

"WHEN WE RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION"

INTRODUCTION

I should like to talk to you this morning in a very personal and intimate way about receiving Holy Communion. Over the course of a lifetime, if we are reasonably faithful to the church, each of us will take the bread and cup more than five hundred times. An act so sacred and that we do so often should never be allowed to become routine.

A WORD OF TESTIMONY

Let me begin with a word of testimony. The older I grow the more I appreciate the significance of Holy Communion. As a teenage boy in my home church the Lord's Supper did not capture my imagination or possess my soul with commanding power. Simply put, Communion Sunday in the church where I grew up meant a longer service and the addition of unwelcome ritual.

But worse, as a young minister fresh out of seminary, conditioned by a low church background, I found myself at times unable to fully appreciate the monthly celebration of the Sacrament. I suppose it was tied in with the fact that the prophetic side of the ministry was more compelling to me than the priestly. I preferred preaching a sermon to presiding over a ritual. The Sacrament intruded on my preaching time, cramped my style a bit and forced me into a role that I endured rather than enjoyed.

However, at this point of my ministry I would say that my attitude is entirely different. Not that I value preaching less. Rather, I value the Sacrament more. I have grown to see that the prophetic and the priestly are not in competition with each other. They really complement each other. This morning I'd like to share with you a few of the observations about the Lord's Supper that have influenced this change of attitude.

BRINGS US BACK TO THE CENTRAL EVENT

For one thing, the Sacrament of Holy Communion keeps central in the church the event to which it owes its life; namely, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Brings us back to this central event.

We can easily lose sight of this event. Our various programs shoot off in a variety of directions and take on a wide variety of forms. Preachers - no matter how hard they try to preach the Gospel in its fullness - are prone to treat some themes more often than others and dwell on those subjects which are dearest to their hearts and best suited to their gifts. However widely our programs range and however far-ranging the themes treated from the pulpit, when we gather as the people of God around the Table of the Lord we enter upon a centering moment that helps us to bring to mind a life and a love to which we owe our life. All of our activities, all of our programs, all of our financial commitments are offered up in response to that which Christ has done for us. "This is my body which is broken for you. This do in remembrance of me".

DECLARES GOD'S SAVING LOVE

Moreover, and in the second place, this Sacrament provides for the enactment of that which cannot be easily put into words or explained; namely, the mystery of God's saving love.

I sometimes think that we Protestants suffer with a compulsion to explain everything. We are the word-oriented tradition of the Christian faith. We feel that if a man has a reasonably good mind and does a fair amount of studying and articulates in a fairly clear manner, reasonable people will be able to receive and understand anything and everything about the faith. We tend to think that a few more sermons, a few more lectures, a few more books and we will be able to

chase the mystery out of every facet of the faith - including the central mystery of God's saving love. We can become so analytical of God and so calculating of His ways, that all joy and every sense of deliverance and expectation soon fade away.

It is not without significance that the Scriptures do not try to explain the love of God, they simply declare it. Here and there we are provided with clues, but essentially it is true that the Scriptures do not attempt an elaborate explanation of how God's love can reach, can find, and can save. The Scriptures do not seek to explain so much as to proclaim. And what no teacher, no theologian, no preacher can adequately do, this Sacrament does in a powerful and winsome way. It allows the church to enact what it could never clearly articulate.

I find it a bit strange that young men in seminary who serve small parishes before ordination are allowed to preach, but not allowed to administer the Sacrament. Think about that for a while and perhaps you will conclude tentatively with me that it would be safer the other way around. For the Sacrament is self-proclaiming, whereas only God knows the damage that some beginning preachers have done to the word that they have sought to proclaim. I think of some of the sermons I preached back before I was ordained. Those of you who don't think much of my preaching now should have heard me then.

Seriously, to me there is an overcast of mystery about the love of God. It has always bothered me that centers of fundamentalism are usually brightly lighted. The symbolism here suggests a determination to rout all mystery and answer every question. My preference has always run to a nave or a sanctuary that is suggestive of some mystery - enough light, but not too much. The sun hid its face when Jesus died, prompting George Morrison to say:

"There was darkness over all the earth from the sixth until the ninth hour, so that no man could go home and say he saw it all".

In the bread and cup God's love is not spelled out. It is acted out!

GOD'S LOVE PERSONALIZED FOR EACH

Consider, finally, the fact that this Sacrament has an uncanny way of personalizing

God's love for each one of us.

In the ongoing course of a regular worship service, we really need not respond if we do not wish to. We can refuse to sing. We can allow our minds to wonder and wander during the prayers. We can resist the admission of the sermon into our minds and hearts. But come Communion Sunday and the elements are there in our hands. What is conveyed in the Sacrament comes not only to the church at large, but to each of us as members in particular of the body of Christ.

When you stop to think about it, both Sacraments in our tradition have this personalizing quality. When you were baptized, your name was called so that God's outgoing love might be particularized in you. "John Rogers, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit". ~~Like~~ ~~wise~~, a love that is broadly proclaimed is personally presented.

Howard Hageman in his book, Theology Today, writes:

"John Calvin once said that the Sacraments were like a hand-shake. You walk down the street and along the way someone

says 'Good morning! How are you?' But there is quite a crowd of people and you are not sure that he is speaking to you. But then the man crosses the street and shakes your hand, and you know that the greeting was meant for you. Just so in the pulpit the holy, redeeming love of God is proclaimed, but you are not certain that it is addressed to you. God's greeting does not really reach your heart. But then in Baptism your name is called or in the Eucharist you must take and eat, and there can be no doubt in your mind that this is, so to speak, God's handshake - confirming His love to you personally".

In the solemn moments in which the bread and cup are being distributed and received, we are very much on our own. Whatever our title may be - whatever our rank - our position - our function in society, there we are. No one is talking. The choir is not singing. There we sit with the emblems of his love in our hands.

OUR RESPONSE Each of us will respond in his or her own way, and there is no way that is right above all others. Let me share with you a few practical thoughts.

First, the form of the Sacrament is ~~utterly~~ unimportant to my way of thinking. I would go so far as to say that if you notice the ushers as they share and serve they have not functioned properly or you have not responded as you should. In other words, the precision of the ushers, the actions of the ministers, that kind of movement is insignificant compared to the movement of God's grace to the threshold of your heart. It's just you and God, there with the bread and the cup. Yes, there are hypocrites in the church, and some of them may be around you. But it's you and the bread and the cup.

It has been my practice during the serving of the bread to reflect on past failures and mistakes.....to ponder my shortcomings as a Christian, my inability to fully sustain those relationships that mean the most to me.

John Baillie one time was impressed by a clipping in a British paper in which a series of causes for the inferiority complex were listed:

"Being too small; being too large; being too rich; being too poor; being the son of a clergyman, a tradesman, or a nobleman; having a bodily deformity or weakness; having to wear spectacles; being deaf; having a dark sin or being of mixed race; having an awkward name; being out of work; and old age".

Baillie went on to comment graciously:

"But, in the first place, it is doubtful whether such a list does not omit a very important class of causes, namely those appertaining to that most inward deformity of all -- the deformity of a bad conscience. And in the second place, it is difficult to believe that a merely outward deformity or disability could of itself have such a sequel where such an inward deformity was not also present".

During the time when the cup is being served I try to think about the future. Our Roman Catholic friends have made far more than we out of the importance of a good intention. It is not simply that we do not achieve what we should for Jesus Christ. We never really intended to achieve. Perhaps as you hold the

cup and prepare to partake, you would find it helpful to frame those resolutions of intent that are proper to you in the present context of your life, and at this particular stage in your Christian development.

And certainly it is fitting to offer a brief silent prayer for someone else in those moments - for those around you, for loved ones both present and absent, for those with whom you work. For God has bound us together, for at least this hour, in the celebration of His supper. And as you pray, whether you be young or old, bear in mind the relationship we have to the church above. There is no liturgy from Communion that has come down through the years that has not borne some kind of thanks to God for those whose labors are over and whose rest is won. Our Communion is with each other - with them - with God.

CLOSING At times all of us get depressed or upset or shaken by the demands made upon us in these trying days here in this city. It is important, therefore, that we draw all the sustenance we can from the Table of our Lord.

Have you ever noticed that as you stand on Fifth Avenue at 51st Street, looking south, you will have to your right the bronze sculpture of Atlas standing with sturdy arms outstretched, bearing the world on his shoulders. On your left you will have the high altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral with its symbol of the man who was broken on a cross. I've been mulling that combination over in my mind for more than ten years. At first I thought we had to choose. Either we go the way of Atlas - the way of self-assertion, or we go the way of the man who gave his life for others. At this stage in my pilgrimage, I see these two as complementing each other.

There is a sense in which God has put the world on our back that we might rise to the fullness of responsible sons. We are to cleanse the air, purify the waterways, establish justice, rightly divide the riches of the earth, promote peace among all peoples. This is our job. But I find as I move to do this work, I am comforted and nourished by the knowledge that One is there who was broken for us, yet one whom even death could not hold. And on the night before he was crucified, he said to his disciples as they gathered around a table and shared in their last meal:

"This is my body which is broken for you.
This do in remembrance of me".

LET US PRAY Lead us, O Lord, ever more deeply into the mysteries of life and death as we see them revealed in the bread and wine of the Last Supper. May we see there plainly, clearly and simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us and all thy people everywhere.

Bind us more closely to each other and to him and lift up our hearts and minds to thee, that we may go out renewed in body and soul - fed, nourished and made new. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen