

## "THE MEANING OF HOLY COMMUNION"

### INTRODUCTION

If I were to ask you "What does Holy Communion mean to you" how would you answer? What would you say? Would you say what one of the members of our church said to me some time ago when this question came up - "It means that the Church service is fifteen minutes longer and that the congregation is apt to be smaller". At least the person was honest in his feelings. But I have the uneasy feeling that there are quite a few in this congregation who might answer in similar fashion. Think for a moment here this morning about this question: what does the Lord's Supper mean to you? Some there are who feel we have Communion too often in our church. Personally, I think it's good for us to come to the altar at least once a month and get down on our knees. At least, it doesn't hurt us.

On this World Wide Communion Sunday, this Sunday when the Sacrament is being observed in most churches of Christendom, it is well for us to consider again the meaning of Holy Communion.

### REMEMBRANCE

To begin with, the Communion Service is the Christian Gospel expressed in symbolic acts. Goethe, Germany's great poetic spirit, once wrote:

"The highest cannot be spoken. It can only be enacted."

In other words, there are truths too profound, too deep to put into words. To body forth their meaning we fall back, as untold generations have done, on the use of symbols - the handshake, whether in joy or in sorrow, conveys more than language ever can; the national flag, the sight of which can put fire into blood; the wedding ring, the silent, eloquent token that its wearer has entered into a relationship which nothing can sever. And so the church takes bread - breaks it - and remembers a body that was broken; takes wine and pours it out and remembers blood that was shed.

This it does at the bidding of Christ. For as you know, he instituted the Communion Service. And if from the beginning down to the present moment Christendom has held it sacred, it is because it was the last thing He asked of his friends. "This do", he said, "in remembrance of me". Perhaps he knew our nature. At best our memories are short. He knew that even our remembrance of Him would fade unless it was repeatedly refreshed, refreshed not alone by the spoken word but by an appeal to our sense - to sight, touch and taste. And at his request we take the bread and the wine - for us the holiest symbols in the world. We recall his great love for all men, a love and a compassion that knew no limits, that went all the way. As we kneel at his table faith is nourished, hope is kindled, strength is renewed. Communion first of all is a service of remembrance.

### THANKSGIVING

It is a service of thanksgiving as well as one of remembrance. For this reason some there are who speak of it as the Eucharist. Here we give grateful praise in hymn and prayer for all that Christ and his way of life has given to us - peace with God, forgiveness of sins, power to break free from sin. "All my life" said Seneca, "I have been seeking to climb

out of the pit of my besetting sins. And I can't do it: and I never will, unless a hand is let down to draw me up". The hand, thank God, has been let down. Power is available to live victoriously. No one need live a beaten life. Christ conquers besetting sin, reclaims us to character and power, remembers us when we forget Him, believes in us when we lose faith in ourselves, heartens and empowers us to try again and again.

### SERVICE OF COMMUNION

A service of remembrance. A service of thanksgiving. It is also a service of communion. Brother Lawrence said that the time of prayer did not with him differ from the time of business and that in the noise and clatter of the monastery kitchen, while several persons were at the same time calling for different things, he possessed God in as great tranquility as if he were on his knees at the blessed Sacrament. He found it possible by dint of arduous and sustained self-discipline to commune with God anywhere, any time.

After the famous British surgeon Lord Moynihan had performed an operation before a group of fellow surgeons, someone asked him how he could possibly do what he did with such a crowd around him. "Well" he said, "It is like this...there are just three people in the theater when I operate - the patient and I". "Three" said his friend. "But that is only two. Who is the other". And the surgeon replied "God".

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~~Some~~ have been able to offer the same testimony. In the home, on the street, at their work they have known the presence of God. With the majority of us those have been rare and fleeting experiences, standing out in memory like mountain peaks. It is when we receive the bread and the wine that God comes closest to us. It is when we receive the bread and the wine that God comes to us in Christ and makes himself real to our faith. What begins as a memorial becomes a presence.

Our fellowship is not only with God, but with one another. John Wesley use to say that there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. The Christian life is not an isolated life but a community life. Nowhere is the sense of community as strong or as deep as it is at the Lord's Table. For here we meet for a few moments on common ground. Here, for a few moments, all barriers of race and color and class and circumstance are abolished. There is nothing in history comparable to the unbroken observance, in ever-widening range of language and race, of the breaking of the bread and the taking of the cup in remembrance of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Think, if you will, of the millions this day who have gathered or will gather in obedience to Christ's last command - by land, by sea, in ancient cathedral and simple African hut, in churches Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Reformed. Here we are one. Those distinctions that separate us elsewhere are here forgotten. In the fact of Christ there is far more to unite us than there is to separate us.

### DEDICATION

There is another note that runs through this service. Remembrance - thanksgiving - communion - and dedication. We speak of the "Sacrament" of the Lord's Supper. The

word "Sacrament" comes from a Latin word meaning the "pledge" or the "vow" of loyalty and allegiance taken by a soldier to his leader. From the beginning as Christians have received these sacred elements, they have made vows - to amend and to improve their ways, to live after the example and the spirit of Jesus, to put God before mammon, service before self, love before hate, brotherhood before bigotry.

Let this time be for you then a time of dedication - a time of commitment - of resolve to make him with no "ifs" "ands" or "buts" - with no conditions or reservations - to make truly the Master and Lord of our lives.

PRAYER As we come to thy Table this hour, Our Father, may our eyes be opened to the deeper meaning of what is taking place.

Bind us more closely to each other and to Thee.

Where there are sorrowful hearts, bring comfort.  
Where there is lingering illness, bring healing.  
Where there is crippling fear, bring hope.  
Where there is disturbing doubt, bring faith.

Lift our minds and hearts to Thee O God - that we may go out from here renewed in body and soul, fed, nourished and made new.  
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From the earliest days, Christians at the Lord's Table have made an offering for others. Today we are receiving a special offering for those our brothers and sisters around the world who have suffered or who are in physical want. Special envelopes have been placed in the pews and we trust you will want to respond in generous fashion to the needs of those in want. This offering will be received in the next several minutes along with the regular Sunday offering.

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