Sunday, October 7, 1984
THE ORDINARY AND THE HOLY
Matthew 26:26-30

"Jesus took bread, and blessed and broke it, and gave it to the 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 you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

Jesus took things quite ordinary and common and showed that they were also holy. It was one of those times when ordinary things assumed a new importance. It happens over and over again in our lives if we have the eyes to see. That which seem quite ordinary or common to us is frequently a mask of the holy.

Each one of us if we search our lives can discover this truth. Here's what one man found. "It was October 17, 1975, and I was in Damascus, Syria, when I was stricken with a very severe kidney attack — the worst pain I have ever endured. I was alone in my hotel room, 5,000 miles from home and wife. The attack came in the middle of the night. The desk clerk was able to place an emergency call for a doctor, but the doctor could not come before morning.

At dawn I was writhing and moaning on my bed when a chambermaid entered to clean the room. When she saw me, her face registered horror and fright. But then she came closer, and her expression filled with compassion. She stretched her hands upward, smiled and said, "Allah!" Then she pointed to me and said, "Good.....soon!"

There was an instant miracle. It would be untrue to say that there was any abatement of my bodily pain; but the abatement of my spiritual pain was sudden and complete.

As she left the room, she blew a kiss to me. She soon returned with a cup of tea, which tasted like hot fruit punch. Maybe it wasn't tea, but no matter. It was soothing; indeed, it was a communion. I recalled what Christ said about a cup of water given to one of these little ones. This time I was among the little ones; an unfamiliar experience for me, and good for my soul.

It was a profound experience of communion and communication. Something quite ordinary — a cup of tea, was also something quite holy. Very few words had been spoken, but what was communicated was too deep and too good for words, for it was the caring and healing love of God."

If you have lived at all, you have experienced love communicated to you in some wordless way. In a time of grief, someone took your hand, or embraced you and you found it much better than any find words of sympathy. The best of words can never carry the holy — but ordinary things like bread and wine can.

In fact, it can be said that experience, the more common it becomes, the more holy it is! The holy is all around us in the most ordinary things. Sometimes we just don't have the eyes to see it. It's as if the ordinary is a mask of the holy and we don't always see beyond the mask.

One reason I like to read writers like Dr. Lewis Thomas and Loren Eiseley, is that they can see in the most ordinary things something far more than ordinary. Whereas, standing knee-deep in

miracles all around me, I often glimpse only a world of profane commonness. The twist of focus that brings the holy into view seldom occurs.

One of the most significant meanings of the incarnation, of God in Christ, is that the ordinary is no longer at all what it appears to be. Common things, common actions, common relationships are all granted a new definition because the holy has once and for all become ordinary in Jesus Christ.

The holy is all around us, but we have to make room for it, be ready to receive it; otherwise we are not aware of it. It requires a certain forgetting; a gradual clearing of the mind, a slowing of the mind and body. Once this happens, then the ordinary begins to reveal itself in new ways.

Then one begins to suspect that the contemplation of any ordinary thing, made extraordinary by attention and love, can become an occasion for glimpsing the profound, the holy. So, it is that Lewis Thomas finds hope for the human species in the accumulative intelligence of termites and in the thrush in his back year. He simply attends with the eye of a biologist and philosopher to what passes beneath our senses every day.

Perhaps we want to separate too much the holy from the ordinary. We expect some vision of god totally removed from our everyday life. We want to possess the sacred without owning the ordinary.

We scoff at the commonplace in the process of reaching for a grandeur we're convinced that the ordinary lacks. God in a baby in a manger? God in a carpenter shop in Nazareth? God in a cup of water given to a thirsty stranger? God in a march for peace? God on a cross? Are we able to accept the holy without takin offense at receiving it through the commonplace? Indeed, can I discern in my own relatives, my wife and children as themselves glimpses of the holy for me?

It is said that Martin Luther insisted that the freedom of Christians is realized in our becoming Christs to one another. In so doing, we discover in each other the presence of more than what appears.

So, it is not surprising that Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to the 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 you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Bread and wine — ordinary and common items — but also holy! They speak of God's presence here and now — within us and among us. Perhaps the best of words can never adequately carry the holy — but ordinary things like bread and wine can. Amen.