Sunday, August 5, 1973
THE HOLY AND THE COMMON
Matthew 26:26-30

All of us have some things in our lives, which, because of what they are connected with, have come to have a special or sacred or holy meaning.

For example, sometimes people when they are married, save some of the wedding cake, put it into the freezer and then a year or more latter eat some of the cake. It has a special or "holy" significance because of its connection with a very special event. There's nothing in the cake itself which makes it special. The ingredients which were used in the making of the cake were the same kind which are used in making other cakes and pastries. Yet what has been common has been made holy or sacred.

There are also special places in our lives. We may remember the place where we first met the person who later became our husband or wife, and now because of that connection it may be a very special spot.

A few summers ago, we took our children to visit some of the special places in our family's history. We found the house where their mother was born, and some of the graves of their great grandparents, and we visited the church where we were married.

The Bible is full of special places and things. When Moses encountered God on the side of the mountain where he was tending sheep, he came to think of that spot as "holy ground." For him it became a special place. It was the spot where God called him to lead his people out of slavery. If you had visited that spot, it would seem to be nothing out of the ordinary.

Often in our lives what is common becomes holy or sacred, because of what is connected to it. Common and ordinary places and things and acts can take on a special and added meaning.

Sometimes something which someone does for us or to us takes on a sacramental or holy character. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, it was like a sacrament to them.

William Stringfellow, who for a number of years practiced law in East Harlem in New York City, talks about an act of holy or sacramental character. He said, "I remember one afternoon going to the northern part of East Harlem to visit an old woman who was having difficulties with the welfare authorities. The matter took several hours to settle, and by the time I was returning to East 100th street, it had turned rather cold. I had gone out in the afternoon when it was warmer, dressed only in a shirt, trousers, and sneakers, but now that the weather had changed, I was shivering from the cold.

About two blocks from my tenement, a boy I knew, who had been loafing on the corner, called out that he wanted to ask me something. As we talked, he saw that I .as freezing to death and so he took off his jacket and gave it to me to wear. The boy was an addict and I happened to know that the clothes on his back were virtually the only ones he had — he had pawned everything else. Sometimes when his clothes were being laundered, he would have to stay in the house because he had nothing else to wear unless he could borrow something from someone. But he saw that I was cold and gave me his j acl.et. It was a sacramental act! 11

Holy or sacramental acts can take place in a variety of places and events. Some of them take on a universal significance, even though very common ordinary materials are used.

The Gospels report that on the occasion of the last supper with his disciples, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

I suspect that on that night, the disciples did not catch the full significance of this sacramental act. They could sense that something special was taking place, but after the crucifixion and resurrection, as they gathered together again and again, and remembered Jesus’s words and the broken bread and cup of wine, then it took on new significance and meaning.

Jesus took common materials, items which were found on the table of every Jewish home, and these became something holy.

Life is like that. The Holy and the common, the sacred and the secular are closely intertwined. In fact, there is nothing that is holy or sacred in and of itself. Much of what is common, however, does take on a sacred or· holy quality. This is another way of saying that God, the Holy One is often found in the common events of life. What could be more common to all of us than eating and drinking? We have to do it to live.

So, Jesus took bread and wine and, in his presence, and the company of those who follow him, they become sacred and holy.

What is holy in your life? Where are the sacramental acts? You may be surprised where God is active.

As we come again this morning to the Lord’s table, we are reminded that the holy and the common are often mixed together in God’s world. Amen.