

Focus on the Lord

A sermon for the Holy Supper by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. ***I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.***” – John 14:15-18

Today as we prepare for the holy supper it may be useful to reflect on how we can focus on the Lord by this means, and why the Lord is said to be “wholly present” with us in this sacrament.

In that vein we begin with the Lord’s words in John’s Gospel referring to “another Helper” who would appear to His disciples, and who would abide with them forever after He Himself was glorified. This word, “Helper,” is also translated “Comforter,” and lest there be any doubt about who this might be the Lord explicitly said, “***I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.***” But because He would not come in exactly the same *form* as they had known Him until then, He referred to Himself as “another,” that is, as coming in *another form of Help* or Comfort, one that could be both *with* them and *in* them.

Now as we know from other passages nearby in the same context (John 14:26 & 16:13), He Himself called that new form the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Truth. Still, He said that *HE* would come, and so He clearly identified Himself as that Spirit – which invites the question... what do we mean by Spirit?

Well, as we know it is the spirit within a person that makes the person, the body is only an instrument to serve the uses of the spirit in this world (NJHD 46). And that spirit consists of will and understanding, or affection and thought. Of course in the Lord’s case it is infinite, Divine will and understanding, which are ***pure love*** and ***perfect wisdom***. Still, in the Lord’s case, as in ours, the material body was only an instrument that He took on to accomplish a very specific use in the world, namely battle against the evils and falsities that were and are pervasive here. Now *having done that*, He can appear to us *even more directly* without the physical body, ***spirit to spirit***, so to speak, if we are receptive.

And how can we become receptive? And how can we have confidence that what we are receiving is the Lord and not some corrupting spiritual influence? Well, that is the purpose of the Word, and of the doctrine drawn from the Word. You see, the evils and falsities, the errors and illusions of the world are still with us and though the Lord overcame them in Himself, WE still have to overcome them as we prepare for life in heaven. But we can’t do it without practical, objective guidance in the natural world. So the Lord has given us the stories and lessons of His Word for that purpose. In fact, the most practical, most important element of that guidance is the clear instruction about what evils are sins and what falsities are really hurtful, so that we can shun them and clear the way for a proper reception of His spirit, that is, His love and wisdom.

When we know the stories and lessons of the Word, and more importantly when we know what they *mean*, we are not only prepared to receive the Lord, we are actually in His presence. And when we DO what the Word teaches we are conjoined with Him, or rather He is conjoined with

us, because the obstacles are then removed. Now this is important: we are not conjoined with some abstract Force, Energy or “Higher Power;” we are conjoined with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Human, the Divine Man who as a spiritual being stands before us and walks beside us and informs us and inspires us to live well.

The word translated in John as “the Helper” or “the Comforter” in Greek and in the old King James translation is “the Paraclete.” The word is formed from two parts, *para*, as in parallel, and *kalleo*, which means to call; so it really means one who is called beside, or *called to one’s side* to aid or assist. In the case of the Holy Spirit this is not some vague aura of support, it is the Lord Himself coming to our aid in the full power of His Divinely Human love and wisdom.

We often say that the word, spirit, refers to understanding; so the spirit of truth is the understanding of truth. But in the case of the Holy Spirit it is the wisdom itself that *provides* for understanding. And of course that wisdom is no more nor less than the *expression* of Divine love providing for our eternal life.

Now what does all this have to do with the sacrament of the Lord’s supper? Well, first of all, this service is a re-enactment of something the original disciples did with the Lord near the end of His earthly life. It engages us through the use of all of our senses – sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell, so it has the potential to remind us very powerfully of the Lord when He was physically in the world. But more than this, it connects us with the Lord through the power of correspondences, the living relationship between natural and spiritual things.

Here’s how it works. Everything in this natural world is a form or manifestation of something spiritual: light, rocks, water, milk, wine – all these things exist in this world as physical expressions of some particular qualities of the truth of faith. Likewise animals, vegetables, fire, heat and, yes, bread, exist as physical expressions of the good of love. In fact, everything in the world is a visible form of some characteristic of truth or good. Even the harmful things in our environment are such forms, but in that case corrupted, perverted or abusive in nature. A person who is unaware of this relationship may not be affected much in a spiritual way by contact with the stuff of this world. To him or her it may just be stuff, which is either useful or an impediment to getting something done. But to the person who is aware of the correspondence those natural objects can evoke a very powerful sense of the spiritual realities at work in his or her life.

For example, knowing that light corresponds to truth, when we see light, or see by means of light, we can be reminded that we understand according to the truth we know. And when we drink water we can be reminded that our spirits are nourished and cleansed by the application of truth in a different form, say, the flowing form of stories that contain life lessons. When we observe and sense the affection of animals or feel the warmth of a fire we can be reminded of the useful, soothing, calming effect of the goodness of love in various forms in our lives.

So when it comes to the bread and wine of the holy supper, specifically unleavened bread and fermented wine as prescribed by the Lord, we can be reminded of Him in a very specific way – and more than that, conjoined with Him through an appreciation of what these things really signify about Him. *And what do they signify?* Of course the bread signifies the goodness of love; the wine the truth of faith. The Lord in offering these elements to His original disciples even said that they were His body and blood! – not literally, but symbolically, because He was the

embodiment of Divine love and the life-blood of this embodiment was the truth that He offered to all who would accept it. But the symbolism goes into much more depth and detail than this.

We make and use unleavened bread, that is, bread without yeast, because yeast, being a fungus, corresponds to the corrupting influence of evil in human life. All it really does in the making of bread is to introduce tiny bubbles of gas that are the byproduct of its growth and that cause the loaf to rise or be puffed up. But in the Lord, even from conception and birth, there was never any evil that was properly his own. There was never any corrupting influence from within Himself that caused Him to be in any way puffed up. All He ever cared about throughout His whole life was the salvation of others, indeed of the whole human race.

This correspondence goes right back to the Exodus from Egypt in the Old Testament, when the Children of Israel were commanded to leave that land in a hurry before their bread was leavened, hence the feast of the Passover, which commemorates that event, and which the Lord was attending at the Last Supper.

The wine of the holy supper, on the other hand, IS leavened, that is, fermented with yeast, and the reason is that when the Lord came into the world He took on the finite limitations that allowed the evils and falsities of the people around Him to challenge and attack His understanding. The result was a spiritual battle, a spiritual *fermentation* process that resulted in every evil and falsity being overcome and subjugated, like the dregs of unfiltered grape juice that fall to the bottom of a bottle and become inert while the juice itself is clarified, purified, and enriched by a small percentage of alcohol. This purified wine, we believe, corresponds to the purified, glorified Divine truth of the Lord's own understanding, and it is offered as a physical symbol of that truth. And by the way, it's good to remember that the alcohol in wine kills bacteria – which is the natural reason why the Good Samaritan poured wine on the injured man's wounds, and one very sensible reason for using wine with a shared or "common" cup.

But yes, sadly, some people are not able to drink any alcohol and so they have difficulty with the wine. But don't worry! The very source of all wisdom is love, so that love actually has wisdom within it; we just don't understand it until or unless we can approach it objectively, without reservations or fear. So if there is something – anything – preventing a person from drinking wine, he or she can be conjoined with the Lord by humbly accepting just the bread (AC 4211). In fact, simply having the *desire* to partake of the bread and wine (whether one actually partakes or not) indicates the intention to receive the Lord's love and wisdom, and may be sufficient to bring about conjunction with Him, provided we are not holding back for any selfish reason.

That said, many of you are familiar with the teaching, often repeated, that the holy supper is the most holy act of worship. Just thinking about this makes it seem as if we may be missing the most important thing in worship if we don't – or for any reason can't – partake. It is therefore one of the factors driving the demand for alternatives to wine in the supper. But we need to know that the New Church doctrines were all written originally in Latin, and in Latin there is no definite article adjective, that is, no "the." Furthermore in Latin the superlative is never absolute, never "the most" of anything, but rather something "very great," "very big," "very important," and so on. Thus what the doctrines actually tell us is that the holy supper is "a **very** holy act of worship," not "**the most** holy act." This of course doesn't mean we can take it or leave it on a whim, but it does mean that it isn't essential for a healthy relationship with the Lord. USEFUL? By all means! But necessary, no. There are other acts of worship that can be very holy too.

The real key to a healthy relationship with the Lord is the effort we make to focus on Him, think about Him, understand Him and love Him. We can't do this unless we think of Him in Human terms, but don't be fooled: we aren't thinking of Him in truly Human terms just because we have a mental picture of Him in a physical form. This is why He glorified Himself, leaving no picture other than the written record of His work, and why He has now revealed Himself in the new form of the Heavenly Doctrines, which explain in detail what was involved ***and is still involved today*** in His work with us. In the end the Divine Humanity can only be appreciated in terms of pure love and purified wisdom, which are the very things we find in the Heavenly Doctrines.

In fact, it is not really an exaggeration to say that the Lord's glorified natural body in the world today is none other than ***the body of revelation*** He has given us in the Writings. The Old and the New Testaments speak powerfully of His Humanity – His thoughts, His affections and His actions in all sorts of worldly circumstances, but the Writings now take us into the celestial and spiritual realms of His incredible love and wisdom in every aspect of creation, providence, free will, rationality and the life after death. And so if we want to be conjoined with Him, if we want to call Him to our side to help and comfort us, if we want to be aware of His presence as the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth ***with*** us and ***in*** us, what can we do? – obviously, read and reflect on the Heavenly Doctrines! Then, when we come forward to partake of the bread and wine in the holy supper He will really be there for us – in spirit and in truth, with the power to inspire a better life, from the inside out.

Finally, there are as you know some important teachings about worthiness in approaching the holy supper, and these teachings can be a little daunting when we are so very conscious of our faults and failings. But what do the passages really say? They say the truths of faith bring the Lord's presence in the holy supper, and the goods of charity together with faith bring about conjunction with Him (TCR 725). **BOTH OF THESE ARE GOOD THINGS**, it's just that one is better than the other. There need be no fear of hypocrisy or profanation if we do not feel fully prepared, fully regenerate, in coming to the Lord's supper. Were any of the first 12 disciples regenerate? No! Is any one of us fully regenerate? No, of course not. The important thing is not all that you have accomplished so far in your life, it is what you hope and pray in all humility that you CAN accomplish with the Lord's help!

So the holy supper is an opportunity to be fed and nourished in that hope, to fully engage the whole mind and body in a simple ritual that affirms His presence and reminds us of His infinite compassion, and especially His infinite provision for us in the letter and in the spirit of His Word.

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-3 and Luke 4:16-22
 Children's talk on What the Lord Can Do for Us

 John 14 & 16, selections
 The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine #210-214