Sunday June 23, 1974

"ANOTHER KIND OF LANGUAGE" I Corinthians 11:23-26

In the sermons for the last two weeks, we've noted that our bodies speak their own language regardless of the words we are saying. Two weeks ago, we considered our hands and how we use them or don't use them and what that says about us and then last week we looked at what our Christian faith has to say about the use of our mouths.

In addition to body language and the language of words, there is yet another kind of language. It is the language that is spoken in the giving and receiving of things or in the sharing of common elements. We give someone a gift and that gift and the giving of it carry a message. Or we invite someone to have a meal with us and in the eating together a message is conveyed.

The language of concrete symbols is all around us. We have our flags, our anthems and emblems. There are days of commemoration, statues, monuments and much more and all are calculated to inspire and sustain us by carrying a message.

Symbols are important because they are loaded with suggestive power. In the case of a flag, here is a piece of cloth with stars sewed on it, waving in the wind. The material itself is not precious, like radium, for example. Yet we treat it respectfully and the sight of it stirs up a passion we would die for. Why? Because over the years we have invested in the flag our love of home and liberty, our democratic faith, our gratitude for the benefits and privileges we have received. The flag means all these things and more to us. That is how symbolism works. It is like the charging of a battery. The energy stored up in it flows back again.

Jesus was making use of this kind of language when he had his last meal with his disciples. As the time approached for his death, Jesus made special arrangements for a last meal with his disciples. During the course of this supper, he took the food and the drink which were most commonly found on Palestinian tables and in the use of these elements he gave them added meaning.

According to the Apostle Paul, who wrote the earliest New Testament account, he remembered it this way. It was read as our scripture lesson. "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper,saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The early church, according to Paul, remembered that this act of eating and drinking carried a message. The church recalled that Jesus took the common act of eating and the elements of bread and wine and added to these additional meanings. Whenever you eat and drink together in my name, this action will remind you of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and of the new strength which comes because of it.

The bread and wine are common material substances. Yet they are charged with emotional power because of what Christ means to us and because of what this sacrament has meant to millions of Christians over two thousand years. This act of eating and drinking carries a memory and a history.

So it is that Holy communion is another kind of language. It is a concrete and dramatic way of remembering Christ, the sort of person he was, how he lived and died and what he stood for.

As a language he carries a number of messages. One of these is that it reminds us that the source of our spiritual strength is in God. In the Lord's Supper, the believer is fed and not by himself. The bread and wine are the free gift of God for the nourishment of the spirit. The Apostle Paul referred to these symbols as spiritual food and spiritual drink. In themselves they are bread and wine, nothing more. Their physical effect on the one who eats and drinks is exactly the effect of any other like amount of these substances. But if they are partaken of with faith by a person who recognizes in them a symbol of the desire and purpose of God spiritually to sustain his people, they are much more than bread and wine. It reminds us too that we are responsible for each other and get our strength from one another as well as from God.

Communion is not like swallowing a pill to get rich of a headache. It is much more. It carries the message that God is with us and that we are to be with each other. Jesus put it this way--"I am the bread of life, those that come to me shall never hunger and those that believe on me shall never thirst."

The more the disciples participated in this sacrament the more they understood its language. Each time they ate and drank together, they experience the power of the risen Christ with them.

And so it can be for us. Leslie Weatherhead tells of a friend who attended a Roman Catholic Mass, during which in the sermon the priest argued for the literal presence of Christ's body in the consecrated wafer on the altar, or what is technically called the doctrine of transubstantiation. After the service he met one of the worshipers and asked her ifshe believed all that the priest had said. The worshiper, an old woman, answered this way. "When I come to mass, Sir, I cannot follow what they do up at the altar. I just kneel down and think about Jesus. I think of that last week with his friends and the last supper; how he knelt in agony in Gethsemane; how they arrested him and all night tortured him and how he died, and how his disciples afterward gathered again and again around the Lord's table and in the breaking of bread knew that God gave them strength and that Jesus was with them. I get very near to Jesus then, Sir, and when I go home, I feel that he comes with me. That is all! That is enough!" Amen.