

WHAT HAS HE DONE FOR YOU LATELY?

For people who are awake spiritually, sacraments are filled with meaning we understand – and with mystery beyond our understanding. They point both to the past and to the future, with blessings and promises that outstrip all normal ways of seeing and perceiving. Whenever we speak of “mystery,” some people think we are cheating. They say that if it really is true and authentic, we should be able to explain it. But this assumes that God is as small and limited and physical as we are, and that God couldn’t possibly have an IQ higher than 190. Those of us who spend willing time in the presence of the Holy Spirit grow increasingly aware that the Spirit is frequently trying to communicate more than we can comprehend, and that the Spirit’s greatest problem, after getting past our pride and stubbornness, is trying to deal with our very limited knowledge and our incredibly small vocabulary.

It is also true that for many people, sacraments are a matter of considerable fear and superstition. One illustration: If the baby dies and has not been baptized, it goes straight to ... you know where. It only takes the absence of a few drops of water to shut off God’s love – to make null and void the Cross and Resurrection? What a very strange and feeble love God must have toward us. Almost any human loves better than that. Yet hundreds of thousands of people down through many different ages have believed this – in fear, and often in agony. Lots of them are still alive today. It’s enough to make us want to love the atheists. Come to think of it, if we truly believe in Jesus, we already do.

There is another camp in Christendom that does not fear the sacraments and, with equal respect and awe, approaches them in anticipation of the blessings they offer and represent. Some of us grow increasingly aware that our Risen Lord is always trying to bring gifts, blessings, guidance, and opportunities beyond what we are willing to receive. Life in Christ Jesus is only limited by our partial responses and ever-so-cautious willingness to go with Him. If I use the word “obedience,” it gets even clearer.

I hope all of you are more focused on gifts and blessings than on threats and fearful consequences. Baptism *seals* new covenants we make with Christ: new awakenings, new life, new things being born within us. To be sure, new wine requires new wineskins – as Jesus reminded us. Every new birth requires a death to something in our former lives. It is possible to get so focused on the deaths required that religion becomes

a very negative, life-denying proposition. “I have to give up smoking”; never mind being able to breathe and move with far greater ease and freedom. All of us know people – and some of us have *been* people – who equate Christianity with a long list of things we have to give up. If you give up something without getting a whole lot more in return, you are a fool! Everybody knows that in the real world. Why don’t we know that in the Kingdom, which is far greater and more real than the real world?

“Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you: there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother, father or children, or land, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive in this age a hundred times as much – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and land – and persecutions besides; and in the age to come eternal life.’” (Mark 10:29-30 REB)

“Great is your reward” How many times did Jesus try to tell us about rewards? (Sixteen times in the Gospels, if you really want to know.) If we give up something without getting a whole lot more in its place, we are fools. Not fools for Christ’s sake – just foolish. *“Jesus – for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:2) No matter how hard life gets, Christianity is never life-negating, never about being selfless, never about sacrifice for its own sake. For a short time, Christians will face these things to stay faithful, but always it is for a higher end, a greater purpose, a far greater reward. *“That you may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (John 10:10)

Jesus had a much higher, wider perspective on what is truly important than most of us do. But if you believe in the Kingdom of God, then it is quickly clear that Jesus was far more practical than we are. He did not go for the little things that are fleeting and inconsequential: the toys that break in a few years; the relationships based on pretense or founded on passing desires; the fame or approval that comes from the society around us and evaporates just as quickly as it comes. *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”* (Matthew 6:19-20) Jesus was after the big values: the true joy; the authentic meaning; the love that comes from God and circles back to God in ever-fresh renewal. Jesus wanted the big blessings for His followers. (Well, He wanted them for *everybody*, but how do you get it to those who will not follow?)

Sacraments are trying to bless us. Among other things, they remind us of all the ways our Risen Lord is trying to bless us, get through to us, enliven us, lead us into greater life. Do we go with them in joy and abandon, trusting Jesus and His love for us? Do we keep trying to catch the hints, the suggestions, and the messages that the Spirit keeps putting into our minds, letting them change our perspective, our direction, our choices, our hopes, our expectations?

As recently as last week, I found myself in a familiar conversation. You know; the 839th-time kind of conversation. It's never the other person's fault; I just try really hard not to sound bored. Anyway, I have tried to teach you that baptism does not have to be a once-in-a-lifetime event. If your parents blew it for you in their eagerness and baptized you back before you can remember – and if they did, I hope they did it out of their own faithfulness – that does not mean you never get to experience the great sacrament of death and rebirth with your Lord. And you are not limited to “Confirmation”: “I confirm what my parents did to me all those years ago, before I could have any memory of it.” How thrilling and exciting! If you sat down on purpose and tried to devise some way to take all the thrill and adventure and awakening out of a sacrament, could you possibly come up with something more lame than Confirmation? Every teenager's dream come true: nothing real or fresh or personally meaningful to me; I simply acknowledge that my parents got it right. Well, the process of Confirmation study and preparation can be wonderful. But how do you get from I to HE? From self to Jesus? From “I confirm” to “He raises me up!”? You do not, unless you baptize fresh – and mean it.

Do we really still believe that only one conversion is allowed per lifetime? One size fits all? One hit and you are through? I hate that kind of mockery of the Christian Life. We only get one authentic, life-changing encounter or spiritual experience and then it's over, except for telling others to get the same hit and then standing around waiting for the Second Coming? Accept Jesus as your Savior and it's all over?? Is that what *anybody* in the New Testament is modeling for you?

One of the most exciting things about being a Christian is that you never know when the Holy Spirit will blow you into a new awareness, a new perspective, a new assignment, a new awakening. It can happen at any moment. It keeps happening all of our lives, if we do not shield and cut ourselves off. That is why they call it “wind” – *ruach*. “Wind” and “Spirit” are the same word in Hebrew. And Jesus taught us: “*The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.*” (John 3:8)

Anyway, this conversation I was in was because someone was troubled about the practice of baptizing people more than once. Doctrine forbids this in many churches. Never mind what Jesus *is* doing for us; pay attention to the doctrine that somebody made up about what Jesus *is allowed* to do for us. If you have a life-changing encounter with the Spirit – an experience of being born anew in some way – and you wish to acknowledge, remember, and live the New Life you have been offered, baptism is the appropriate sacrament. If you are so far away from the Kingdom that it takes the Holy Spirit three or five or fifteen major awakenings to get you on the WAY and keep you on the WAY, why would you be reticent to acknowledge and claim them all? Get real! This life is ongoing! It is not like toast – click, burn, pop, and you’re done. The years keep coming and we need to be burned by the fire of the Spirit in endless new ways. When we first get converted, most of us apply the light of our awakening to only a small portion of our lives. The light of the Spirit has to move from the core of the self ... to the mate, to the children, to friends, to the job, to recreation, to fear, to guilt, to shame, to hope – to everything. And with each major new encounter, we feel the jolt, and we may have to reorganize many things in our lives. If the Holy Spirit did it all at once, most of us would not survive the shock. It took Paul ten years to move from conversion to first missionary journey. And that was far from the end of his adventure. We know of at least five conversions of Peter, though doubtless there were more. If your Christian Life is boring – if you have it all down pat – you got off the Path and stopped walking the WAY a long time ago.

Are you putting it off, this wondrous Life that Jesus is inviting you into? Do you imagine that you have plenty of time to explore the Christian Life, once you have all the important things taken care of?

The Scripture lesson this morning gives us an interesting glimpse into the ministry of Jesus. He heals a man’s withered hand; He restores sight and speech to a man blind and dumb. So the crowds are bringing Him the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others, and Jesus heals them. And toward the end of the day, He teaches them to share and care for one another in a way that amazes them all.

Then the Pharisees and Sadducees come and ask Him to show them a sign. Do you hear the irony in that? Can we comprehend the unbelievable density of such a comment in the wake of what has just been taking place? Miracle after miracle, and they want a “sign”? “We missed it. We were busy and couldn’t be there, so would you do something really big so we can know for sure too?” These Pharisees

and Sadducees have a blindness that even Jesus cannot heal. How I pray that I do not have it too! (“Easter was okay, but what have you done for us lately?”)

Jesus’ reply to these blind religious doubters is profound. The only sign that can reach them, He says, is the sign of Jonah. But we have no time for Jonah today. We need to get ready for our communion meal.

Some of us recently partook in the communion sacrament on Maundy Thursday. It was not a light or casual experience. The source event of the Lord’s Supper, at least for me, is among the most profound events that ever took place on this earth. Maundy Thursday evening is still fresh and powerful in my mind. I am not ready for the communion meal this morning. We get baptized too seldom and take communion too often. That’s not really true, but sometimes it feels true. I need to be born anew more often. And I need to digest the amazing nurture and blessings of the Lord’s Supper more completely before I have room to take in more.

At the same time, I am truly in need of more Jesus in my life. We dare not stray very far from the awakenings and invitations of Holy Week and Easter or we will begin to lose our WAY again. So I am also very grateful for this meal again this morning. Grateful to have Christian friends to share it with. Grateful for our Lord, who is never too tired or reticent to nurture and feed and care for us.

On Maundy Thursday, we came alone, as individuals, to receive Jesus’ offer of Himself to us. May we continue to receive Him, and never forget. But there are many dimensions to this meal. Jesus designed it that way for us on purpose. The meal must carry us through many trials and temptations, for many years, through many generations. We are not alone; we are His body in this world – His People. Therefore we also belong *together*. Vast numbers of people do not realize that none of us can walk the Christian Path alone. A leader of love and a religion of love are not designed to leave us alone or apart. We partake of His body and we *are* His body. The church is the body of Christ. It is not the greatest truth, but it is *one* of the greatest truths.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself.” (I Corinthians 11:27-29)

Lots of people will assure you that this passage is support for the doctrine of transubstantiation – that is, the bread really does turn into the flesh of Christ and the wine really does turn into His blood. I will assure you, as usual, that if you reduce communion to a literal, physical layer of understanding, you will miss its true meaning. We are eating the bread and drinking the cup, and on Maundy Thursday we were claiming without equivocation that Jesus was offering us Himself. The only question is: Are we willing to receive Him?

The words come from Paul, the earliest witness to such things. He is writing to the Corinthian church, and the Corinthians are plagued with divisions and factions. They are new to this Christian Faith and Christian community business, and Paul is trying to answer their questions, heal their divisions, and help them move on into the Christian Life – together. Paul’s favorite analogy for the church is this now very-familiar phrase: The church is the body of Christ. The church is to carry on the work of Jesus in the world as if Jesus’ body were still among them, only now it is present through His followers in numerous places because His followers carry Him *within* – that is, they listen constantly to the guidance and direction of His Holy Spirit, and try to act as they believe He would want them to act at all times and in every situation.

So Paul reminds them of how they each partake of the bread and the cup – how they take the body and the blood of the Lord into their lives. Urging them to not be careless or mindless about what they are doing, Paul concludes: “*Any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself.*”

Sorry for the details, but Paul does not have a shallow, literal mind. For example, he believes that circumcision of the flesh will do you no good; you must be circumcised in heart and soul. Of course, if we start hearing Paul on a shallow, literal level, it is hard to break past it. Everything will be heard from such a level. On the other hand, once we hear him beyond that level, we hear everything he says quite differently. I cannot imagine Paul reducing the relationship with Jesus down to a transubstantiation level; he prayed too much. If the wine turns to blood and the bread turns to flesh, where does that get you? A simplex physical miracle – maybe impressive to cannibals, but does this do something for your soul, for your relationship with the Resurrected Lord? It is the mind, the heart, and the will that must be reached.

Further, I cannot help but note that Paul does not say “without discerning the body and the blood,” which surely he would have done

had the details of transubstantiation been on his mind. How could he leave out the blood? Is it not at least as important as the bread? He wants us to discern THE BODY: the church – the band of disciples all around us. **You cannot eat this meal alone!** “*Two or three, gathered in my name*” is a prerequisite of the Christian Faith. I know that a Catholic priest sometimes takes the Eucharist alone. The priest I knew best always felt himself to be part of the entire church even when he did so. If you partake of this meal without discerning the body – the fellowship of believers, the church around you, the body of Christ – then you call down onto your life the consequences of isolation, loneliness, sickness, weakness. That is the very next phrase in the passage, by the way: “*That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.*” (I Corinthians 11:30) Well, everybody dies here, but sometimes we die early because we try to go it alone.

Discern the body. Be aware of the others around you who walk this WAY too. You are in a faith family. All of you are being fed and strengthened *together* – to support each other, to live this life in loving relationship with each other. A Second Commandment is like unto it: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Most often in our time this is reduced to some nonpersonal appeal to give money for some charitable cause. What it really means is discern the body of believers all around you.

In Paul’s analogy, none of us are able to be all the necessary parts of the body all by ourselves. We are too small and limited by ourselves. There are lots of things that we can do alone, but none of them are worth diddly. It takes two to tango, and it takes two or more to be a Christian: you, the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ, and at least one other Christian brother or sister. This is not my opinion; I am just quoting Jesus. (Matthew 18:20) Some days I don’t like it any better than you do; I like to be alone. But it is not in my hands. Christianity is supposed to be forming the greatest alliances, the greatest friendships, the greatest partnerships, the greatest Disciple Bands on the face of the earth. Taking this meal is supposed to be forming and strengthening those bonds between us. If you eat this meal, discern the body. Understand how it links us with one another – how this turns us into the body of Christ wherever we are in this world.

What has He done for you lately? After all that Jesus has done and gone through for us, that might sound amazingly crass, or even cynical. “So you died for me – gave up your life for me – but what have you done for me lately?” Surely there is a point at which we could not imagine

asking for more. Most certainly we can never deserve or be worthy of what we have already received. And that is precisely why I bring it up.

If Jesus has not done anything for you lately, something is dreadfully wrong with your faith and in your relationship. Is He angry, or have you grown unwilling to receive? A living relationship never goes dry for very long; it never gets stale unless it is disintegrating. Do we not *want* to keep doing more and more for those we love? Do you not *know* that Jesus loves you?

What is incredibly sad – what feels like true rejection – is when people we love no longer want us to do anything for them; when they turn away; when they are no longer willing to receive; when they no longer want to be with us.

We have to get over the realization that we are undeserving and get past the reality that we are unworthy. And I don't mean by denying it. We never *will* deserve Jesus. We never *will* be worthy of His love. Furthermore, Christianity is not just about wondrous people in the past or about what Jesus did in the past. That is for people who never heard about Pentecost – who never read past the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament.

Jesus is as active in your life as you will allow Him to be. Jesus has endless gifts and wonders to give you and to reveal to you. We celebrate the sacrament of communion often – because Jesus has so much more to feed us, to show us, to bring us into. But a lot of it He cannot show us or tell us until we are no longer content to be alone – no longer willing to be religious, spiritual, dedicated, courageous, or committed ... all by ourselves. Christianity is not for Lone Rangers. “*Any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself.*” That is because our God is a God of love, of community, of relationship. The Kingdom of God is not about loneliness, isolation, or doing everything yourself, without any help. If that sounds to you like bad news, you have never heard the Good News.