Sunday January 7, 1979

"LEARNING TO SAY GOOD-BY" Matthew 26:20-29

Often when a friend or someone we love is going away, it's customary to have a last meal together as a way of saying good-by. It's an ancient practice. When the Hebrews were about to leave Egypt and slavery, they had one last meal together before they began their journey. Today Jews all over the world still remember that good-by to Egypt with a meal--it's called the "feast of the Pass-over."

Holy Communion for Christians is also a kind of good-by meal. The Gospels tell us that when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world, when he knew his death was imminent, he arranged one last supper with his disciples. It was a "good-by" meal. Significantly, it was held at the time and in connection with the Jewish festival of the Passover.

No matter what the occasion, learning to say good-by is often a difficult but necessary part of life. All of us want to hold on to some things. Yet from birth to death we face a series of good-bye's.

In birth we say good-by to the womb. Later there is weaning. Then the good-by to the security of the home when we begin school. There is the first good-by to our own bed when we stay overnight at someone else's house. There are the good-byes we say to various objects which have become very important to us as children and even as adults, perhaps a toy or something else that has special meaning for us.

When we leave home for college or to take a job, or rent our first apartment, we are at the same time saying good-by to a former way of life. There may be the good-by involved in the break-up of our first love affair. If we choose to marry, that involves a different kind of good-by to our former way of life and to the family in which we grew up. In today's world, more and more people move from one job to another and from one part of the country to another and this means learning to say good-by in many ways. Divorce, the death of relatives, friends, parents, facing our own death--all are a part of learning to say good-by.

Each day we say good-by to the past. When we celebrate birthdays we are saying good-by to another year in our lives. One reason for New Year's celebrations is to have a way of saying good-by to the year just ended.

Much of the Christian faith is about learning to say good-by without regrets. When we come a Christian, it means saying good-by to our old way of life and being born again. This may happen suddenly or gradually--just as many good-byes can take place suddenly or gradually.

Today on this first Sunday of the New Year of 1979, with the celebration of Holy Communion, we are saying good-by to the past as Christians. And there are things in the past year that we are glad to say good-by to, and other things which we wish we didn't have to leave behind.

We are glad to say good-by to the mistakes we have made, to our failures. And the good news of our faith is that God says good-by to them also. God forgives us and invites us to begin fresh.

Yet the problem is that some of us, even though we would like to say good-by to our mistakes and failures, have trouble doing so. We carry some of them with us like a weight around our necks. Even though our faith invites us to say good-by to our past, to that which we regret, to the hurts and pains we carry from the past, to the bad memories which haunt us, it is not always easy to do.

Sometimes we can help others to do this by our forgiving them even as God forgives them and us. And others can help us when we know of their forgiveness and acceptance.

A prison warden tells this story. A friend of his happened to be sitting in a railroad coach next to a young man who was obviously worried. Finally the man revealed that he was a convict returning home from a distant prison. His imprisonment had brought shame on his family and they had neither visited him nor written him very often. He hoped however that this was only because they were too poor to travel and too uneducated to write. He hoped, despite the evidence, that they had forgiven him.

To make it easy for them, he had written them to put up a signal for him when the train passed their little farm on the edge of town. If his family had forgiven him, they

were to put a white ribbon in the big apple tree near the railroad tracks. If they didn't want him back, they were to do nothing, and he would stay on the train, go west, and never return.

As the train neared his home town, his suspense became so great he couldn't bear to look out the window. His companion changed places with him and said he would watch for the apple tree. In a minute, he put his hand on the young convict's arm. "There it is," he whispered, his eyes bright with sudden tears. "It's all right, the whole tree is white with ribbons."

In that instant, all the bitterness that had poisoned a life was dispelled. "I felt as if I had witnessed a miracle," the other man said. And he had. The convict's family had learned to say good-by to his past sins and mistakes, and in so doing helped him to say good-by to them also.

This morning in our Communion together, remember it's a good-by meal. Before you eat the bread and drink the wine, think for a moment about those things in the year just past that you want and need to say good-by to. Perhaps some bad habit, or some hurt you carry with you, or something which happened to you and still bothers you. Maybe you need to forgive someone, to say good-by to some harm which someone brought to you. Remember above all, Holy Communion tells us that God says good-by to our sins and mistakes over and over again. God forgives us.

Remember too, that Holy Communion is also a "hello" meal. Jesus was saying good-by to his disciples and also hello to a new life for him and for them. Once we learn to say good-by to the things of the past, then we are able to say hello to new commitment; hello, to a new way of life. Then we can start fresh. God always gives us the chance to start over again, no matter how much we have fouled up in the past. Amen.