Book 1

Sunday June 4, 1972

"DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME" I Corinthians 11:23-26

Human beings are distinguished from all other living creatures by one fact we seldom consider. We are the only creatures who build tombs. We have been defined as beings who laugh or who use tools or who make fire or who think, or who speak; but certainly we are the only creatures who erect monuments.

To put it another way, only we human beings seem to have the instinct to preserve the remembrance of ourselves upon the earth. As far back as the race is found, there are markers for graves seeking to keep alive a memory. The remains of tombs are more ancient than the remains of dwelling places for people who were alive. Cities of the dead in archeology antedate cities for the living. We human beings will do almost anything to keep from being forgotten.

But there's more to memory than just being remembered. The memory of things in the past can be a guide and a help in the present.

1. The Bible makes great use of the faculty of memory. Again and again in the Old Testament, God says to the people of Israel, "Remember!" Remember you were a slave in Egypt. Remember the Lord your God who has led you. Remember and keep all my commandments. Remember now your creator in the days of your youth. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Remember your father Abraham and his descendents.

What we choose to remember to a certain extent determines what we are and what we do. A remembered hatred can continue to cause us to hate. A remembered love can cause us to continue to love.

The Jewish Feast of the Passover is a meal of memory. And so also are all other holidays and festivals, religious ones and national ones. We celebrate the 4th of July as a day of memory. We've just celebrated Memorial Day. Christmas recalls the birth of Jesus, just as Easter remembers his resurrection. Each birthday we celebrate recalls for us the day we were born just as wedding anniversaries look back to our wedding day. And so it goes--human beings are creatures of memory and to help our memories, we use various symbols and materials.

Thus Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." And he took bread and he broke it and gave it to them and he took wine and poured it out and said, "Take and drink in remembrance of me." Just as human nature is a remembering nature, so also human nature takes symbols to help us remember. We live in a material world and we are able to express ourselves through material forms.

God becoming man in Jesus Christ is in itself an expression of spirit in material form. "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us." All of us crave some tangible expression of the movements of the spirit. We seek to cast into a physical mold, if just for a short time, emotions and feelings which are spiritual. And so to express our gratitude, we give a gift. Or there is the handshake, the embrace, the kiss, the touch of the hand and many more tangible expressions of our feelings and emotions.

Furthermore the symbol or action, properly nourished and used may enhance the experience which lies behind it. When two friends meet and greet each other with a handshake, there is in it something more than the observance of an age-long custom. The hand of fellowship has its own unconsciour influence in nourishing the friendship which first prompted the act.

The reverse is also true. Not only does a symbol and action nourish the experience and feeling it expresses, but a symbol or action neglected or omitted may issue in a loss. If not fitting expression is found for an emotion, the feeling may lose its vitality and die. So close is the relationship between spirit and flesh, between feeling and action.

I once knew a home where the father's intensely reserved nature could not abide any expression of love. He neither kissed his children, nor allowed them to kiss him. He was a good father, but somehow this firm prohibition became a barrier which grew and grew until at last father and children seemed to be living on opposite sides of a wall. It was a symbol and action neglected. A small thing to some, perhaps, but it helped freeze the expanding love of those children. That father would've given a great deal to braak that barrier down. A symbol and action neglected may weaken the emotion and feeling it was intended to express. It may also weaken the memory.

Now of course, symbols and actions can become abused or they can become empty forms. Nevertheless, we are not faced with the question of symbols or no symbols, for life is constantly presenting them to us. The spiritual always seeks expression in the material.

So Jesus took bread and wine. He knew the value of remembering and the necessity of material in helping us to remember. "Do this in remembrance of me." Jesus never built a monument of sone, nor does he ask us to do so in remembrance of him. Rather he calls us to a memorial action--he asks us to eat and drink together as a community in remembrance of him.

In so doing, we also remember Christians through the ages who have gathered around the Lord's table to eat and drink remembering Jesus. In so doing, we remember that God is for us--God is for all people. We remember that God loves the World; that the world is good and that God wills good for us.

And it goes deeper than that. When we take a piece of bread, we take something in which the sun, moon and stars have all shared their life. We take with the piece of bread the mystery of rain falling on the earth; the mystery of its darkness, of grain growing. That strange mystery of how human beings discovered that these grains of wheat could be beaten into flour and people could learn how to make bread over fire. We take in this bread all the cosmos, everything of nature--all the mysteries of human existence.

The bread feeds our bodies and out of our bodies our thoughts come into the brain. And from the brain and the body come all those spiritual affections by which we characterize our lives and freedom. In short, when we break bread, we break open all things, ourselves and the world included, and we move into that vast solemn moment when we say there is meaning in death and life, in hate and joy, in peace and war, in doubt and faith. There is meaning in this vast contradictory mixture of things.

The bread and wine which is of the stuff of our living reminds us that our faith is related to all of life and that each moment and each part of history has eternal qualities. Our faith is concerned with every level of a person's activity, every event, every dimension of life.

And so we take bread and wine, and we remember; we remember that God has always been with people in every place and time and that God continues to be with us, judging us, correcting us, guiding us, forgiving us, loving us.

We can therefore be open to the world, open to all of its possibilities.

Behold this is the joyful feast of the people of God.