

"THE ETERNAL FOOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 3, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

Annie Dillard was in the 9th grade and like most young people her age she was suspicious of the values and the traditions of her parents. Her parents had been taking her to church for as long as she could remember. Annie wasn't too sure she really wanted to be in church, but she went to church nonetheless because it was important to her parents. On a typical Sunday morning she could be seen sitting in her usual place - the first row of the balcony in a large stone carved church in Pittsburgh. She enjoyed the balcony because she could watch the people down below.

Annie Dillard was at that wonderful age where she was quite sure of herself. She thought she knew better than anyone. On that Sunday she realized it was Communion Sunday. Annie always did her best to avoid going to church on Communion Sunday. To be honest, the whole thing seemed absurd to her. Communion was something people did that had no real meaning. She even wondered what Jesus would have thought of the whole charade. She would watch as the silver trays were passed out, with the small cubes of bread and the cups filled with Welch's grape juice. Then one Sunday as she was looking around a strange feeling came over her.

DEVELOPMENT

She saw her friends praying...even the boys she had seen at the 9th grade dance the evening before. Even they were praying. It seemed almost unbelievable that they could take communion so seriously. Then she watched as the adults prayed. Every head was bowed in the sanctuary; no one was moving. And as she watched, she was alerted to a new feeling...to something she had never experienced before. "I didn't know what to make of this" she thought to herself.

There in that church that morning she experienced the broken body and shed blood of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The people that she doubted were coming together "as sinners" in need of the bread and juice. That morning Annie Dillard realized in a new way why we celebrate communion. It is not because we deserve it. It's not because we have been "so good". But rather we come to the Lord's Table in need of something we cannot do for ourselves. We are offering ourselves "up" to be a part of the body of Christ - so that we can go out into the world that seems God-forsaken. Annie Dillard slowly realized this is not a "God-forsaken" world because God is present through His people.

REFLECTION

We live in an age when the sacred no longer seems important to people. For some Holy Communion has lost its meaning and importance. There are some like young Annie Dillard who think the whole thing is absurd. Others do their best to avoid Communion altogether. And so this morning as we prepare to receive the Sacrament, let's take a few minutes to reflect on some words of Jesus from John's Gospel. He said,

"I am the living bread. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever..."

EXPERIENCE A ONENESS

For Christians living back there in the first century, sharing in the Lord's Supper was very important. They could experience oneness as they came together to share the holy meal. After the Christians worked hard all day they met in each other's home and shared a

meal. After the meal there would be a message following by a singing of a hymn. Then, they would remember the words of Jesus, "Take...eat...this is my body given for you...take and drink".

In a world that was often unkind to the Christians they found strength from their meal and from their fellowship together. The next day they were then ready to go back into the world. For the early Christians fellowship around a table was a daily occurrence.

Consider for a moment what takes place when people gather to share a meal. Something nearly indescribable takes place when people are able to sit down to eat and talk together.

Once there was a family of five that seemed to disagree on just about every subject. If one said the cup was half empty, the other would say it was half full. At times their disagreements blew up into heated arguments and often feelings were hurt. Outsiders wondered how this family could stay together. Yet there was more to this family than that. Something almost magical took place when it came time to sit down for the evening meal. The arguments and the disagreements were quickly forgotten when that family sat down around a table for supper. They could somehow put aside their disagreements long enough to enjoy each other's company. During the meal different members of the family would share the experiences they had during the day. There was a sense of "oneness" and of unity as that family ate together.

In something of the same way we come together as the Church to share in Holy Communion. We are like family, aren't we? As the hymn suggests, we "share each other's joys and burdens". When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we come together as one body. As the body of Christ we may have different opinions about our beliefs, or about how church business or other issues should be handled, but we are able to put aside those differences when we come to the Lord's Table.

Our differences are forgotten as we kneel together to receive the bread and take the cup that God has given us. There is that sense of unity and of oneness in these moments. When we share communion with each other we are not only acknowledging our need for spiritual food but also our need for each other. We're in this together, "come hell or high water" as the popular expression goes. It's tough to be a Christian by yourself. Some try, but I feel we need each other. And communion brings us together as a family and gives us a sense of unity. We celebrate,

"One with Christ, one with each other,
and one in service to all the world"

EQUIPS US FOR THE WORLD

Then, too, Communion equips each one of us to face the challenges of a new day. We have experienced something special as the body of Christ and now we are ready to meet the world...to go "eyeball to eyeball" with whatever's out there. We are ready to face the world head on. Like Annie Dillard discovered that Sunday morning in her stone carved church in Pittsburgh, the world is no longer "God-forsaken" - because we are in the world and God is in us!

The people who crossed the Lake to be with Jesus were very confused. As we have seen, they did not understand what Jesus was talking about. They were

upset over what He said. Verse 52 says that the people started an "angry argument" among themselves. They apparently were stuck on the literal level of what Jesus was saying. "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" they asked. (John 6: 52). Eating someone's flesh sounded a bit on the gross side.

Jesus, however, was speaking on a different level. He knew what was in store for Him. He saw it coming; He knew He would be put to death and would rise again. He tried to tell the disciples as well as the people this, yet they could not understand what He was talking about. Jesus told them that the only way they could experience this new life was to believe in Him - the One that God had sent. Remember that earlier the people wanted something they could see and touch...and then they would believe. They had asked Jesus for a sign or a miracle to prove to them beyond a shadow of doubt that He was who He said He was.

But Jesus did better than that for them. He offered the people something they could experience with their five senses. What Jesus offered them they could see, and touch, and taste, and smell and hear. This meal would be different from all other meals. This meal would change their lives. Jesus said to them,

"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has Eternal Life, and I will raise Him to life on the last day".

We, too, have that promise and that assurance.

The bread and the cup that Jesus offers us is the eternal food for which there really is no substitute. "For My flesh is the real food. My blood is the real drink". There is only one way to participate in the life that Jesus is offering and that way is through Jesus alone. And this was what Jesus wanted the people to understand. The person who accepts these truths will have eternal life. Jesus is the "bread" of life, the bread sent down by God from heaven.

WHEN WE TAKE COMMUNION / A TRANSFORMATION

When we come to share the bread and the cup we are acknowledging that.....yes, we are sinners, that we have fallen short, that we are in need of something we cannot provide for ourselves. We come...hoping and seeking to be more like Jesus. We come hoping that through the bread and cup we will be transformed as well as forgiven.

When we eat the bread and drink the cup, I would like to believe that we are transformed. When we allow Christ into our lives we become different people. We become more Christ-like in our attitude and behavior.

According to German folklore there once was a wicked man who wore the mask of a saint to woo and to win the saintly girl he loved. Years later when a cast-off friend discovered the deception, she challenged him to take off the mask in front of his beloved and to show his face for the sorry thing he was. He did what he was told only to discover that underneath the saint's mask, his face had become the face of a saint.

Friend, this food that Jesus offers us in these moments this hour is the real food, the eternal food, the food that will change us and our world.

And Jesus said,

"The man who eats this bread will live forever".

Amen and Amen!

PRAYER

Lord, in the quiet of this hour before You, we would share in the joyful feast of the people of God. We come from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South...and gather as one family around Your Table. We come - not because we must but because we may. We come - not to show that You are righteous, but to ask for Your help.

We pause in these quiet moments to offer to You, O God, of peace, our thanks for the peace that again has come into our world in recent days.

- for the end to the Persian War conflict, we thank you.
- and we pray for the swift return of our valiant soldiers to their homeland and to their loved ones.

And without forgetting the death and the destruction of these recent weeks and the loss of life on the other side, we give You our thanks for the victory achieved by the coalition forces over aggressive evil.

But now the time for healing has arrived and may this great nation reach out to those whose lives have been broken by war. Release the rivers of compassion and caring that we may help to bind up the wounds of those whose homes have been destroyed and lives changed by this War.

Touch our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care and encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. We pray for Karen Oldham, Ada Kinney, for Joe Weddington, father of Lynn Tucker and for the niece of Kathy Buckley. We remember Lili Bates in our prayers...whose father has passed.

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I. HOLY COMMUNION

- A. It has long been the custom...to celebrate...and we like to announce for the benefit...the Table of our Lord is open...
- B. His Table is open to all....and we invite all of you to receive the Sacrament....trusting that this may be an occasion of...
- C. Procedure. Elements will be served to you in the pews. Upon receiving them, please hold....

II. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We take this moment to greet the visitors...delighted...invite you to join us downstairs for coffee....be free in the sharing... fill out a card or sign a guest book. Come, worship with us... work with us, too...in the programs of outreach.
- B. Roots of this church are deep in the soil...doing "Lord's work" here since 1837....next Sunday we celebrate our 154th birthday! Minister here in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...
- C. Interested in learning more about the church, come to the chancel steps following the organ postlude...one or two members will be there to greet you and tell you more about the church and the good things....members: wear name tags at the coffee hour.

III. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns listed for you in the bulletin. Review them on your own....monthly issue of our parish news sheet will be "out" next Sunday.
- B. Adult Fellowship Retreat is "in the works" for two weeks from today. Be signing up for it downstairs. Cost: Coordinator for it is....
- C. March is our Anniversary month. Next Sunday we celebrate another birthday and not only do we look forward, but we pause to reflect a bit on our past....blessed...opportunities and challenges ahead. Robert Lewis, President of our Board of Trustees, would like to share some of the things that our Trustees have been thinking about and planning....present him to you at this time.

IV. OFFERING:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive".
In this spirit....let us...



LET'S
ALL
BE THERE...

SUNDAY, MARCH 10

THE

ANNUAL CHURCH MEETING
PARK AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

1 P. M.

Russell Room

ALL ARE INVITED...

IT'S A 90 MINUTE MEETING AND WE'LL REVIEW THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE
PAST YEAR AND

THINK TOGETHER AROUND THE YEARS AHEAD....

- Where should we be in the year 2000?
- What can we do to help strengthen our Church?
- What are some practical goals that we as a congregation can assume?
- What needs are not being met?

Come and hear the "STATE OF THE UNION" message to be given by the Chairperson of the Administrative Council and leader of the Tuesday evening, "Hounds of Heaven" study group - GEORGE W. LEOPOLD.

It's also our Birthday Sunday and we want all of our people to come and celebrate our 15th Anniversary... to have lunch together and enjoy a slice of birthday cake.

NO
EXCUSES OFFERED!
ON TIME,
TOD!

