

Bread and Wine: A Sacrament of Dependence and Hope

Many Generations of a Family Gathered for Independence Day
at their Family Home

Psalm 16:5-11; I Corinthians 13:8-13; John 1:14-18

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Some of the best memories of my ministry are of moments experienced here in this place and with this family. Countless gatherings around the kitchen table with coffee, cookies and nutty M&Ms. Visits during Thelma's illness and eventually as she lay in the hospital bed in the family room with many of you present. The sacrament of baptism celebrated for the rising fourth generation – or in my ministry, the fifth generation for I too had the privilege of being pastor to Gerrit and Jo, Neal and Alice in their respective homes.

In these past weeks as I've stopped by I have realized, Marvin, that life's load has become heavy, more difficult to carry. Perhaps I've sensed a bit of weariness. Not to your liking, the Life Alert system is installed and the keys of the red Ford truck no longer a part of your daily routine, although dear Joanne does drive you around often, stopping at the drive-in window of Temptations for ice cream (Life still has its little pleasures).

The last time I was here you asked when the old Christ Community group would celebrate communion again. I had thought perhaps last month but we were not able to arrange it. Your question made me realize your hunger for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper – Holy Communion. The bread and wine that over your lifetime has been for you the sign and symbol of our Christian faith – the body and the blood through which we experience our Lord's life and death and are strengthened and refreshed as we follow the way of Jesus.

Thus I wanted to satisfy that hunger one more time and what better community in which to celebrate Holy Communion than in the gathering of your loving family – a loving family because you, Marvin, and your beloved Thelma learned love in your respective families and you in turn with your beloved Thelma created a community of love for your six children and their children and their children's children, all of that arising from the embodiment of the love of God in Jesus – the strong tradition of Christian faith that has marked this family.

Yesterday as I was preparing for this family service, I went to my funeral file and took out the service I led for Thelma on June 23, 2001. There was an eloquent

testimony to the treasure of family. I'm not certain who put together this litany of remembrance, but it captures the richness of a family immersed in love.

Our Grandma, Our Guardian

We'll forever remember the child in you...

baseball games in the field, thread spool necklaces, making sand castles, playing Husker Du, your animated dreams, and under-dogs that seemed to push us to the sky.

We'll always treasure our outings together...

picking berries, ice skating and mini golf, taking us swimming, outings to Russ', and drives around the Oval with a stop at Miss Lisa's.

We'll always remember your mindful sayings...

"walk and think", "Lord give me patience and give it to me right now", "Oh Marv" and countless others.

We'll sorely miss the cook in you...

cookies from the icebox, your world-renowned muffins, pork barbecue on Christmas Eve, and enough pies at Thanksgiving to cover the kitchen table.

We'll always remember the gardener in you...

potting plants with us, eating vegetables straight out of the garden, and the care that went into every turn of the John Deere.

We'll forever cherish the caregiver in you...

the countless times picking us up for school because we missed the bus, protecting us from Grampa's endless teasing, the old-fashioned home remedies for everything, correcting exaggerated stories, your honest advice and candor to help us see our paths more clearly.

We'll forever admire the homemaker in you...

stiff towels right off the clothesline, the butter on the ham sandwiches, cookies and coffee at your kitchen table, the multiple pairs of knitted mittens and slippers, the love that was sewn into each of our quilts, the iron always being warm, the sheet over the davenport, homemade strawberry jam, and the way you provided a warm gathering place.

We'll always carry on the traditions you've established...

the best Easter egg hunts ever, Christmas stockings for all thirteen of us, the most famous picnic coordinator on the block, decorating Christmas cookies, playing piano for the Bottema Choir on Christmas Eve, five dollar bills in birthday cards, fireworks, sharing old treasures and reliving old stories.

For always being an inspiring role model as a mother, wife and devout Christian, we thank you. And as you continue on and become our Guardian Angel, we say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

To be sure, Marvin, that was written about Thelma, mother, grandmother, great grandmother par excellence. But you have been a vital partner, gramps, in that endeavor. And the fact that the family continues to gather on holidays, on Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, jammed into a house too small, a room too small, is testimony to the degree to which love and care still mark this family. You are its rock, its compelling center.

I went through the wonderful liturgy of that service and found that what I want to say today I've said before. The Scripture lessons are the same. The title of my meditation for Thelma was "A Love Shaped Face" – pretty well chosen I would say. And the lessons bear repeating.

Psalm 16:8: "I keep the Lord always before my face." Because he kept the Lord before his face, the Psalmist said, he would not be moved. Constancy, strength, resoluteness – those are the fruits of living before God's face. Faithfulness, dependability, consistency – those are the marks of this family and I submit to you that is not an accident; it is the fruit of living faithfully before the face of God, in trust, in goodness, in love.

Love. John's Gospel tells the Christmas story in one line: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." And so in the Word become flesh (or human), we see the face of God. In verse 18, he writes:

No one has ever seen God. It is God's only Son...who has made him known.

In his familiar and well-loved chapter on love, St. Paul writes a description of love as the highest gift of the Holy Spirit. But then he acknowledges that in our present human experience we see dimly:

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.

To live in love is the highest human possibility but as long as we are on our human journey we will wonder, struggle, sometimes despair of making sense of it all. But this is not the last word –

...now dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully.

This is movingly expressed in the funeral folder I have from Thelma's funeral. I'm not sure who chose it; I suspect it was a family choice. It could not be more appropriate and I think it is appropriate to be reminded of it today as we celebrate Holy Communion on the holiday when we celebrate The Declaration of Independence. I've entitled my meditation today "Bread and Wine: A Sacrament of Dependence and Hope."

It is one thing to celebrate national independence for which we give thanks. But that is not the celebration we are engaged in here. Rather it is the total dependence on the good and gracious God who is our rock, our strong foundation enabling us to be confident that we shall not be moved. It is the celebration of the way of Jesus, the way of love, the way that cost him his life. But in bread broken and wine poured out we remember, we find our hope and we know in our dependence on God we will be kept in love, confident that, though now we see dimly, there is coming a day when we shall see face to face.

Thus let me say as clearly as I can to us all and especially to you, Marvin, feeling the infirmities of the flesh –

The best is yet to be.

Listen to the Parable from Thelma's funeral folder and know that she is present even now, here and now...

A Parable

A young Mother set her foot on the path of life. "Is the way long?" she asked.

And her guide said: "Yes. And the way is hard. But the end will be better than the beginning."

But the young Mother was happy, and she would not believe that anything could be better than these years. So she played with her children, and gathered flowers for them along the way: and the sun shined on them, and life was good. The young Mother cried, "Nothing will ever be lovelier than this."

The night came and storm, and the path was dark, and the children shook with fear and cold, and the Mother drew them close and covered them with her mantle, and the children said, "Mother, we are not afraid for you are near, and no harm can come." The Mother said, "This is better than the brightness of day, for I have taught my children courage."

And the morning came, and there was a hill ahead. The children climbed and grew weary, and the Mother was weary, but at all times she said to the children, "A little patience, and we are there." So the children climbed, and when they reached the top, they said, "We could not have done it without you, Mother." The Mother, when she lay down that night, looked up at the stars and said, "This is a better day than the last...for my children have learned fortitude in the face of hardness."

And the next day came strange clouds which darkened the earth – clouds of war and hate and evil, and the children groped and stumbled, and the Mother said, “Look up. Lift your eyes to the Light.” And the children looked and saw above the clouds the Everlasting Glory, and it guided them and brought them beyond the darkness. That night the Mother said, “This is the best day of all, for I have shown my children God.”

And the days went on, and the weeks and the months and the years, and the Mother grew old, and she was tired and weary. But her Children were tall and strong, and walked with courage. And when the way was hard they helped their Mother and when the way was rough, they lifted and carried her; and at last they came to a hill, and beyond the hill they could see a shining road and golden gates flung wide.

And the Mother said, “I have reached the end of my journey. And now I know that the end is better than the beginning, for my children walk alone, and their children after them.”

And the children said, “You will always walk with us, Mother, even when you have gone through the gates.”

And they stood and watched her as she went on alone, and gates closed after her.

They said, “We cannot see her, but she is with us still. A Mother like ours is more than a Memory. She is a living Presence.”

The Prayer

Oh God, whose mercies are new every morning,
whose faithfulness is great,
and whose grace washes over us in wave upon wave,
to You we lift up our hearts,
longing for the experience of your Presence
which is healing and refreshing.

On this beautiful day as the nation is celebrating our independence,
as a family we celebrate our dependence –
our dependence on your grace that holds us steady
in the movement of our days,
your grace that has kept us as a family together in love and care.
And especially, we give you thanks for the patriarch in our midst,
father, grandfather, great grandfather,
the one whose steady presence keeps us steady,
whose faith has shown us the way,
whose welcoming love keeps us coming back and coming together.

We are grateful, O God, that once more we can gather here,
be together and celebrate the holiday.
But even more today, we gather around another table,
the table of our Lord.
In the presence of the symbols of bread broken and wine poured out
we are brought back to the heart of things,
to that which really matter,
to your love, your grace.

Be present to us as we are present to You and one another—
touch us deeply, hold us securely, manifest to us that Love
that is at the center of all things.
Spirit of God, make this bread and wine for us
the body and blood of Christ who loved us
and gave himself for us
as we pray the prayer he taught us, saying,
“Our Father, ...”