

ALTARS AND TABLES

We are here primarily to take communion. It is the highest sacrament of the Christian Faith. Most of us have taken communion many times before. In all likelihood, we will take it many times after tonight. At times it has been mere ritual for us, but at other times it has lifted us to a new dimension, into a new truth: into the unity and power and presence of the Christ who loves us, who comes for us – who does so at any price, whatever it takes.

Remember me. That's about all it takes, from our side. Because of who Jesus is and what He does, remembrance is about all it takes to get us back into the possibility and the reality: Communion. Life together. Walking and sharing and doing things together. Communion: *with union* – in harmony with God and with each other.

Perhaps we start out this night being grateful that Jesus still wants communion with us. I am, at least. That always seems like a miracle to me. In my life, over the years, there have been times when other humans didn't seem to want very much to do with me. There was Dorothy Cooper, back in first grade. Sometimes she was friendly; sometimes she preferred Bill Gaines. I really didn't know why, one way *or* the other. But it was painful. If somebody likes you, will it last? If not, why not? What can we do to keep it coming? Don't we sometimes do everything we can think of and it still doesn't keep coming? Sometimes it is clear what went wrong, but lots of times it is unclear and makes no sense. So what's changed since first grade? Same song, second verse. That was only previews of coming attractions.

Life has bumps. It just does. The road is not smooth. Most people do not make it over very many bumps with us. Maybe one. Maybe even two or three. But the bumps keep coming. After a while, they either blame us or think other people will be smoother, or maybe they just need a change of scenery, or it looks like a better opportunity somewhere else. Anyway, they are gone again – physically, mentally, religiously, relationally. Once in a while we find a friend, somebody who for some unknown reason stays – sticks – or at least keeps coming back. That's the real miracle.

Rejection, betrayal, turning away, walking off or away or apart – that is not strange. That happens all the time, all over the world, on endless levels and in endless dimensions. Wanting to be with us – wanting communion, wanting to stay in it together – *that's* the miracle!

When we hit big bumps, I expect people to scatter. It's the way of the world. So guess how much I appreciate it when some do not scatter? For me, the folk who do not scatter easily are the people of Christ. That may not be true for everybody, but that has been my experience. People who love Jesus do not scatter easily. I guess it's because they know someone who does not scatter on them.

Nevertheless, each time I come to communion, I am grateful that He still wants communion with me. It is a mystery to me. Others, more or less my equals, do not always want very much to do with me, or they get tired of me or find better things to do. But this ONE, the Son of God – far greater, far busier, with friends in places so high I cannot even fathom it – *always* wants communion with me, is always eager to share time and life with me, is always eager for us to go on together. I simply do not understand it. But it makes life worth living. Never mind that it is always startling, always miraculous. It makes me grateful to be alive – grateful that I have more days to go on in His presence.

Beyond the gratitude, or maybe partly because of it, I am also reminded this night that wherever there is communion, there is, so to speak, an altar and a table. That is, there is always a sacrifice and a shared meal. Jesus cannot come here tonight – He cannot be here, cannot participate with us – without some kind of sacrifice. We experience that principle on even the most mundane levels. We cannot go to dinner together on any evening without arranging our schedules, setting the time aside, and turning away from all the other activities and interests and people with whom we might have spent this time.

The pattern is much more obvious in the context of the Last Supper. Jesus not only sets this time aside to be with His disciples, He has set aside His life and time in Heaven to come to earth in the first place. He is also staying true to His mission and purpose on earth by remaining with His disciples on this night. That is, it will lead – and He knows it – to arrest and final confrontation. This night is ablaze with “body broken” and “blood poured out.” By staying with the disciples – showing them (revealing) His kind of life and truth and love, and making it possible for them to find it and come into it also – this is what it is costing Him.

Jesus *could* turn away; He *could* close the options back down to what is normally expected and settled for in this world. But to reveal the new dimension – to keep the invitation open – this is the price: Body broken, blood poured out. Altar and table are mingled. The joy of the relationship and the anguish of the task are hopelessly intertwined. We will never get them separated again – not in this world.

This is the night it all begins to come clear – more than we can fathom, more than we can absorb, more than we can endure – with Judas leaving early, feet getting washed, all the last instructions about serving each other and about loving each other as He has loved us. This is the night we go to sleep on Him, and the night He prays to be released from it all. This is the night of His own final testing: “*Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.*” This is the night of the arrest, of the kiss, of the cock crowing. This is the night His best friends run away, and there is nobody left to ride the bumps with Him.

Oh well; it’s a hard life, and He brought it on Himself, right? Right?! We inhabit a world where such a thing is done, to such a ONE? Ever since He made it clear, we realize that it goes on all the time, all over the place: This world is not under the reign of God, and there is no hope for us. That, among other things, is something we had not known, or at least had not faced or could not make ourselves see. This world is not under the reign of God, and there is no hope for us ... unless some WAY is revealed whereby and wherein we can return: convert, repent, be transformed – be allowed back into and under the reign of God.

Beyond the gratitude, or perhaps because of it, I am reminded this night that wherever there is a communion meal, there is, so to speak, an altar and a table – a sacrifice and a shared meal. We cannot come here tonight either – oh, we can come, but we cannot really *be* here or participate – without some sacrifice of our own: our pride; our belief in our own wisdom, or right to control; our individualism, and the fear and loneliness that go with it. And that leads to many continuing sacrifices – plans we were working on, ways we were spending our time and life – and to new goals, and new things coming to life within us.

Oh yes, it leads to a Passover for us too. The first Passover was a deliverance from bondage under Pharaoh, in Egypt. This New Passover is release from slavery under sin (alienation, aloneness, separateness, not being part of God’s Kingdom). It is release from slavery under Satan, and all the guilt and shame and fear and sorrow that come from that.

There will be other kinds of sacrifice too, perhaps, and things that get dropped from our lives as a result of being in His presence. Many of them are things we no longer need or want, except maybe from habit. And this is part of the joy that begins to well-up within us, despite the solemn side of this night. There are so many things we no longer have to carry around with us! The load of self-loathing; the anxiety of never doing enough or being enough; the anger toward others who have made things harder; the excuses that are only a thin veneer to hide our terror; even the fear of death and loss, and the many layers of pain that go with it – all these get sacrificed too. Not completely, of course – not all at once. But they are on their way out. Indeed, “the burden is light,” and getting lighter. Do we also look into each other’s eyes, at this meal-time, and see the deep glint of irrepressible amazement – the awestruck dawning of an unending and unconquerable JOY? “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” No matter what else is happening, that refrain is never more than three days away.

This is the night the Great Communion Meal began. It draws us into the transition between the *earthly* ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the *continuing* ministry of the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ. Jesus gives His first followers many hints and even clear teachings that this IS what it’s all about. So this Communion Meal continually reminds us that He is with us – that His power is transforming us – even as the body is nourished, restored, healed, and changed by the food. He is with us – He walks with us still. Nothing we or our world can do will change His offer, this meal, or our invitation to be part of Him. We can refuse it, or wander off, or forget for a time. But He is here ... waiting ... offering.

And He says, “*Remember me.*” Even more, He says, “*Do this meal in remembrance of me.*” Do this breaking of bread and drinking of the cup ... in remembrance of me: remembering all we have shared; all I have done for you; all it has meant; all we have meant to each other. The evidence is ongoing and everywhere, yet the body broken and the blood poured out is the clearest and most graphic proof we know of God’s mercy, God’s offered forgiveness, God’s passionate love for us. And yes, God’s determined intention to be with us, and for us, forever. I do not think it is meant to be limited to this special, ritual meal, when the disciples gather formally. I think Jesus intends us to remember every time we eat *anything*, alone or together, and every time we drink anything, alone or together. We must never get far away from this remembering, or the forgetting will be devastating.

Most of the time, though, we do not need or want somebody droning on about it. It is all there for us, ready to flood back in at any moment – whenever we are willing to take that moment to remember. So it is all gathered within us and ready: all we know of Him; His way of teaching; His love of parable and imagery; His own compassion and unusual powers; His confrontations and His courage; His startling prayer life; the movement He led with a disciple band at its core; the prayer He taught us; His true identity that dawned upon us so slowly: Messiah, Christos, Son of God. We bring it all into each moment of remembrance. *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

“How self-centered of Him,” I once heard someone say. How self-centered to want to be remembered so often by so many. Well, either that, or it is His way of keeping the channels open so He can bless us, save us, and go on loving us.

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Could *I* ever say such a thing? Could *you* ever say such a thing? I mean, on this level? Sorry to even breathe these questions, but without the contrast, how do we catch the magnitude and understand? What have I ever been or done that the world should remember? Why would I want it to? Please, I’m not feeling lonely or discouraged, especially not here – especially not with so many good friends around me, and feeling the presence of so many other friends, both living and dead, who have blessed my life beyond the telling. No indeed, these are not dismal thoughts, nor do I doubt that some people love and care about me. But what have I ever been or done that the world should remember? Why would I want it to? Doesn’t the old world have enough problems already?

But when Jesus says *“Remember me,”* it is a beacon in the night to show the WAY. It is a lifeline for any who will grasp it, no matter how big the storm, no matter how dark the disaster. It is even a beacon on a nice sunny day, when life seems rosy and we are about ready to squander our time and our gifts – or bury them – and run off to play our own games with no thought at all about why we are here or who sent us. This meal, if we remember Him, is a promise of deliverance: a promise of help, of shelter, of sanity, of holy purpose – a promise of LIGHT and LOVE.