

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

■ "ON RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION"

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"ON RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION"

I don't want to deliver a sermon this morning or even a meditation. Rather I should like to talk to you 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 that we do so often should never be allowed to become routine.

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

But worse, as a young minister, conditioned by a low-church background, I found myself becoming somewhat resentful of the Sacrament. 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 preaching time, cramped my style a bit, hid my personality and forced me into a role that I endured rather than enjoyed.

Now, however, my attitude is entirely different. Not that I value preaching less. Rather, I value the Sacrament more. I see now 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 influenced this change of attitude.

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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 resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can easily lose sight of this event. Our 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 heart and best suited to their gifts. However widely our programs range - athletic contests, concerts, instruction in arts and crafts, dramatic presentations in the theatre; 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 recall the event to which we owe our life. All of our activities, all of our financial commitments, all of our programs 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." (I Cor. 11:24b)

Moreover, this Sacrament provides for the enactment of that which cannot be explained; namely, the mystery of God's saving love. Georgia Harkness tells about a retreat that she conducted for university students. Early on in the retreat a student asked what seemed to be a very innocent question: "How could the death of Jesus of Nazareth two thousand years ago take away our sin?" The young people at that conference went round and round on that question into the wee hours of the morning.

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 reasonably fair amount of studying and articulates in a fairly clear manner, reasonable people will be able to receive and understand anything about the faith. We are under the illusion 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.

Some of the most arid passages in any man's theology are those passages that attempt to explain how divine grace works. Soteriology has probably stopped more seminary

students than any other subject. Presently we become so analytical of God, and so calculating of His ways, that all joy and every sense of deliverance and expectation fade away.

It is not without significance that the Scriptures do not try to explain the love of God, they simply declare it. Oh, here and there, there are clues. Jesus talks about giving his life a "ransom" for many. A New Testament writer speaks about our having been "delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light." (Acts 26:18) Paul was fond of the legal context and spoke frequently about our being "justified" before God. But essentially it is true that the Scriptures do not attempt an elaborate explanation of how God's love can reach and find and save.

The Scriptures do not explain they proclaim. "Behold the Lamb of God that beareth away the sin of the world." (John 1:29b) Or again, "Christ died for our sin in accordance with the Scriptures." (I Cor. 15:3) 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.

In this connection it strikes me 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 beginning preachers have done to the word that they have sought to proclaim.

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 that is suggestive of 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 there 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!

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 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 think about it, both Sacraments 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." Likewise with Communion, a love that is broadly proclaimed is personally presented.

"John Calvin once said that the Sacraments were like a handshake. You walk down the street and over 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. ' 1

In the solemn moments in which the bread and cup are being distributed and received we are very much on our own. (Perhaps this is why I was uncomfortable with the Sacrament as a teenager. I had grown accustomed to being lead and inspired from the pulpit. It was unsettling to be

thrown upon my own resources.) Whatever our title might be - whatever our rank - whatever 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.

Each of us will respond in his own way, and there is no way that is right above all others. Let me share a few practical thoughts. First, the form of the Sacrament is utterly unimportant. I would go so far as to say that if you notice the deacons as they serve they have not functioned properly or you have not responded as you should. A man came up to me one time shortly after I had come to Riverside and said, "It is remarkable how a church that size can serve Communion so quickly." My question was, "How did he know?" Besides, what difference does it make?

The precision of the deacons, 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. 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 short comings 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 skin or being of mixed race; having an awkward name, e. g., John Bull; 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." 2

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.

Surely we should pray for those around us. I try to pray for each deacon as I hand out the trays. Perhaps you will be moved to pray for the one who gives you the bread and the cup, the one from whom you receive it, and the one to whom you give it. For God has bound us together, for at least this day, 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 for 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, and with them, and with the Lord.

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All of us are depressed by the demands made upon us in these trying days. It is important, therefore, that we draw all the sustenance we can from the table of the Lord. It was an out-of-town preacher, Theodore Ferris, who reminded me of something that I had never noticed about New York even though this is my native city. As one stands on Fifth Avenue at 51st Street looking south he will have to his right the bronze sculpture of Atlas standing with sturdy arms outstretched, bearing the world on his shoulders. On his left he 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, and rightly divide the riches of the earth. 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 death could not hold. "This is my body which is broken for you This do in remembrance of me."

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hageman, Howard, G., Theology Today, pp. 504-5
January, 1950
2. Baillie, John, Our Knowledge of God, p. 11
Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1939



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