have the ability to reconcile people to God.
- Most of all, such a person is a child of the King of the universe. God is not a remote, vague force but the one whom I call “Father.”

So why is it that nobody notices this? It is because God has packaged this power in what St. Paul called “vessels of clay.” You and I are made of the dust of the earth. What’s remarkable about this is that Christ himself assumed the same kind of body — dust of the earth, a vessel of clay. Had the authorities of his time seen him in his glorified body (as at the Transfiguration), they would not have been able to deny his power and authority. But he was concealed in the same kind of body you and I have, and they did not recognize him. We are made of the same “stuff”; our bodies are made of the same kind of atoms; we possess the same Holy Spirit. We are “little Christs”; that is to say, Christians.

We need sometimes to be reminded of this. After all, in instituting communion our Lord told us that “this is my body, this is my blood.” It’s made of the same stuff as well; just a different arrangement of atoms. It is a sign to us that he came in the flesh, not as some sort of spiritual phantom. But we may turn that around; he is physically just as real as these elements. That’s one of the messages of communion; your Lord came in the flesh, just the same kind of flesh that you have as your body. When you partake of communion, you acknowledge this symbolically. Indeed, in communion we proclaim that we have met the *real* God, with a *real* body just like ours, who suffered a *real* death on the cross as our atoning sacrifice, experienced a *real* resurrection from the grave — and is *really* coming again to judge the living and the dead.

Communion is not trivial; but it is very real.

April 24

## Never Prayed

It is a curious fact, and seldom mentioned. Concerning the resurrection, Christ often taught his disciples that this was something that was prophesied in the Old Testament. In doing this, Christ taught his disciples that this was God's purpose from the beginning, and was not an accident or an attempt to regain control over a mission which had gone astray. Indeed, he himself prophesied it. He warned his disciples that it was going to come — and they probably misunderstood what he said. It's hard not to sympathize with the disciples on this one; after all, nobody had ever done this before. Had he told them of the coming of the atomic bomb, they could have been no more bewildered. But one thing concerning the resurrection that Christ never did: he never prayed for it. Not once did he ask his Father about the resurrection. He took it as a matter of fact; God said it would be done, and done it would be.

We might well ask, then, what did he pray for? There are three things I might point out to you:

- He prayed "that this cup might pass from me." It is of some comfort to those of us who suffer that Christ greatly feared the suffering and death that he was about to endure. He is human, like us, and being nailed to a cross is not a ho-hum experience.
- He prayed that "nevertheless" that the Father's will would be done, not his own. If there was no way possible to avoid the cross (and evidently there wasn't) he signaled that he would be the willing sacrifice, the Lamb of God.
- He also prayed for us, the church. In particular he prayed for our protection — from the power of Satan. His death had a purpose, the establishment of the church. His suffering was necessary for this; he would see to it that his suffering and sacrifice were not in vain.

We are taught that we should take communion "in remembrance of him." This morning may I particularly bring to your mind some of the remembrances:

- Take communion in remembrance of his *fears*. He stared a horrible death in the face and went to it willingly. In this he was totally human; it is wrong to say that being God this fear was not real. Any reasonable human being would have been afraid of the suffering, and Christ was completely human.
- Take communion in remembrance of his *suffering*. His was not a swift, painless death (as we might inflict capital punishment on someone). His was a slow, agonizing death delivered by soldiers who knew exactly how to maximize his suffering.
- Take communion in remembrance of his *death*. None of us has experienced death and come back to tell about it. If you are fully human, death includes the dread of the unknown. It also includes the remorse of the "if only." Looking backward, you ask if you could've done better. Looking forward, you ask, what comes next?

Even though he knew the resurrection was coming, the suffering — and the love which put him through it — were completely genuine. As you take communion, remember his fears, his suffering and his death.

*May 1*

## **Prayer List**

Like many other Christians who participate in ministries which are external to their own local church, I get occasional copies of a prayer list. This particular ministry is one which deals with prisons and prisoners throughout America, but the requests from them seem rather ordinary. They seldom have to do with the prison ministry itself, but have everything to do with the human beings in that ministry. In a way that's a very comforting thought. Why?

- It reminds us that the church is universal — we have Christians all over the world. They go in prayer to the same God that we do.
- It reminds us that suffering is not something that is confined to those who are super Christians. That prayer list holds out the same illnesses, medical conditions, family conditions and death that you would see in any local church.
- It reminds us that the church is one body, with its members having many gifts. Prison ministry is not something that is easy, nor is it “for everybody.” For example, children are usually not allowed. We have differing gifts and differing responsibilities.

The source of this unity, this “one-ness” comes from Jesus himself. He is the head of the church, and he is the glue that holds her together. When you look at the church as a collection of different people, you see many different people. When you look at the church as one faith, you see one faith. This is taken from the example given to us in the Trinity; God is three, but yet one.

This is symbolized to us in communion. On any given Sunday communion is being celebrated in churches around the world. There are many many different places, but there is one body. Just like there is one bread which is used to symbolize Christ's body, broken for us. Many pieces; one body. Similarly, the cup that we partake comes from one source; or as a Scripture would say, one blood. The wine in my cup is the same as the wine in yours, portraying to us the one blood of Jesus Christ given for our salvation.

It is therefore no accident or point of trivia that we are taught to examine ourselves before communion. At the very least we should look at ourselves and ask whether or not we are indeed part of that one body, partaking that one blood. Communion should bind us together, not split us apart. As you partake this morning, ask yourself this: am I one with the body of Christ, or am I leading yet another fragment out the door?

*May 8*

## **Style of Mercy**

### **Colossians 3:12-13**

The apostle Paul lists for us what might be considered the elements of style in mercy:

- Compassion
- Kindness
- Humility
- Gentleness
- Patience

We might begin considering how Christ exhibited these characteristics to us, on the Cross.

- His compassion is shown to us in the fact that he came in the form of a human being. Compassion is necessarily something that involves some similarity. Had he just floated in on a cloud and pronounced forgiveness, we would take it much less personally.
- His kindness is shown in what he did not do: he did not berate those who were crucifying him, but understood that they too were intended to be saved. In his kindness he allowed those who were the ones who crucified him to become children of God like all others.
- His humility is quite apparent. Here the Lord of the universe submits himself to the injustice of man, and makes no complaint.
- His gentleness might best be exemplified by his care for his mother. On the cross, in intense suffering, he took the time and trouble to commend his mother's care to his best friend, the apostle John.
- His patience is with us today; he is waiting for all who will be saved to come in before his return to judge the living and the dead.

We can follow this style in our own lives, in imitation of him.

- Our compassion may take the form of throwing an arm around somebody's shoulder, which demonstrates the essential of compassion: it is mercy shown from one equal to another.
- Kindness is often best shown with those who are regularly offensive. Not taking anger, but treating them as one who needs to be gently corrected, making sure that they are not humiliated in the process.
- Humility is required for compassion and mercy; otherwise we tend to give mercy out with a great dose of pride. It makes us feel good, but I would question whether or not the recipient sees us as humble or humiliating.
- Our gentleness is often the leading edge of mercy. It is often difficult for the recipient to distinguish mercy from vengeance; gentleness goes a long way in making sure we are correctly understood.

- And patience? Sometimes we must wait for the right opportunity to show mercy. For some, we must wait until a large opportunity comes along; for others it may be the next offense today.

At communion, we celebrate Christ's ultimate mercy. The bread and the cup are simple symbols of our forgiveness, the mercy that Christ has shown for us. Simple, yet profound, they touch the heart of every Christian. It is so important that God tells us (Matthew 5:7) the God shows mercy to the merciful, so there is a great benefit to this imitation of Christ. Indeed the style is so important that the apostle tells us (Romans 12:8) that we are to deliver mercy with cheerfulness. Perhaps our difficulty with mercy is that we enjoy receiving it more than we do giving it.

*May 15*

## **God's Mercy**

It is instructive to compare the mercy of God with that of man. We sometimes feel that because we are merciful to others that God somehow owes us something for it. But consider:

- The mercy of God is pure — there are no strings attached. By his mercy God does not intend to squeeze something out of you, rather to put something into you.
- The mercy of God is boundless. God is eternal and therefore is eternally patient, for time is in his hands. It is also boundless because it is the mercy of the omnipotent God; there is no sin so great that it cannot be covered at the cross.
- The mercy of God is full of wisdom. The goal of his mercy is a sinner coming home, not just cleaning up a little bit. By achieving the high goal of a returning sinner, the lesser goals are achieved pretty much automatically.

Man's mercy, on the other hand, springs from man's nature. We are made in the imitation of God and are therefore capable of soaringly great mercies. We are also sinners, and therefore our mercies often fall short.

- Man's mercy is not pure; often enough we are merciful only to those from whom we see some possibility of benefit. Even if we see no possibility of benefit, we prefer to show mercy to those who are appealing, not those who are appalling.
- Our mercy is limited by our power to deliver. Often enough we have the desire but are unable to deliver. We are mortal; have you ever wished that you could have been merciful to, and reconciled with, someone who is now dead?
- Often enough our goal in showing mercy is simply to clean up the sinner a little bit; smooth some of the rough edges of his character. We do not look to his salvation; we do not look to our relationship with him. We see only today and take no thought for tomorrow.

The comparison is best shown in communion. Before you were born Christ gave his life for you. You cannot match this. His motive in doing this was pure love; you cannot match this either. Christ offers his salvation to "whosoever will." We tend to be a little bit more picky than that.

The great mercy of God is indeed worthy of being remembered regularly. That's one of the reasons we have communion. So as you partake this morning remember that his blood flowed out of pure love; his body was broken so that anyone may come home to him. Before you partake, though, give some examination to this: are the mercies you deliver to your fellow men a good imitation of Christ's mercies which are open to one and all?

May 22

## Worthy Sinners

### Romans 12:8

It is a puzzle: if you look at the end of that verse you will see that mercy is to be given cheerfully. The word used for “cheerfully” here is the same root word used in the phrase, “God loves a cheerful giver.” More than that, it’s the Greek word that we adopted into our language as the word “hilarious.” At first glance, it’s not exactly the adverb you’d pick to describe giving mercy. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that the process of rendering mercy often includes a great deal of condescension.

The main reason for this concerns the people to whom we are being merciful. There are those who are sick whose conversation is hard to bear because it’s a constant whine. The poor to whom we render our compassion are often poor because of their own poor choices. In other words, we don’t think them worthy of our mercy.

The example of Christ, on the other hand, is quite instructive here. He did not divide those to whom he gave mercy into the deserving and undeserving. In fact, the entire concept of a “worthy sinner” seems quite foreign to him. In giving mercy, he divided his audience between those who asked and those who didn’t. Those who asked encountered his style of giving:

- Christ gave with kindness. Even to those who needed the warning, his “go and sin no more” seems a kindly word of warning, not fire and brimstone.
- Christ gave with humility. Though he is entitled to all honor as the creator and ruler of the universe, he never demanded it of those who sought his mercy.
- Christ gave with gentleness. He knew that those who asked his mercy often came with fear. By his gentle words he calmed their fears.
- His mercy comes with patience, for he is not willing that any should perish. Thus he delays the day of judgment.

Whether it is in forbearance — the gentle rain of mercy — or in forgiveness, the cloudburst of mercy, we need to imitate our Lord.

The cross is the supreme example of mercy. Christ found no worthy sinners. He therefore did not render mercy to us because we earned it, but because he loves us. You have freely received this loving mercy; freely give. Indeed, more than freely, cheerfully give.

As you take the cup and bread this morning, remember your Lord sacrifice as an example to you. It is not our worthiness but his love which makes this possible. He has been merciful to you; have you followed his example?

May 29

## Faces

### Exodus 33:19

Most people are very familiar with what might be called the “Smiley Face” view of Christianity. It’s particularly common among Christians who are raised in the church, but never really thought very much about it. Here’s how it goes:

- We are wonderful people. Just look around at the nearest people to you at a good church potluck. They are all smiling, you know them all to be people who do good deeds — in short, wonderful people. Therefore, we reason, God must love us because we are such wonderful people.
- Being wonderful people, we do good deeds. Whether by what we put up with or what we put forward, we can see that we are doing good things. Therefore, we reason, the God must be greatly in our debt — in short, he owes us.
- Thus, if we encounter suffering, it’s obviously something which is just not fair. What could God be thinking of? We’re the good guys; we’re not supposed to suffer.

But consider: Christ, the ultimate good guy, suffered and died on the cross. We are warned that if they did this to him, we will encounter suffering as well. Perhaps our logic in thinking that it is not fair might possibly be defective.

So let’s look at the “Frowny Face” view of Christianity. It’s a little bit different:

- Each and every one of us is a sinner. Each of us has a different set of sins; some of us don’t like the sins of some of the others. Some sin seemed to have social approval, but the truth is — sin is still sin. And we all have it.
- God, in giving justice (pure justice) should quite well condemn us along with everyone else. We are sinners; we are guilty and should be punished.
- Therefore, if he doesn’t punish us (for whatever reason) we have received a favor from God which we did not earn. Unmerited favor of God; the very definition of grace.

So how is it that God treats us differently than those who are not Christians? It is by the sacrifice of Christ that God’s justice is satisfied. God laid the penalty for our sins on His shoulders. Thus, and thus alone, is justice satisfied and mercy granted. For this, we should at least be grateful. Indeed, we should do more than that; we should make it a point to remember this sacrifice and honor the one who made it. That is exactly why we have communion — to remember the sacrifice and honor Christ who made it. Communion is the reminder of the most important thing that could happen in your life: the change in direction which leads you away from Hell and towards heaven.

Therefore, when you partake of communion this morning, do not do it lightly. Don’t take it as a matter of routine; thinking, “we do this every Sunday.” And most certainly do not take it with your mind

wandering elsewhere. Rather, examine yourself to see that you take it in a worthy manner. Repent where repentance is required; give thanks in all these things.

June 5

## New Every Morning

Lamentations 3:21-23 KJV (21) This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. (22) It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. (23) They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

In the middle of one of the most discouraging books in the Bible, Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah comes up with this little gem. I think we can understand it. Have you had the sensation that God just couldn't forgive you one more time? Surely, he's tired of you and your sins? In this passage take hope.

Human beings get weary. God, however, is timeless — and therefore does not change. As he does not change, therefore he does not get weary (even of our sins.) It seems contradictory to think of something that is timeless and yet ever new. Perhaps an analogy will help. The Mississippi River, "Old Man River" just keeps rolling along. The river looks the same every day. But we know that the water in the river just keeps going on and on, so it's always new. God's mercy is like that; always the same, always new.

"They are new every morning" — why morning? Electric lights have changed this quite a bit, but in the day of the prophet Jeremiah when the sun went down, it got dark. Human beings easily weary in the darkness, fearful of the things we cannot see. But then comes the dawn. It's not that things have changed; it's that we can see them now. With the dawn, Jeremiah could see the mercies of God.

"Great is thy faithfulness" — we think of human beings as being faithful (or not), but God is the ultimate in faithfulness. He has promised us his mercies, and by his very character he cannot lie. As the apostle John told us,

1 John 1:9 KJV If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God is not only faithful but righteous. By the sacrifice of Christ on the cross our sins have been atoned for, and therefore in justice our sins have been cleansed. Christ has paid the price; we owe nothing. And because of this, we have hope. The day will come when our salvation is revealed at the return of Christ.

Men need to be reminded much more often than they need to be taught. CS Lewis remarked that Satan does his best work by keeping thoughts out of our mind rather than putting thoughts in them. Satan wants us to forget the nature of God's mercy, and succumb to hopelessness. This is one reason that Christ gave us communion. We see in communion the same elements, cup and bread, every time we partake. It reminds us of the sameness and constancy of God's mercy. It's like that river: the form of communion is always the same; the specific elements, like God's mercy, are ever new.

*June 12*

## **Sacrifice Triumphant**

On February 23, 1945 an Associated Press photographer named Joe Rosenthal took a picture. He was embedded with the United States Marines, covering the combat on an island named Iwo Jima. It is the only picture ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for the same year in which it was taken. You've seen it; it portrays five Marines and a Navy corpsman lifting the flag at the top of Mount Suribachi.

It's not "just a picture." In 2001 a similar picture was taken at Ground Zero in New York, showing the firemen raising a flag there — in the same pose that Rosenthal captured. Rosenthal's image is burned into American history. Somewhere between "just an image" and reality itself lies the truth of that picture. The art of photography brings to the human mind a sense of being there. It touches the heart. It produces in our minds both the memories of that war and our hopes for the future. We remember the sacrifice; our hopes for the future include that our children will not have to make similar sacrifices. We hope that that flag raising represents sacrifice triumphant.

Photography is a relatively recent invention. Before there were photographs, people had other ways to remember the important things that happened. Sometimes they carved a statue; sometimes they wrote a book. But for the most central of things they created a ritual so that all might remember — and hope. Very often these rituals are simple things. Picture yourself in Pearl Harbor at the Arizona Memorial, listening to the 24 notes of Taps floating over the grave of the USS Arizona.

As a photograph has composition, so does a ritual. The most profound of rituals typically have simple elements with deep meaning. Ritual does not need to be fancy; indeed, Rosenthal shot his picture in black and white. We have a similar situation in communion. The elements are extremely simple: bread and wine. Simple, they are also easy to remember and easy to understand, conveying a very profound thought in a very easy way. In the bread we have His body; in the cup we have His blood.

In this ritual we have the most important memories of the faith. We remember the atonement that he made for our sins. But we also have our hopes. We look forward to the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. This ritual reminds us of the price He paid for that hope. His sacrifice was not in vain, for it brought us redemption. Sometimes sacrifice is a bitter experience, especially if we are paying a price for something which leaves us with no hope. The sacrifice of Christ leaves us with hope eternal; it is truly sacrifice triumphant.

June 19

## Prodigal Son

You remember the story; it's one of the most famous short stories ever written. The younger son comes up to his father and asks for his share of the inheritance. Some have doubted the wisdom of parting with the money at this point, but the father in question did just that. The son, as you will recall, leaves the area to squander the money in wine and women (song being relatively inexpensive.) When he runs out of money he discovers that he has been consorting with "checkbook friends." So, after a little hardship, he comes to his senses — and returns home.

With that introduction, may I introduce to you the character of the father. There are three things that I would wish you to see:

- Patience — note that the father is out every day, looking down the road in the hope that he will see his son coming. It apparently takes some years before he comes back, but all that time the father has not changed his mind. He wants his boy home.
- Loving — you can tell by his first reaction to the sight of his son. He does not wait for him to return; he doesn't walk towards the lad — he runs. Those who hold that the father in this parable is a picture of God may note that this is the only time in the Bible where God is pictured as running. When he gets to him, there is no explanation asked, there is no lecture delivered. The picture is one of pure joy: my boy is home.
- Forgiving — indeed, forgiving to the point of restoration. The prodigal knows what he deserves, but the father gives him restoration into the family. It is extravagance; forgiveness often is.

God's love is like that. He shows us this at the cross. For 2000 years he has been patient, waiting for his children to come home. Is he loving? The most famous verse in the Bible starts with the phrase, "for God so loved the world..." Only pure love would sacrifice a son. But it is in forgiveness that we see this most clearly. We are forgiven, not in part but in whole.

"My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought,  
my sin, not in part but the whole  
is nailed to the Cross and I bear it no more  
praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul."

In communion we can see our responsibilities simply by looking at the prodigal son. May I submit that there are three things we need to do:

- First, we need to confess our sin. It may seem obvious, but even the prodigal son knew he had to voice it.
- Second, we need to recognize that we are not worthy of the Father's love — it is his free gift.
- Third, we need to take that love into our hearts, cherish it and accept it — and then spread it to all we know.

Communion — the "welcome home" feast for all of us who are prodigals.

*June 26*

## **White Dresses**

### **1 Corinthians 11:23-32**

It was a small church in Southern California. In a fit of poor judgment on their part and mine, I was asked to serve as a deacon. Being the junior man on the team, I was the one who was to round up the customary eight men needed to serve communion — in August. Custom decreed that all the men would wear ties — in August, in Southern California. They wear sunglasses there for a reason, folks. Try as I might I was unable to round up eight men willing to wear a tie. Radical measures were called for. So I did this: with the help of the youth minister, I recruited eight high school girls to serve communion. They were instructed to wear white dresses of a modest appearance and otherwise behave in accordance with the importance of the occasion.

When the girls entered the church with the communion trays, there was an audible gasp from the congregation. I am pleased to say the girls carried out their task with complete decorum in a very high-class manner. I knew, of course, that there would be an elders meeting just after the service. I was prepared.

My defense was found in the classic passage concerning communion, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:23-32. If you will notice that passage, you will see that St. Paul prescribes no specific method to serve communion, nor any specific set of persons to serve communion. However, it is clearly a solemn occasion. As the young ladies had served appropriately, the elders found they could see no reason to require ties. But communion is clearly of first importance. One reason for this is that in communion you come in contact with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and this proclaims to you and everyone else the core doctrines of the faith.

Another reason that this should be such a solemn occasion is that it is designed to make you examine yourself. You are in touch with Christ. By this symbolic act, you proclaim his death. In proclaiming his death you proclaim his resurrection; in proclaiming his resurrection you proclaim his ascension; in proclaiming his ascension you proclaim his coming again. To do this in a frivolous manner, or to do it by rote in an unthinking manner, is sin. It is grievously offensive to the Christ who gave his life for you.

Therefore, do not be distracted by those who serve (or what they are wearing), or those who make music during communion. Rather, examine yourself with all seriousness, repenting of your sins. Then partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

July 3

## Celebration

English must be the most confusing language in the world. For example, we tell people that we “celebrate” the Fourth of July. Now what does that mean?

- Most likely, it’s going to start with a parade. There may be military units; some of them active-duty and others veterans. Add to this a variety of civic organizations, a few floats created for the occasion and of course marching bands, and you have a most enjoyable spectacle.
- Fireworks — what would the Fourth of July be without the chance to “ooh” and “ahh” over colorful explosions in the sky. This is often accompanied by patriotic music, usually John Philip Sousa’s *Stars and Stripes Forever*.
- Of course, we eat. It varies by the region of the country, but you usually see hot dogs and hamburgers, such All-American favorites as pizza, watermelon, corn on the cob and a variety of things cold and wet to drink.

We also tell those same people that we “celebrate” the Lord’s Supper. This obviously has a very different meaning than celebrating the Fourth of July.

- Instead of the parade, we have prayer. Indeed, it is a deep and serious form of prayer, for it concerns our eternal life.
- In many churches, the entire ceremony is performed with great reverence. Little children are told to hush; teenagers are told to put their feet flat on the floor, and decorum in general reigns.
- Oh yes — we eat. But not in the same sense we do for the Fourth of July. This is a solemn, symbolic meal. The bread and the cup have deep meaning, something which cannot be said of hot dogs.

Someone from a foreign country might ask us: why the difference? I think the answer is fairly simple. In celebrating the Fourth of July, we celebrate *our* victory over our foes. It doesn’t much matter which war you’re talking about, Americans like to celebrate their victories. But in Communion we celebrate not our victory, but our Lord’s victory. His opponent was much greater than anyone we have ever had to meet on the battlefield. Therefore his victory is greater also; so was the price he paid for it. God became man for the purpose of dying for our sins.

We celebrate the Fourth of July in a fitting manner. We should do likewise with the Lord’s Supper. Therefore, examine yourself and see if there is something in your conduct or attitudes which is unbecoming to a Christian. If so, repent and make plans to make amends. Then, with clear conscience, take and eat of this most important meal.

July 10

## Scapegoat

### Leviticus 16:7-10

Mention the word “scapegoat” today, and you conjure up a picture of some unfortunate bureaucrat who is taking the blame for some senior official’s wrongdoing. The person is usually an underling that you’ve never heard of, just as high up in the hierarchy as is needed for blame, but as low as possible — after all, this person is expendable. Usually this scapegoat has some complicity in whatever was going on, and for all practical purposes knew that this might happen to him. If the scandal is high enough, and the scapegoat is also high enough, he might escape with just being fired. Otherwise, there is usually some jail time involved. But the defining point is this: even if he was complicit in whatever the scandal might be, he’s not really the person at fault. He’s just the fall guy.

The word “scapegoat” comes to us by way of the King James version of the Bible. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would obtain two goats. These goats each had a role to play; they got that role by random chance — we would say, the role of the dice.

- The first goat was sacrificed as an atonement. In the Old Testament system, shedding the blood of animals was presumed to atone for the sins of the people. This is only one of many such sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament. But it was done on that most sacred day, the Day of Atonement, which came around only once a year.
- The second goat became the scapegoat. The priest symbolically laid all the sins of the people on the head of the scapegoat. Apparently it was not sufficient to have an atonement sacrifice, you had to haul those sins away from the view of God. The scapegoat, therefore, was taken out into the wilderness a sufficient distance where it would lose its way and never return.

Somehow, both of these goats were necessary.

These goats foreshadow the role of Christ in the New Testament. The fact that this happened only once a year is a foreshadowing of the one time atonement of Christ on the Cross. Christ takes upon himself both functions of those goats:

- He is, of course, our atonement sacrifice.
- But he is also the one who takes away our sins, removing them from the sight of God so that they may be seen no more.

As the psalmist put it,

As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.  
(Psalms 103:12 NASB)

In communion we see the picture of this: we see the atonement, and we see Christ carrying away our sins. As you partake this morning, give thought to how he has removed your sins. If you are in faithful communion with him he will help you keep them out in the wilderness.

*July 17*

## **Tax Collector**

### **Luke 18:9-14**

The story is a familiar one. The Pharisee comes up to the temple to pray. On the surface of things, it seems that he is indeed one of the righteous.

- By outward appearances, he is righteous. Fasting is only required on the Day of Atonement, he fasts twice a week. He tithes not only the items required, but every little herb in his garden. His garments reflect the religious requirements of the Old Testament Law. Everything that you can see says that this is a righteous man.
- But God sees the heart, and in this parable we may see it too. What's clear is that he bears a great deal of hatred to the other man. His heart is an excellent example of being judgmental. But perhaps worst of all is that he is presumptuous towards God. He knows, he assumes, that God must agree with his analysis of the tax collector and himself.
- May I ask you, then, one simple question: just exactly what did this man want from his prayers towards God? He asked for nothing — and from what I can tell, that's what he got.

The tax collector is quite a different character. Whether or not he can see himself as others see him I do not know, but he can see himself quite clearly.

- A tax collector in those days was a toad working for the invading Romans. He made his fortune by cheating people out of taxes which weren't really required. In the eyes of his community, this made him worse than a swindler or even an adulterer.
- He also knew what he wasn't. He knew he wasn't righteous or worthy in God's sight. He's the kind of guy who sits in the back of the church, hoping the preacher doesn't recognize him when it comes to fire and brimstone time.
- There is a certain direct simplicity to the man. He knew what he wanted; he knew what he needed — and he came to ask for it. He needed God's mercy. Christ tells us that he got it.

As we approach communion this morning, may I remind you of the obvious point of this parable. The one who exalts himself shall be humbled; the one who humbles himself shall be exalted. In communion this can be made most clear, because this is the time at which you come close to God. Think about yourself; did you come this morning prepared to ask God for nothing? If that's the case, He will be more than willing to give that to you. May I suggest that you wish to take advantage of the opportunity to bring yourself before God, doing it in a very clear manner.

- Check your attitude. Is this a time for you to be looking down on others?
- Acknowledge who you really are. God already knows, but he likes to make sure you do too.
- Ask for what you really need — the mercy of Almighty God.

His mercies are new every morning, including Sundays. Seek him while he may be found.

*July 24*

## **Hard Saying**

### **John 6:53-58**

In one of the most controversial passages of the New Testament, Christ explains the necessity of communion to his disciples. If you are Roman Catholic, you take this section quite literally. This is called transubstantiation. There are several versions of this, but for Protestants it is typically taken as a symbolic explanation. Either way, however, it is commanded that the Christian take communion. The reason is quite simple; his body and blood as given in communion are the mechanism of his ongoing grace towards us. If you take communion, with sincerity, then you are one of his forgiven children called the church.

Some of us would ask: "how do I know this is real?" Let us begin with the obvious. He who spoke and the universe began is the ultimate source of reality. If he tells you something is real then in one sense or another it must be real. He is the source of reality, and he says it's real. There is more to it than that. We are told in this passage that those who do partake of communion live in Christ and Christ lives in them. This is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; it is also the source of unity of the church. Indeed, Christ tells us that the words he has spoken to us are in fact spiritual life for us. Nothing else we can touch with our hands is as real as communion.

To those who partake, Christ has promised resurrection from the dead. He tells us that we already have eternal life; but this might just be that life so favored by cartoonists of people floating around on clouds playing harps. This is a very convenient metaphor, but it is precisely what Christ does not promise. You have eternal life, right now. In addition to that, he tells you that he will raise you up in bodily form on the last day. You are a human being. Human beings have bodies. At the last day he will reunite body and spirit. After that, you will live forever. That is the promise Christ makes to those who partake of communion.

Communion is the source of our fellowship with Christ, and is therefore the source of the fellowship of the church. Those in His church have eternal life, will be raised on the last day and live forever. These facts have been obscured by the debate about transubstantiation, but let us realize the truth: unless you partake of communion, genuinely and sincerely, you are not part of the church. You are not in fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ. Consider well, then, what your attitude should be towards this most sacred of meals.

*July 31*

## **Seven Pillars**

### **Proverbs 9:1-6**

Bible readers who come across the first verse in Proverbs chapter 9 are often puzzled by the phrase “seven pillars.” It seems, from our modern view, an odd structure. It is not. Seven pillars are used to construct an ordinary, quadrangular building used for the purpose of banqueting or feasting. Four pillars are at the corners; the remaining three are in the middle of three walls. The fourth wall is the one that faces the public and is entirely open. Thus it is that such a building presents an open, welcoming entrance. You can see everything in it, nothing is hidden — it almost advertises itself. More than that, the word “pillars” carries with it the idea of the permanence of stone. So we have a welcoming banquet structure, stoutly constructed to last a long time.

The passage consistently refers to wisdom as being female. We might take a look at what wisdom does.

- She prepares her meat and her wine. It is an interesting parallel to the body and blood of Christ.
- She then sends her maids out to get people to come into her banquet. It is very much reminiscent of Christ’s parable in Luke 14:16-24 of the banquet for which those invited refused to attend.
- Most of all, she declares this banquet to be the salvation for the simple and the foolish, those people who lack judgment. It is therefore of great benefit to those who dine with her.

As such we can see something of a parallel between the banquet which wisdom gives and the meal which Christ offers. We may examine the wisdom of communion.

- Just as wisdom’s banquet is open to all, communion is open to every repentant sinner.
- Like the stone pillars of wisdom’s house, communion is designed to be permanent — at least until our Lord comes again.
- Communion, like wisdom, is of great benefit to those who will hear what is said. If you see the body and blood of Christ in it, you understand the mechanism of God’s grace.

Communion, like wisdom (see James 1:5) is given generously. Our Lord laid down his life so that we might have this reminder of our salvation. There is no greater generosity.

*August 7*

## **Blood Types**

The name of Karl Landsteiner is not known to most Americans, but the results of his research are very definitely common knowledge. Landsteiner discovered what most Americans would call blood types: the familiar A, B, AB, O system which is used to guide the correct transfusion of blood between one individual and another. Landsteiner also made several other contributions to medicine, including the discovery of the polio virus, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1930. Without this system we would not be able to successfully donate blood and have it used for another person. This is particularly important today because most blood donations are simply that of the red cells, not the whole blood. It is extremely important that the blood types match. Landsteiner's work transformed blood from a simple fluid to an essential of the art of medicine.

There are some simple rules for transfusing blood between one human being and another. The rules may be simple, but if they are not followed, death may result.

- You have to have a blood type as donor which is acceptable to the blood type of the recipient. All those little bags of blood look the same; the wrong stuff looks just like the right stuff.
- The purity of the supply of blood is extremely important. You can kill someone by transferring disease in a transfusion.
- It may seem simple when you watch it done, but the art of setting up a transfusion is something which is a skill which needs to be learned. You have to know what you're doing.

Similar restrictions apply in the spiritual world as well. The ancient Israelites were forbidden to eat meat with its blood still in it (Leviticus 17:14), as the blood was considered to be the life of the animal. Indeed, the Old Testament teaches us that without blood there is no forgiveness of sin. In the sacrifice of Christ, our atonement, the same principles apply.

- The wrong stuff looks like the right stuff. Many religions deny the possibility of a sacrifice for the sake of sin, but the Christian knows that without Christ's blood there is no forgiveness.
- Only the blood of Christ will do, for only *it* is pure, unstained by sin. We demand purity in our foods; we likewise expect it in the atonement. Purity is extremely important.
- The appeal to follow Christ is often a simple one, and it seems that anyone could devise his own form of Christianity. But it is much better to have someone who knows what he's doing guide you. You have to know what you're doing.

The perfect sacrifice of the right stuff, the pure sin-cleansing blood of Christ perfectly given to us as our Passover lamb — only this will do. Therefore, as you take communion, do so in remembrance of the one Who shed his blood for you.

*August 14*

## **Walk About**

### **Psalm 119:44-45**

Some readers, particularly Americans, will look at these two verses and see what appears to be a contradiction. The way of freedom, it seems, is said here to consist of two things:

- First, you must obey God's laws forever.
- Second, you must seek out God's precepts.

This, the psalmist says, will result in you walking about in freedom. For many of us it seems the exact opposite. What we really want to do is be free of God's laws and his precepts; then we will consider ourselves really free. We may begin by seeking the fallacy in that reasoning.

Let us suppose that you are in possession of one octopus and one eagle. In your desire to set these creatures free, you bundle up the octopus into your hand and hurl it into the air, crying out, "Fly! Fly!" The octopus, I suspect, would view this procedure rather dimly. The eagle, on the other hand, would view it in exactly the way you intended — it permits him to be free. What's the difference? Pretty simple, really. An eagle is intended and designed to fly. If you want the octopus to be free, throw him in the ocean. The creature is free when it is able to do what its creator designed it to do. Freedom does not consist of anything you want; it consists of doing what you were designed to do.

So then, what was man designed to do? At the very beginning of the Bible, God says "let us make man in our image." You were designed to be like God. Therefore, when you are most like God, you are most free. The first step in this is obedience to his laws. Eagles, for example, don't attempt to reinvent the laws of flight or aerodynamics; they take advantage of the laws that exist. To do this, they have to have in their way some knowledge of the laws of flight. Similarly, human beings if they are to imitate God must know what the rules of spiritual life are. We must first be obedient if we are to be free.

But it is the second step that concerns us with regard to communion this morning. We are to "seek his precepts." We are to look and find the basic principles by which God operates. This does not concern us with the tiny little infractions, but the grand sweep of what God has done. It is quite clear what his precepts start with. He tells us that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The second is to love your neighbor as yourself. These are his great precepts. He has taught them to you not just by word but by example. Communion is given to you so that every time you partake you will remember what he has done both so that you may be grateful and so that you may take his example. No greater love exists than that of a man laying down his life for his friends — and that's what he's done for you. He died — it's his body, it's his blood — so that you might live forever in the imitation of God.

So, consider well this morning your obedience to his laws. Is there repentance due? Then do it quickly and do it thoroughly. Then, as you leave, remember he has given you the great example of love.

Freedom for human beings comes when they seek his precepts, and there is none greater than this.  
When you leave this morning, do so as a child of God walking in love.

*August 21*

## **Salvation in Judgment**

1 Peter 1:17-19 NASB If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; (18) knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, (19) but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

It has lately become unfashionable in the church to speak of the possibilities of Judgment Day. One should not conclude, however, that Judgment Day will not occur simply because we are not preparing for it. In this passage, Peter makes three points about Judgment Day which are useful for us in preparing for it.

- First, God is impartial in judging you by the works you have done. This does not necessarily mean that he will be pleasing you, but you can be assured of honest judgment by one who knows everything.
- The subtle phrasing of “the time of your stay on earth” should remind us that we are just passing through this world, it is not our permanent home. We have a limited time to get it right.
- Therefore, we should conduct ourselves in the fear of the Lord. A parallel way to look at it might be this: an automobile can be very destructive, which is why you should drive carefully.

We have been redeemed. We been taken out the old lifestyle, the one we inherited from our ancestors. If that lifestyle had produced heavenly results, we'd probably stay with it. It produces futility instead. Just because the wrong answer is an old one doesn't make it a good idea. God did this for us in a way which fits his eternal nature. Peter tells us that we were not redeemed with “perishable things” — which I would interpret to mean something like leaving the milk out of the refrigerator — and gives us the example of gold and silver. God's definition of eternal seems to run a little longer than ours. He didn't buy us at the slave market.

God purchased us with the precious blood of his son, Jesus Christ. It is precious because it is sinless, the perfect sacrifice. He went to the cross like a lamb to the slaughter, and unblemished and spotless lamb. When we partake of the cup of communion we are saying to the world that by the blood of Christ we are redeemed. It is a reminder to us of his sacrifice; and we need to be not so much taught as reminded.

August 28

## Sneaky Fitch

Romans 6:9-11 NIV For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. (10) The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. (11) In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

A staple of high school drama departments, and many other stage companies, is a play entitled *the death and life of Sneaky Fitch*. I'll let the narrator introduce you to Sneaky:

"Who-or what-is Sneaky Fitch? I'll tell you. He's the town bum of Western myth and folklore. But Sneaky is not content to be the lovable, ideal town bum of Western myth and folklore. Oh, no. He's a real bum! He is the most lily-livered, yellow-bellied, good-for-nothing, low-down, rotten-clean-through, miserable polecat that ever walked the face of the West! And that ain't the half of it!"

In the course of this comedy, almost at the beginning, we find that Sneaky appears to be dead, to no one's regret. The undertaker lays him in a coffin at the end of the day, thinking to come back the next morning and finish the job. Fitch does not have the decency to actually be dead, and in due course he wakes up. He heads to the town bar and discovers that everyone there is absolutely terrified of him. The reason is simple: Fitch is dead, and you can't kill a dead man again. In the gunslinging West a man who has died and risen is invincible — and Fitch takes every advantage of this.

The key point, for us, is the fact that once a person is dead then death has no further hold on him. St. Paul makes the same point in our passage today. Christ died; and by the power of the Holy Spirit he was raised from the dead. He cannot die again, and therefore death has no hold on him. He then draws the parallel with the Christian: you are to consider your self dead to sin, having died in Christ, but alive to God. The act of baptism is the ceremonial acceptance of the death of Christ in your life; you are buried with Christ and rise to walk in a new life.

Communion is the memorial of Christ's death. We certainly should remember his sacrifice in doing this, but we should also remember that we too have died — to sin. We do this by participating in his death, of which communion is a reminder. We are dead to sin because of Christ's death. It is therefore no accident that we are told that we are to examine ourselves before we take communion. Are we indeed dead to sin? If not, what steps should we take in response? Ponder the sin in your life, and give thought to how you will repent and indeed be dead to sin.

September 4

## Baby Food

John 6:53-58 NASB So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. (54) "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (55) "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. (56) "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. (57) "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. (58) "This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever."

Having recently become a grandfather (again) I am reminded of the basics of nutrition for small children. Those of you who have had children are familiar with the common baby food jar. It contains approximately three times the amount of food necessary to feed the child at any given meal. This is because one third of the jar will be eaten and the other two thirds will be used as an object of play. This means that the child will wind up distributing the contents of the jar in a number of really interesting places: mother's blouse, the bib, the high chair tray, the floor, the kid's hair, nose, ears — though it is a minor mystery of Western civilization how the kid gets strained peas into his shoes. It's even more of a mystery how he gets them inside his socks, between his toes, with his shoes on.

But please note one thing: the baby is eating things which adults eat. They are strained, puréed or otherwise processed, but they're made out of the same ingredients. We have something of a parallel to that in communion. To a new Christian communion may seem rather simple, and indeed it is. It's just that sometimes we don't see that something can be both simple and profound. Which it is.

We can see this in several ways:

- First, we see this in the nature of communion. It is a simple meal made of common elements — bread and wine. These things would be familiar to most Christians of most times. As you grow in the faith, you realize that this is also a symbolic meal. Later, you realize that the symbolic and the physical here intertwine.
- Second, we see this in the necessity of communion. The Lord's Supper is commanded to us; it is not offered as an option. If you are a Christian — new or 80 years old in the faith — you take communion. It's the same communion for the new Christian as for the old Christian. There is no segregation in communion.
- Third, we see this in the reality of communion. The creator of the universe, he who spoke in the worlds began, says, "this is my body." The one who defines reality in his creation has told you this. It is not a trite little ritual that we made up. It is at the core of the faith — and the faith is very real.

Indeed, you cannot take communion without proclaiming to the world that you are a Christian. Specifically,

- You proclaim yourself to be one of the saved. You tell the world that you have received the grace of God.
- You also proclaim his death as our atonement — and the physical reality thereof — and his resurrection. Taking communion states those facts.
- You do this until he comes again — which means, of course, that you proclaim that Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

These proclamations can be made by the newest of Christians and the oldest Christians. They are core items of the faith and completely suitable for a new Christian. They grow in their value to the older Christian day by day. For such a thing, you are asked to examine yourself to see that you are taking it with all seriousness. Your Lord went to the cross with all seriousness; you can do likewise in communion.

*September 11*

## **Swiss Army Knife**

The Swiss Army Knife has long captured the imagination of the American male. To have something in your pocket which will handle most of the minor mechanical emergencies of the day is a nice feeling. The ultimate expression of this is in the Wenger Grand, the world's largest Swiss Army knife. It is 9 inches wide and weighs 2 pounds. It has 87 separate tools. For example:

- For the golfer, there is a club face cleaner, divot repair kit and a shoe spike wrench.
- For the bicyclist, there is a tool to tighten your spokes, and in fact a chain rivet setter.
- There is also a laser pointer (no sign of a light saber yet.)

As of this writing, the device may be obtained for a mere \$1300. The pants pocket to hold such a device is extra.

Some people see God like a Swiss Army knife. They have a problem; they open the particular aspect of God which solves those problems, and when solved, they put God away — just like folding up that knife. So we see people going to God asking for these kinds of things:

- People ask for healing — and when healed they say a quick thank you and put God back in the closet.
- People ask to get out of a financial mess — and that tool goes back into the knife as quickly as possible.
- It takes a little longer, but people also ask God for help with their family. When God finishes, or appears to, they fold the knife back and put it in the backpack.

This is idolatry. If you do this, you are treating God like a collection of tools, and you are thankful for each tool — but do not recognize the God who really is. You love the tools, but you don't want God interfering in your life.

In communion God presents himself to you in a different light. It is as if he wants to show you the most important thing about himself: God is love. How does he do this?

- In communion, he shows you the real problem in your life — sin. It may present itself in a variety of ways, but the core problem is this: all have sinned.
- There is only one solution to this, the atonement. God sent his son to do just that, to pay the price of your sins.

What he asks of you in communion is that you remember the sacrifice He made on the Cross. Of all the things he could ask you to memorize, he boils it down to this: he loved this world so much that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. As you take of communion this morning, examine yourself and see if you are grateful to the God who is, or just thankful for your Swiss Army knife.

September 18

## Adultery

### Proverbs 6:32-35

In the modern church it is fashionable to praise what used to be called adultery. We praise it, however, under different names. We call it “open marriage”, or “having an affair” (do you need to wear a tuxedo for that?) or simply “a little fling.” It all sounds so harmless and loving, how could a loving God not favor it? And yet, if you talk to a policeman, he will tell you that one of the most dreaded calls to respond to is that of an angry man whose wife is “having an affair.”

The reality was well described by Solomon about 3000 years ago. To be specific:

Proverbs 6:32-35 NASB The one who commits adultery with a woman is lacking sense; He who would destroy himself does it. (33) Wounds and disgrace he will find, And his reproach will not be blotted out. (34) For jealousy enrages a man, And he will not spare in the day of vengeance. (35) He will not accept any ransom, Nor will he be satisfied though you give many gifts.

This describes the matter rather well. But it is not my purpose to talk about adultery today; rather, to use it as an example of the difficulty of forgiveness. Forgiving adultery is extremely difficult; reconciliation even more so.

But forgiveness is a requirement for the Christian. It is not an optional “good idea.” It is a requirement. It is shown to us in several familiar passages. For example, the Lord’s prayer asks of the Lord to forgive us our debts on the condition that we forgive those who are our debtors<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, we have the example of Christ on the cross asking his heavenly Father to forgive those who were executing him<sup>2</sup>. We are forgiven if — and only if — we forgive others<sup>3</sup>. Just at the point where our minds run to what kind of vengeance we can take, we are told that vengeance is prohibited; it belongs to the Lord<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, the entire principal of Christianity is the imitation of Jesus Christ — and that means forgiveness<sup>5</sup>.

Forgiveness, then, seems to be quite a burden. But quite to the contrary, say the Scriptures. Christ tells us that “Blessed are the merciful<sup>6</sup>.” In fact, in the same sermon Christ tells us that this is the perfection of the Christian, that we are to be as perfect as God<sup>7</sup>.

This brings us to the subject of Communion. We are told that Communion is the new covenant we are making with God<sup>8</sup>. In other words, when you take Communion, you are proclaiming your obedience to

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:12

<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>3</sup> Mark 11:25-26

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:19

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:32

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:7

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:43-48

<sup>8</sup> Luke 22:20

him. You are saying that you are his follower, and that you follow his example — and his example is forgiveness. More than that, taking communion is a symbol of the fact that we are one body<sup>9</sup>, the church. And if your marriage is divided, how can we be one body?

You have often heard that you are to examine yourself before partaking of communion<sup>10</sup>. May I suggest to you that one of the purposes of doing this is so that you will remember those whom you need to forgive — and do so. Do not do this in word only, but as you leave this place remember to go to that person and proclaim your forgiveness, in total honesty. Do not take Communion as a hypocrite would; rather take it in truth, including the forgiveness your Lord requires of you.

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<sup>9</sup> 1st Corinthians 10:16-17

<sup>10</sup> 1st Corinthians 11:28-31

*September 25*

## **Denial**

Recently, the attention of the press has been focused on an ancient practice of the church: the denial of communion to certain individuals. The general grounds by which this is done is that the person being denied communion is, in the words of the Anglican Prayer Book, “a notorious evil liver.” This usually implies three things:

- The individual is unrepentant for something which is clearly a sin.
- The sin tends to be one which is besetting, though there are exceptions.
- In some sense, the sinner must be able to fix the situation — at least theoretically.

The method of using denial of communion to deal with a problem like this has its advantages:

- It tells the world, or at least those who know the sinner, that the church considers what he or she is doing to be a sin in need of correction.
- By denial of communion the individual is given a motivation to repent and to correct the behavior.
- It is, surprisingly, the most gentle form of church discipline. The standard method may result in the individual being thrown out of the church. This method simply prevents the individual from participating in the most important symbolic ritual in the church, but does not prevent that person from having fellowship with other Christians.

Some disadvantages may also be seen:

- It may be misused. It may be seen, for example, as a good way to get rid of someone who is bringing up embarrassing truths.
- It may also favor certain types of sinners. We are most familiar with the Roman Catholic Church method of denying communion to those who are divorced. But greed also is a sin; do we deny communion to a rich, prosperous and overly greedy banker?

Obviously, in a short communion meditation, we are not going to solve this problem in any significant way. So why did I bring this up?

- Communion implies that you are part of the body of Christ; you are one of the guys wearing the white hats. (See 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:21). Staying a member of the body of Christ requires you to be a repentant Christian.
- Communion implies that you believe in the return of Christ; that also implies that you believe in the judgment to come and heaven and hell. You are saying to the world there is punishment for sin; what should God do if you happen to be the sinner, unrepentant?
- Communion implies that you acknowledge the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. You accept his atonement for your sins. Is it a good idea for you to presume that somehow the sins you will not repent of won't count?

- Paul tells us (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:28-32) that there are those who are sick and have even died because of the unworthy way they went about taking communion.

In short, taking communion in a serious manner is not a matter of life and death; it goes beyond that to heaven and hell. So what should we do?

- We should acknowledge the importance of communion by taking it with proper respect.
- If you are the Christian handling a besetting sin, repent and then seek help from your fellow Christians. The fight against sin in your life is not fought by you alone, but Christ and his church are with you — if you will but ask them to be.
- If there is a broken relationship in your life which you can restore, do so. Make that promise to God before you take Communion; deliver on that promise as soon as you can.

Partake of communion in a worthy manner. Everyone else in the room is a sinner too; join us in repentance, join us in fellowship.

*October 2*

## **Black Hat**

It is a convention in the English language to call someone who is a villain, the bad guy, a “black hat.” The expression originates from the fact that until 1932, virtually all films were shot in black and white. Western motion pictures typically didn’t have a very large budget, but needed something cheap to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys. White hats showed up much better in film than black hats, and it became a convention that the good guys got the white hats, and the bad guys got the black ones. This persisted until the introduction of Technicolor in 1932, and even after that it was common for the good guy to wear a white hat. It has passed into our language as a way of referring to people who are on the wrong side — at least by your own definition. It is quite an image.

The Western movie genre has a stock character for the black hats:

- The man (have you ever noticed that it’s almost always a man?) goes around with a constant sneer — he is very irritating.
- At some point in the film he will “kick the dog.” That is, he will perform some petty, vicious act to establish his evil character. That’s important. It’s the filmmaker’s way of letting you know that this man is not just someone with a grouchy disposition, but is genuinely evil. He’s not a fallen sinner; and that’s a feature, not a bug.
- The only way to deal with such a man is to shoot him. He must be shot in the prescribed manner, by a “white hat” in a gunfight in the main street in town, accompanied by thrilling music.

This makes for a good motion picture. It’s not a very realistic picture of human beings, however. It’s a realistic picture of what we imagine other human beings to be. May I submit to you that the Christian approach to the black hat is exemplified in communion.

- Communion proclaims God’s grace for one and all. There is no one so evil that the only way to deal with them is to shoot him. Indeed, we are told that God’s will is that none would perish but all would receive his grace.
- Communion is not a cheap, throwaway ritual. It is something which cost Jesus Christ is very life, and therefore is quite expensive. It is God’s extravagance that provides us with his loving grace. God paid for it; he gives it to whosoever will.
- Communion is a recurring approach to the sinful nature of man — whatever color of hat he wears. In it we are reminded to examine ourselves, repent and then partake.

Communion — black hats welcome

*October 9*

## **Painswick**

The year 1940 was a rather tense one for England. In the summer of that year it was presumed that the Germans would be invading rather shortly, no one knew where or when. But the British Army was not about to be caught short in its paperwork. The appropriate bureaucrats produced a requirement for every civic organization in England to have a "War Book." Among many other items to be listed, there was to be a list of items available which might be of assistance to the Army in its transport and operations.

The same requirements were proposed for the largest of cities and the smallest of villages. In particular there was a village named Painswick, population about 1800. Painswick is located about 30 miles southwest of Stratford-upon-Avon. Their list of items is somewhat unusual. They started off quite well by listing the fact that they had 11 horses and 16 wheelbarrows. A little further down the list we find that they had six bedpans, 10 pair of scissors (denoted as "large") and 13 hot water bottles. But just to make sure they included everything, they added 7 ½ pounds of tea, three tin cans of condensed milk and one fish kettle. The Germans having failed to invade England, we shall never know what the intended purpose of the fish kettle was.

It is a comforting fact of human beings that they face the unknown and the dangerous with three questions:

- What is the right procedure under the circumstances?
- Have we included everyone in the procedure?
- Have we thought of everything for the procedure?

Perhaps this is why our Lord gave us communion. It is a noticeable fact that communion is done in a calm manner, reflecting the fact that we know the answers to those questions. The "right" procedure is well known, given to us in the Scriptures. The procedure includes all who believe — for we are to invite all who believe to join us in communion. And communion is so simple at its very roots that it is difficult not to think of everything involved. Beyond bread and wine, what else do we need?

Had our Lord given us detailed instructions for a complicated ceremony, we would do our best to follow those instructions. In his infinite wisdom he chose not to do that. Rather, he gave us a ceremony which is so simple that the human mind is drawn to the meaning behind it. We see in this ceremony the body and blood of Jesus Christ, given for our atonement on the Cross. The ceremony itself does not get in the way of our understanding of its meaning. Sometimes the simple is also the profound. As you partake this morning, let your mind's eye I go back to Calvary and see what your Lord has done for you. Then, in obedience to his command, eat and drink.

*October 16*

## **According to His Glory**

### **Ephesians 3:16**

Perhaps you have never thought of this, but there is a certain style to giving. It largely depends upon the reason for which the giving is done. For instance:

- There is a type of giving which is based upon someone's need. The giving tends to be quite simple; no one wraps a gift for a guy with a cardboard sign by the freeway exit.
- On the contrary, there are those gifts we give for special occasions — weddings, anniversaries, birthdays and Christmas. These we present rather ornately in wrapping paper, and hope to receive a form of appreciation from the recipient.
- There is also giving by social status. If you know someone who is rich, you expect them to give more just because they are rich.

That last item deserves a little more attention. If you expect a rich man to give generously, simply because he is a rich man, then how much more would you expect God to give? His style of giving would indeed be that of one who is both holy and enormously wealthy.

The Scripture assures us here that he will give "according to his glory." As one author put it, "glory is to God as style is to an artist." If he is giving to meet someone's needs, the needs will be met with the gift which is pressed down and running over. He will give inappropriateness to the occasion; specifically, when it comes to rendering salvation to those who are sinners who call on his name, we find that he has been more than extravagant. If it's his social status, then consider how completely and abundantly he gave you salvation.

Style is important. Do you not see that God gave his only Son for us on the Cross, and did so in a simple manner that would reach and touch the hearts of the lowest orders of society. His sacrifice is completely understandable by even the least of us. It is also a style that flies above what the richest and most capable of us could do. It is one thing to give money; it is another thing to give your only begotten son. Thus, when he instituted the memorial feast for this, he needed something that would have the simplicity to touch the lowest and the elegance to touch the highest. Thus we received bread and wine, after giving thanks.

Ponder it, if you will. This day you have been given a reminder of the greatest gift that any human being can have: salvation. The reminder tells you of the price he paid for this gift. Even in its style you can see the simplicity and compassion of God. So before you partake today, set your mind in order. Confess your sins to God and then partake of the gift which he gives you. Do not take it lightly; do not take it quickly, but rather in the full reverence it deserves.

October 23

## Zounds!

### 1 Peter 2:24

The expression “zounds” has pretty much left the English language, except for Bugs Bunny cartoons. To pronounce it, it must rhyme with “wounds” — for it is a contraction of the expression “God’s wounds.” It was used as an expression, not exactly in polite company, to express surprise or astonishment. Our ancestors felt that the existence of the wounds of Christ was an astonishing thing. That our Lord would be wounded on our behalf seem to them to be beyond any possible expectation.

Let us consider, then, the wounds of Christ. I once heard a preacher tell me that there is nothing man made in heaven. Leaving aside the possibility that the Ark of the Covenant is there, which is what Revelation tells us, there are five other things that are man made in heaven. They are the wounds of Christ, in his side, in his hands and in his feet. These are the most visible wounds, to which we must add the general suffering of dying on a cross. It is a long, slow, painful death. But the human being is not just a physical body; the cross is not just physical injury. It also includes the humiliation of being executed as the worst of criminals. He was wounded indeed for our transgressions.

It’s important to remember that the suffering of Christ is always mentioned as being “in the body.” Christ was not some phantasm who just came along to take a part in the play that God was putting on. No, His suffering was very real, very bodily indeed. He had a body just like ours, and he suffered just like we do. Note that this suffering is voluntary; he did it for a purpose — that you and I might be forgiven of our sins and receive the grace of God.

Christ did the suffering that we might receive the results. He carried our sins in his body; therefore we are dead to sin as children of God, but alive to Christ (Romans 6:11). It is not just our acquittal on Judgment Day that we are talking about, but also the effect of not being a slave to sin. We can live as we were designed to live — in communion with God. When we partake of communion, we are to remember that it represents the body and blood of Jesus. The blood represents the life; the body the suffering. By this suffering, now, Christ is our High Priest, intervening for us with the Father. He paid the price; we got the benefit.

Therefore, as you partake this morning:

- *Remember* your sin and your salvation.
- *Realize* your sins, not in the abstract but specifically.
- *Repent*.

Then, with clear conscience and a proper respect for what Christ has done for you, partake.

October 23

## If a Man Dies

### Job 14:14

"If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my struggle I will wait Until my change comes.  
(Job 14:14)

It is the question questions: will he live again? The question is a universal one, for all of us are appointed a time to die. You've seen it at funerals many times, I suspect. Those who are closest to the deceased are asking themselves, "Will I see her again?" We long for the fellowship, love and companionship that we once had, and wish to have again. Those less connected are asking the question, "what happens when I die? What happens to the 'me' — the soul — at death?" Countless funerals have come and gone, and the questions remain unanswered by the casket being lowered into the ground.

It is extremely fortunate for us that we have, in Christianity, the one example which might answer this question. Several people have been raised from the dead; Lazarus, for instance, is one. It seems, however, that these few people did not take good notes. But our Lord Jesus also rose from the dead — and he was the one who called the shot before it happened. He is the one who knows. When he rose from the dead it is obvious that he had a body. In some sense that body was different than the one we have now, for he seemed to have little regard for walls and locks. On the other hand, it was a physical body, as Doubting Thomas found out by putting his hands in the side and the nail holes. Jesus is the one person who has "been there, done that."

So, what does the only living expert on the subject have to say? He tells us quite explicitly that the faithful Christian will rise from the dead, in the new body rather than the old one. When will this happen? He tells us this will happen when he returns. He explicitly tells us that he will bring with him those who have slept in Christ. All the saints of the ages will join him in that return.

Until that time, he has commanded us to take Communion. We are to do so "until he comes again." This is to be a reminder to us.

- It is to be a reminder of *the price he paid*.
- It is to be a reminder of *the salvation we have gained*.
- It is to be a reminder of the fact that *He is returning soon*.

As you partake today, then, remember the price he paid for your salvation and the promise he has given: you will rise with him in glory. As Job put it:

"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.  
"Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold,  
And whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!  
(Job 19:25-27)

*November 6*

## **Judas**

One of the most puzzling people recorded in the New Testament is Judas Iscariot. His actions have long provoked the debate about predestination, for they were prophesied many centuries before. For those who do not believe in predestination it is certain at least the God foresaw that there would be a Judas and that he would betray his Lord and Savior. By the time of the Last Supper, Judas had already sold out the man to the priests for 30 pieces of silver — something also prophesied many years before. But more to our point, Jesus knew this at the Last Supper. He did not drive the man from his company. Indeed his last gesture to the man was to offer him bread soaked in the juices of the meat, a sign of friendship and communion.

There is some question as to whether or not Judas actually participated in the first communion here. The question is apparently of importance to theologians, and they differ. St. Augustine says, along with Thomas Aquinas, that he did participate. John Chrysostom says he did not. The matter has been one which has been disputed since the earliest days of the church, and I do not propose to settle it here. But let us suppose, for the moment, that he did partake. If he did, he certainly took it in that “unworthy manner” that St. Paul warns us about. It did him no good at all, for he did not repent. More important, Judas was definitely invited. Why would Jesus do this when he knew the man was going to betray him; when he knew the man had already sold him out? I submit there are at least three reasons:

- One reason might be for the sake of justice. It is one thing for the Christ to know that you are guilty and another to prove it to your fellow disciples. No such proceeding had taken place, nor was there time to hold such a thing. Think of the example that would be set for the church if people could be thrown out of the congregation by the whim of the minister who thought for sure the person was guilty. It is contrary to good church discipline.
- Another reason might be that he was giving Judas a chance to repent. The meal was a Passover meal, and the theme of God passing over your sins would be strong. Perhaps Jesus was giving him this last opportunity.
- The most important reason might be this: Jesus wished to preserve the unity of his disciples. On the night before he is crucified he did not wish to be involved in something which would divide his disciples; rather he wants to unify them. Justice will be served in due time; communion needed to be served that very night.

There are some thoughts for us in this too. The most immediate one is to point out what happened to Judas and point to each of us and say “do not take this an unworthy manner.” It is a warning to us, one at all, of how serious God is about this particular supper. More than that, have you ever considered that communion is an offer of a chance to repent? You might be looking at your neighbor and saying, “how does that man have the gall to come in and take communion with real Christians?” Judge not, my friend. Maybe that unworthy hypocrite is today repenting at the invitation of Christ. More than that, we find here the unity of the disciples to be of paramount importance. Some of us are far too quick to rush to judgment about others; for the sake of the unity of the church, it is better that you concern yourself with your own repentance, leaving the others to Christ.

November 13

## Wedding

It very much depends upon the denomination, of course. But it has become common to include a communion ceremony between the bride and the groom at a Christian wedding. Normally, only the bride and groom receive this communion. But it is so special that we even have wedding furniture designed specifically for the purpose of having the wedding couple kneel and take their first communion together as husband and wife.

Weddings are full of symbolism. It is fruitful to examine, therefore, what communion means in the context of a Christian wedding.

A truly Christian wedding centers on Jesus Christ. We can see within his attributes why communion fit so appropriately within the wedding.

- *Lordship.* It is important to see that authority in the marriage is hierarchical. We have regrettably strayed from the tradition where a bride promises to “love, honor and obey”, but this is the intention God had from the beginning. Taking communion recognizes the fact that the husband’s authority over his wife comes from Christ — and is therefore not absolute but subject to the commands of his Lord. It is for this reason that Peter tells the bride not to give way to fear (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:5-6). If the husband exercises his authority in accordance with the commands of Christ, her obedience is no great burden.
- *Love.* The greatest example of love ever given was Christ’s sacrifice on the cross — which is what we remember at communion. This sets the example of love, particularly for the husband who is told to love his wife as Christ loved the church. As a particularly pragmatic point, one of the essential ingredients in love is forgiveness. It will not take long before the married couple need to practice this.
- *Life Eternal.* We celebrate communion until the Lord returns. It should remind us that those with whom we celebrate our fellow heirs of the grace of life (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:7). It is grand to know that your husband or wife is destined to live forever. This might even increase the respect that one has for the other.

There are some lessons for the rest of us in this also. We too must consider the Lordship of Christ. Many of us are happy to acknowledge Christ as our Savior, but gently skip over the part about “Lord.” Often enough this comes from our lack of courage. But Christ is your Lord, you should fear God — and dread naught.

Christ exhibited love — none greater — on the cross. This is our example; do we act like it? Similarly, we might ask if we live in the power of the resurrection, treating our brothers and sisters as those who are going to live forever, not just a temporary nuisance. There is a reason we are taught to examine ourselves at communion. Reflect upon these things; change what must be changed and draw closer to Christ.

November 20

## Joseph

### Matthew 1:19

Joseph, the husband of Mary, faced one of life's more unusual decisions when his wife-to-be informed him that she was pregnant. Joseph, no fool, immediately had a choice to make:

- He could follow the strictest of the Old Testament laws and seek to have Mary stoned to death. This might've brought on some complications with the Romans, but it was in view.
- He also had the choice of divorcing her. In those days that just required a little legal work, much less so than now.

Mary no doubt explained to him why she was pregnant. This may have raised some doubt in Joseph's mind, but given Mary's youth (she was probably about 13) and the uniqueness of her story it's not at all unreasonable the Joseph would conclude that something was amiss. So he had a choice to make. The Scripture tells us that he did the righteous thing; he was going to divorce her. Interestingly enough, the "righteous thing" was the choice that did not follow the strictest of Old Testament law. Why is this righteous?

The truth is that it is harder to follow Jesus Christ than it is to follow a set of rules. The Old Testament law is pretty clear: stoning. But I would point out to you that following this rule does have a tendency to make you feel very self-righteous. That law is a witch hunter's dream. There's a warning for us in here; if following the rules makes you feel self-righteous, you might just want to think twice. The simple truth is this: man's justice is legalistic. Think about it; our legal system is, well, legalistic. Our justice system runs by rules. God's system runs by his wisdom. Joseph chose wisdom.

Communion is a portrayal of that. The Scripture teaches us clearly that the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross was part of God's plan from the beginning. This is clearly indicating to us that dealing with sin by reconciliation is the wisdom of God from the beginning. Note, please, the God could at any time have decided to replace us with some other creature in the hopes of getting better behavior. He was not interested so much in better behavior as he was in reconciling us to himself. Legalists want better behavior; those who love want reconciliation.

The war is not over when you have defeated your enemy in battle. The war is over when you have made your enemy into your friend. God has done that. He has reconciled us to himself. Once we were far from him, now we are his children. This is a great and glorious thing; we rightly describe the memorial of this as something we "celebrate."

So as you partake of communion this morning reflect in your heart that God in his wisdom has paid for your reconciliation. His body, his blood on the Cross have turned you from God's enemy into God's child. That is something to celebrate.

*November 27*

## **Life Changing Experience**

There is a certain benefit to visiting other churches, particularly when you are on vacation and can't get to your home church anyway. Look at it this way:

- You get to see the good stuff that other people have thought of. It might be simply mechanical things, or good way to arrange the worship service and of course you get to hear a different voice speaking to you about Christ.
- You also get to see those things which are not perhaps quite as good. It's still true: nothing is ever a total loss, it can always be used as a bad example. It's worth asking about these things, because you might find they have a good reason for doing it the way they do.

One such church — we'll call it the "Life Changing Experience Church" — was very proud of the fact that during communion they played hard rock Christian choruses as loudly as possible. Whatever it was we were supposed to think of in communion was then unthinkable.

Now, there is a traditional argument about music during communion. Those who prefer to have music during communion would argue with you this way:

- Music may guide your thoughts. You may be listening only to the melody of an old and familiar hymn, but your mind knows the words. If it's the right hymn, it produces the right thoughts.
- Chosen wisely, music promotes reverence — the attitude of awe towards the awesome God.
- It's usually serious music, which promotes serious thought.

Those who propose that no music should be played will bring to your mind the thought that silence focuses the mind inward; the hymn could in fact be a distraction. We cannot settle this issue within the simple communion meditation message. But it is fair to ask whether or not primal scream rock 'n' roll is what we want to do.

The matter is relatively straightforward. We can ask ourselves what does the Scripture require of us in terms of our attitude towards communion.

- We are to take it "in a worthy manner." This is serious business; we are to take it seriously.
- In so doing, we are to examine ourselves. Look into our own lives and ask what Christ would have us change.
- And in our contemplations we must always remember that communion promotes the unity of the body of Christ. We must test our thoughts with this.

Leave the music to the musicians; let those who worship focus on Jesus Christ.

*December 4*

## **Mirror of the Soul**

### **Philippians 4:8**

Most of us remember with some fondness our childhood days when we had someone heroic to admire. Your author is of the generation which remembers Davy Crockett and the Lone Ranger, both of whom paid particular attention to the correct formation of character in those they met. It's normal for children to have people to look up to and admire. But did you know that adults do the same thing? To ask yourself who it is that you admire is to open a mirror to your soul. It's true for children, it's true for adults: whoever it is that you admire, that's the person you're trying to be. That is what I want you to examine this morning. Crack that mirror open and ask yourself, "why do I admire him or her?" The answer to that question will give you a good deal of insight concerning you, not the person you admire.

In this passage Paul outlines the contemplation of your mind examining someone or something. He gives us a list of tests we can apply to the people we admire — and ourselves.

- Truth—the sense of fair dealing and honesty.
- Honor—is the person one who deals uprightly with other people? Not a hypocrite, but one who walks the talk?
- Righteousness—doing the right thing, doing it first, not last, and doing it no matter the cost?
- Purity—is this someone clearly committed to faithfulness? The guy with the dirty joke, or the guy whose wife knows he is faithful to her?
- Loveliness—the word originally meant "friendly toward." Someone who never met a man he didn't like?
- Good reputation—has he practiced being a Christian so well that everyone knows it?

A consistent part of communion is self-examination. Look at the person you admire and look at what you've done to become like that person. Then look at the characteristics given above and examine their character in your life. You may be surprised at some of the ugliness you see in that mirror.

It is not sufficient just to examine yourself. If you find something deficient, you need a plan to correct it. Confess those sins, repent of them, and just possibly find your self a new hero to admire.

*December 11*

## **Do You Believe This**

### **John 11:25-27**

In this startling passage, Jesus makes two extremely significant claims.

- He claims to be “the resurrection.” He is the source of the dead rising from the grave. Considering that his crucifixion is still some time ahead, and he has yet to raise Lazarus from the grave, it seems extreme. But note that it did not seem extreme to those who followed him.
- He claims to be “the life.” The word in the Greek for life is the one from which we get our word “zoo.” He is the source of biological life. He is therefore in control of the one thing no other human can control — life and death.

Then he tells his listener that if she believes this, she will have eternal life. She replies that she knows that he is the Christ.

What’s interesting about this is the person to whom Christ revealed this first. This is Martha, of “Mary and Martha” fame. You remember the incident; Martha came out to complain to Jesus that her sister wasn’t carrying her share of the housework. Jesus sent her back to the kitchen, telling her that Mary was doing something better. So we see that Martha is not someone particularly blessed with “religious thought.”

Is she a great philosopher? No. Is she a great theologian? No. Is she a great evangelist? No. Is she a great teacher? No. Are all these things the wrong questions? Yes. Christ chose to reveal this explicitly to someone whom the world would view as just another housewife. It’s his way of saying it’s for everyone. All he asks of her is that she believe. It’s not about Martha’s ability, it’s about what she believes.

Communion is somewhat of a reminder of this to us. As Martha was not one of the “great people,” but rather ordinary, communion reveals Christ to the ordinary human being as well as the great ones. It is a picture for us. The bread represents his body; the cup, his blood. In these we see his sacrifice on the cross. From the cross he went to his death and then to the burial. As he laid down his life voluntarily for us, he picked it up again and walked out of the grave. He is the resurrection.

If you believe this, then communion was given for you. You should partake in a solemn and worthy manner, knowing that what you are touching is beyond your comprehension. But know also that Christ gave this to you. No matter how humble or great you are, he prepared this meal for those who believe. We celebrate not your greatness or your humility, but His greatness displayed in humility.

*December 18*

## **Bury the Hatchet — Handle up**

### **Isaiah 43:25**

"I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, And I will not remember your sins.  
(Isaiah 43:25)

Most of us like to think of ourselves as forgiving human beings. We are perfectly willing to forgive — but not forget. The transgressions in question may be in the files, but there's always a little tab sticking up to tell you where they are. That's how human beings forgive; they file away the offense, but they know where to find it.

More than that, we tend to base our forgiveness of someone else on such things as the quality of their confession. If someone is eloquent and pleading with you for forgiveness, you're more likely to do so. If they can show some form of repentance and trying to make things right, that inclines us to forgive even more. Conversely, if they don't, we are rather reluctant to forgive. We believe there are a set of conditions that need to be met before we forgive someone.

If that weren't sufficient, we also tend to attach an age to forgiveness. Things that are very recent we tend to look at as being something we will forgive in the future, after the passage of time has dulled the pain. Similarly, we tend to overlook our own sins of the past because so much time has passed by. Man's forgiveness carries man's weaknesses.

As Isaiah tells us here, God's forgiveness is quite different. I would point out to you the motive that God tells us for his forgiveness: "for My own sake." God forgives us because it's part of his nature to forgive. Philosophically, it is one of his attributes. The reasoning is fairly simple. God's character cannot change; He is eternal. He is eternally righteous, and cannot abide the presence of sin. So therefore, for his own sake, he blots out our sins. Thus he removes them from his presence. He does so completely and permanently. Note that he tells us that he "will not remember your sins." This is not just an instantaneous forgiveness, it is the promise that the forgiveness will never be withdrawn. Your sins are gone when God forgives.

This is not handwaving or magic; there was a price to be paid for this forgiveness. Christ paid it on the Cross. We know this; but like most human beings we much more need being reminded than instructed. Communion is that reminder of the price of God's perfect forgiveness. The body of Christ, the blood of Christ, were given voluntarily so that you might be saved. This alone should have communion impel us to be thinking about our own forgiveness. It's a good occasion to remember that Christ told you that you are forgiven as you forgive. So I ask you: is there someone today that you have not forgiven? Consider what your Lord God has done for you — then go, and do likewise.

*December 25*

## **Las Posadas**

Many Americans are unfamiliar with a Mexican tradition at Christmas called Las Posadas . It is a charming ceremony performed for nine nights just before Christmas. A procession is formed, headed by two people playing Mary and Joseph. They go from house to house asking for shelter (“posadas”). Like the original Mary and Joseph they are turned away until the procession comes to an end point where they are given shelter.

This was originally an outdoor play designed to teach the people of Mexico — recently conquered by the Spanish — about the Nativity of Christ. Most of the residents were not literate, and therefore an outdoor play was something that they could understand easily. Over the years it has grown into a celebration. You might well ask why there are nine nights; the answer is simply that pregnancy takes nine months. The nine nights recognize Mary’s pregnancy.

Of course, teaching like this does something more than just tell the story. It also gets across some points about doctrine as well:

- The fact that Mary is pregnant implies that Jesus, the Christ, is fully human. Real human beings come from pregnant women. Had Jesus stepped out of a flying saucer, doctrine would be quite different.
- The fact that the couple are seeking shelter tells the story that Jesus was born as a poor boy. Most of the rest of us were born that way too, and therefore we see in him someone who suffers like we do.
- Perhaps the brightest lesson of doctrine is this: the joy of the Nativity. This little drama announces to us that the Savior is born. Sometimes we forget that the word “gospel” means “Good News.”

Such a procession of Mary and Joseph also brings us some light on communion:

- The joy of his birth reminds us of the purpose of his life — to die for our sins on the Cross. He did not come just to tell us some funny stories, but to be the Lamb of God.
- It also reminds us of Christ’s words concerning the “least of these.” We are to practice hospitality. Communion is open to all who believe; an example of God’s hospitality.
- Like Las Posadas, communion is a visual representation, in this instance the death of Christ. His body, the bread, and his blood, the cup pictured for us.

A procession like Las Posadas sticks in the mind of the children, helping them to remember. Communion sticks in the mind of the adults for the same purpose.