SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 1983

Book 12

"JUST A PIECE OF BREAD"

LUKE 24:13-16, 28-31

"WHEN HE WAS AT TABLE WITH THEM, HE TOOK THE BREAD AND BLESSED, AND BROKE IT, AND GAVE IT TO THEM. AND THEIR EYES WERE OPENED AND THEY RECOGNIZED HIM." (LUKE 24:30)

SOME MONTHS AGO, ON A SUNDAY MORNING FOLLOWING A WORSHIP SERVICE IN WHICH HOLY COMMUNION HAD BEEN CELEBRATED, A YOUNG GIRL ABOUT FIVE YEARS OLD CAME FORWARD TO LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT THE MATERIALS OF COMMUNION UP FRONT HERE ON OUR COMMUNION TABLE. SHE ASKED ME IF SHE COULD EXAMINE THE BREAD, SO I TOOK ONE OF THE BREAD TRAYS OFF THE TABLE AND HELD IT DOWN CLOSE TO HER LEVEL SO THAT SHE COULD SEE IT. SHE STUDIED IT VERY CAREFULLY FOR A MOMENT AND THEN SAID, "WHY, IT'S JUST A PIECE OF BREAD."

AND, OF COURSE, SHE WAS CORRECT. IT WAS JUST A PIECE OF BREAD, THE KIND MANY PEOPLE PUT ON THEIR TABLES EVERY DAY, THE KIND WE USE FOR TOAST IN THE MORNINGS OR FOR SANDWICHES AT LUNCH. THAT'S ONE WAY TO LOOK AT THE BREAD USED IN HOLY COMMUNION.

BUT REALITY AND TRUTH COME TO US ON SEVERAL LEVELS. SOMETIMES THERE'S MORE TO SOMETHING THAN AT FIRST APPEARS. TAKE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PHOTOGRAPH AND A PAINTING. THE CAMERA FAITHFULLY RECORDS THE FACTS -- NOTHING MORE -- YET THE ANGLE OF THE LENS, THE AMOUNT OF LIGHT USED, WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THE PHOTOGRAPH AND WHAT IS EXCLUDED, CAN ALL ADD OR SUBTRACT FROM THE TOTAL IMPACT OF THE PICTURE. THEN SUPPOSE THAT AN ARTIST PAINTS A PICTURE OF THE SAME SUBJECT MATTER. THE ARTIST PAINTS THE FACTS AS SHE PERCEIVES THEM AND INTERPRETS THEM. NOW WE SEE THE SUBJECT OF THE PAINTING THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ARTIST, AND THERE'S EVEN MORE INTERPRETATION THAN WITH THE PHOTOGRAPH.

TWO OR MORE PEOPLE STUDYING EITHER THE PHOTOGRAPH OR THE PAINTING WILL NOTICE DIFFERENT THINGS ABOUT THEM -- WILL EVEN SEE DIFFERENT THINGS AND DIFFERENT MEANINGS.

SO IT IS WITH HOLY COMMUNION AND THE ELEMENTS OF COMMUNION, THE BREAD AND THE WINE. WE CAN SEE JUST A PIECE OF BREAD OR A THIMBLE FULL OF WINE OR GRAPE JUICE AND NOTHING MORE. THAT'S ONE LEVEL OF MEANING.

OR SECONDLY, WE CAN SEE WHAT'S BEHIND THESE ELEMENTS. IT IS NO LONGER JUST A PIECE OF BREAD, BUT HAS SUDDENLY BECOME

MUCH MORE: A REMINDER OF GOD'S LOVE; A REMINDER OF A LAST MEAL TOGETHER OF JESUS AND HIS CLOSEST FOLLOWERS; A REMINDER THAT FOR ALMOST 2,000 YEARS CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN GATHERING TOGETHER AND, AS A PART OF THEIR COMMON WORSHIP, USED BREAD AND WINE. AND NOW WE FEEL CONNECTED AND A PART OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OVER THESE THOUSANDS OF YEARS.

THIS IS MORE THAN JUST A PIECE OF BREAD. IT HAS A STORY TO TELL; IT HELPS US TO REMEMBER WHO WE ARE; IT SPEAKS OF THE HOLY IN THE MIDST OF THE COMMON; IT REMINDS US THAT GOD IS PRESENT AMONG US IN SUCH SIMPLE THINGS AS THE EATING OF BREAD AND DRINKING WINE.

BUT THERE IS EVEN A DEEPER LEVEL OF REALITY HERE IN THIS PIECE OF BREAD. THIS IS THE REALITY THAT CUTS THROUGH FACTS AND TIME AND SPACE AND THEOLOGICAL THEORIES TO FINALLY BRING US TO THE MEANING AND MYSTERY OF LIFE ITSELF. HERE WE CAN EXPERIENCE THE MYSTIC ONENESS OF EXISTENCE.

SAMUEL MILLER PUT IT THIS WAY: "WHEN YOU TAKE A PIECE OF BROKEN BREAD IN COMMUNION, YOU DON'T TAKE JUST A PIECE OF BREAD. YOU TAKE SOMETHING IN WHICH THE SUN, MOON, AND STARS HAVE SHARED THEIR LIFE. YOU TAKE WITH THIS BREAD THE MYSTERY OF RAIN

FALLING ON THE EARTH; THE MYSTERY OF ITS DARKNESS; OF GRAIN GROWING; THAT STRANGE MYSTERY OF HOW HUMAN BEINGS EVER DISCOVERED THAT THESE GRAINS OF WHEAT COULD BE GROUND INTO FLOUR AND PEOPLE COULD AT LAST LEARN HOW TO BAKE BREAD OVER A FIRE. YOU TAKE IN THIS BREAD ALL THE COSMOS, EVERYTHING OF NATURE -- ALL THE MYSTERIES OF HUMAN EXISTENCE."

THERE'S EVEN MORE TO IT THAN THAT. THIS BREAD SPEAKS OF THAT LONG, PATIENT CLIMB OF HUMAN BEINGS OUT OF THE DARK OF THE PAST. WE TAKE WITH THIS BREAD, NOT ONLY THOSE THINGS WE REMEMBER IN AND AROUND THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE LIFE OF CHRIST, BUT WE TAKE ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY IN THIS BREAD.

FURTHERMORE, THIS BREAD FEEDS MY BODY, AND OUT OF MY BODY MY THOUGHTS COME IN THE MIND. AND FROM THE MIND AND BODY COME ALL THOSE SPIRITUAL ATTITUDES BY WHICH WE CHARACTERIZE OUR LIVES AND OUR FREEDOM.

AT ANOTHER LEVEL, OF COURSE, THIS BREAD IS MADE UP OF MOLECULES AND ATOMS AND ELECTRONS AND PROTONS AND NEUTRONS AND ALL KINDS OF OTHER SMALLER PARTICLES WHICH MODERN PHYSICS CAN TELL US ABOUT, AND ALL THINGS IN CREATION ARE MADE UP OF THE SAME KINDS OF PARTICLES, ONLY IN DIFFERING

ARRANGEMENTS. AND SO, AT THE DEEPEST LEVELS OF EXISTENCE, THERE IS A MYSTIC ONENESS AND UNITY THAT WE ONLY DIMLY PERCEIVE. ANALYZE AND BREAK DOWN THIS PIECE OF BREAD IN A MODERN LABORATORY, AND WE DISCOVER THAT IT'S MUCH MORE THAN JUST A PIECE OF BREAD.

SO WHEN WE EAT THIS BREAD THIS MORNING AND DRINK THIS CUP, WE ARE SAYING WITH OUR ACTIONS THAT THERE IS MEANING IN DEATH AND LIFE, IN HATE AND JOY, IN DOUBT AND FAITH. THERE IS MEANING AND MYSTERY IN THIS VAST CONTRADICTORY MIXTURE OF THINGS. THERE IS SUCH MEANING AND MYSTERY IN A PIECE OF BREAD THAT WHEN WE EAT IT, THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO THE HORIZON OF THIS WORLD. THIS PIECE OF BREAD WHICH WE CALL HOLY THEN REMINDS US THAT ALL OF LIFE IS HOLY, AND ALL THE THINGS OF LIFE ARE HOLY. AMEN.