Maundy Thursday, March 23, 1978
COMMUNIION MEDITATION

Over 1900 years ago, Jesus and his friends sat in an upper room in Jerusalem having their last meal together. It was Thursday night before Easter, just as tonight.

During the meal, Jesus took some bread and broke it and gave it to the others with the words, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he reached for the cup; and after he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many.”

Jesus spoke of course in the vivid metaphor of the East. Harry Emerson Fosdick tells of a native-born Syrian who when receiving a friend into his home says with extravagant hospitality, “This house is yours; you can burn it if you wish. My children are at your disposal; I would sacrifice them all for your pleasure.” That’s how people in that culture speak. The language is graphic, suggestive, symbolic; not literal.

And for us to take these words of Jesus in their literal sense is like insisting that the sun actually rises and sets because we use such terms. The disciples that night knew what he meant. He was leaving behind a memorial of himself. The broken bread was a little token that would symbolize for all time the essential character of his life and teaching, and so keep him in the minds of his followers.

Jesus had written no books, no written instructions, had set up no formal organization. But in this simple ceremony he summed up what he stood for and trusted that to work when he was gone. A memorial, symbolizing sacrificial love. “This do in remembrance of me.”

Unfortunately, because Christianity moved into a world of cults and pagan religions where the idea of partaking of the gods was rampant, the simple ritual of Communion was overlaid with superstition, and this memorial became magic. Thus, in the Middle Ages, they rang bells before the consecration of the elements so that those in the fields could come running to behold the miracle when the bread and wine were changed into the body and blood of Christ.

Worse than that, the Lord’s Supper became an object for strife and exclusiveness among Christians, so that even today those from various segments of the church can work together, play together, sing and worship together, but cannot take Communion together. There are too many Christians who have the egotism to believe that their particular way of doing things is patented in heaven, as though anyone could monopolize the grace of God by their particular church machinery or be in control of God’s power!

So tonight remember, the Holy Communion is symbolic through and through. It is a concrete and dramatic way or remembering Christ: the sort of person he was, how he lived and died and rose again and that the main theme in our faith is God’s love for us and for the whole creation. God is inclusive and not exclusive!

Also remember tonight, that symbols, like charges of electricity, are dynamic things; and they can help to energize a person’s whole spiritual life. Symbols always point beyond themselves. They are loaded with suggestive power and mystery.

The bread and wine are common material substances, yet they are charged with emotional power because of what Christ means to us. As one person put it, “I might pick a rosebud off a bush, and it would be a rosebud and no more. But the one I love best in all the world might pick a rosebud and give it to me, and it would be a rosebud and a great deal more. The substance would be changed because she gave it to me.”

So tonight, as we gather to remember Christ through this sacrament, this is no medieval magic. Communion is not like swallowing a pill to get rid of a headache. It is an act of faith and love and friendship. Communion helps us because it speaks to us of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ. That’s why Jesus said, “I am the bread of life, those that come to me shall never hunger; and those who believe in me shall never thirst.”

Again, tonight with these ancient and common symbols of bread and wine we remember Jesus Christ.