

Nourishment & the Holy Supper

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, September 25th, 2016

“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.” ~ John 6:27

It has often been said that if you enjoy your work it's not really work, it's what you do for your own pleasure and satisfaction. “Work,” or labor, is what you do because you have to in order to achieve something else that you want or need.

So in the spiritual sense work, or labor, is what we do to get over ourselves, to repent, reform, and compel ourselves to live according to the laws of heaven. It's not easy and at least in the beginning it's not fun, but if we want to be fed or nourished spiritually it is a necessary means to that end. And yes, we can labor spiritually for “the food that perishes,” thinking we will gain peace of mind, lasting satisfaction and delight from worldly things, but the Lord knows this is not a good plan. As we see every day in the news if not in our own lives, no matter how hard we work, one false move, one inattentive moment can change our earthly life completely. On the other hand, if we labor for “the food that endures to everlasting life” we are assured that such incidental events have little significance; it is the ruling love or determination that counts.

But what is it to “labor for the food that [so] endures”? You might think it would simply be to live well, to do the right thing, or to be kind and generous even when we don't feel like it. But the teaching in John suggests much more – “which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.” In fact, without looking to the Lord and doing what we do *because HE said so* we're missing the point.

The expression, Son of Man, refers specifically to the Lord in His Word, *the truths of revelation* and not just common sense or “enlightened self-interest.” Likewise “God the Father” refers not only to the Lord as Creator, but to His Divine love, from which all blessings ultimately flow. And the thing is, that Divine love is communicated to our minds ONLY through the truths of His Word, which we need to learn and then practice, no matter how difficult they may seem.

The specific challenge of our text this morning is therefore to do the work of learning what the Word teaches, even though it feels like work, since it is only by doing this that we can be nourished with heavenly food, “the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:33).

The Upper Room

Speaking of “coming down from heaven,” the literal imagery suggests something falling from the sky, as for example rain or mist. So we are reminded of the manna in the book of Exodus, where the Lord told Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you” (Ex. 16:4). What better place could there be to receive this bread than on a rooftop, which was in fact the “upper room” where the Lord told His disciples to gather and prepare for this feast. In ancient Israel this was the typical “second story” of a house where family members might gather to visit or do certain household chores. For one thing it was out of the way of the domestic animals that usually

had easy access to the ground floor, and besides, it was a pleasant place to enjoy the evening breeze after a hot Palestinian afternoon. Think of it as you would a patio deck or a rooftop terrace, somewhat above the fray of ordinary life, a quiet spot where a person could visit with friends or family members and reflect on the events of the day.

And of course, this quiet, elevated place corresponds spiritually to an elevated or *interior* state of mind, a state of love and reflection in which, if we pay attention, we can really connect and be conjoined with the Lord. I say “reflection,” even though that is not the most interior state, because the evening generally represents that frame of mind. So an elevated, evening state represents both of these conditions.

And though we are here now in the middle of the day, the sacrament of the Lord’s supper is being offered as an opportunity to enter into this very particular state. True, in the past and even in our Liturgy it has been referred to as a sacrament of repentance (DP 122, *e.g.*), but the greater truth is that it’s a sacrament of love and commitment to the Lord: the focus is intended to be on Him, and not on ourselves *as we are doing the work of repentance*. For as we noted a few moments ago, the work is hard, and it can be overwhelming when we think too much about our failings and our needs. Now and then we need to go upstairs to that peaceful, refreshing, interior state of love and communion with the Lord, take a deep breath of the fresh air up there and just let ourselves relax: – turn things over to the Lord and relax.

Various Challenges in the Holy Supper

This – relaxing – may not be what first comes to mind when you think of the holy supper. What first comes to mind may be the teachings about our worthiness to partake. We know that we can’t be conjoined with the Lord in real, unselfish love if we’re not “worthy,” meaning if we haven’t made a real effort to shun the evils that lurk in our affections, but remember, the *full* teaching about this is that although we can’t be *conjoined* in that case, the Lord can still be *present* for us if we approach the sacrament respectfully (TCR 716, 719), and so we can still *connect* with Him at least on the conscious level of thought, and rededicate ourselves to the work.

Again, when you think of the holy supper you may quite naturally have self-conscious thoughts about coming forward in front of the whole congregation to do something that seems not only conspicuous but, given our sensitivities, maybe even a little presumptuous. Part of that, at least for some, is that same old “worthiness” concern: who is really worthy? Who is really “regenerate” enough to partake with full integrity? We certainly don’t want to give other people the impression that we think so highly of ourselves. Besides, isn’t this a deeply personal and private thing, connecting with the Lord?

In response there are several things to consider. First of all, this is *not* just a personal and private thing: we are all in this struggle together, and we all need one another’s support: – OK, not necessarily in public confession, but by comforting one another in the knowledge that the Lord can help. We all have our failings and deep down inside we all know it. So this is not about who’s good and who’s not so good. It’s about all of us in solidarity doing our best to encourage one another to lean on the Lord – to put ourselves in a position where we can connect with Him, feel close to Him, and for at least a few moments let go of our pre-occupation with ourselves. In this connection, when we come forward to partake it can be really useful to be aware of and sensitive to those around us. And when we go back to our places after partaking, if we notice other peo-

ple, or they notice us, it can be a pleasure to sense the affirmation of a shared experience, even if only of the *effort* to make that connection with the Lord. Reverence and pleasure are not mutually exclusive. Love to the Lord and love toward the neighbor go hand in hand.

Further, even though the heavenly doctrines speak of this as something for the “regenerate,” what this really refers to is those who are *entering into the process* of regeneration. Nobody, not even an angel of heaven, is ever completely regenerate. This is why baptism and the holy supper are described as “two GATES,” not two kingdoms. Baptism is a gate of entrance into the process of reformation, and so into the church. The holy supper is a gate of entrance into the process of regeneration and so into heaven (TCR 571, 721). But participating in the holy supper does not mean a person is fully regenerate any more than baptism means he/she has been fully reformed. Both sacraments simply confirm the intent and the effort to engage in these things.

So, is the holy supper necessary? No, not really. People can get to heaven or a heavenly state without either of the sacraments, *but they are given to help us*, and why wouldn't we accept this help? As the Lord said, “This do in remembrance of Me.” Here's how it works: by engaging all of our physical senses it allows us to concentrate both inwardly and outwardly on Him. We hear His teaching about the supper, we see the elements prepared and offered, and we touch, smell and taste them as we participate. Every aspect of this is correspondential and so opens up a link to the Lord – the hearing to His Word, the sight to an understanding of Him, the touch to our affection for Him, the smell to our perception of His presence with us, the taste to the discernment of His love and wisdom in us, and the ingestion of these things to the full incorporation of them into our lives. Note that there is nothing here about selfishness and misunderstanding, nothing about our flaws and failures. It is all about focusing on HIM.

Sure, we may be conscious of the many distractions around us, but again, if it's other people we worry about we might try thinking of them not as critics or observers but as fellow laborers, each group coming to the vineyard at a different time and all being given the same reward, the same recognition by the Lord. One group is not better than another; we are all doing what we can, and the Lord recognizes every effort accordingly. So should we.

the Holy Supper as a Feast with the Lord

Now in the children's talk we referred to the many feasts – and three in particular – that the Jews were commanded to observe every year. And we know that the holy supper was introduced by the Lord during the feast of Passover – which is why we use unleavened bread. Still, it was a feast. However in the development of our ritual for observing the supper it is possible that we have emphasized the solemnity of the occasion to such an extent that (a) it has become intimidating, and (b) it has become a challenge rather than blessing. As for the challenge, we are all too familiar with the predictions of the Lord's looming crucifixion at that time, and these prompt us to think about how we ourselves betray Him from week to week. But the Lord did not institute this ritual to recall either His suffering or the betrayal He knew He would face, He did it to remind us again and again of His love, His wisdom and His power to get us through it. For this we should above all be *happy*, and *thankful*, despite whatever failings plague us.

And if the ceremony is intimidating, remember that it is intended to be a gate of entrance into *heaven* (TCR 721), and heaven is where you are when you are at peace having *done* the work of repentance and reformation – or at least some of it. Of course, heaven itself might well be intim-

idating if you don't think you're "good enough" to enjoy it, but recall the parable of the talents in Matthew 25: those who used the talents their lord gave them were rewarded with a promise of authority "over many things" and were told, "Enter into the joy of your lord." That authority, no doubt, is the power He gives us to control our own selfish and worldly inclinations so that we CAN have peace and joy. So if we're doing the work, why would we decline the reward, the sense of joy we *could* have even in the holy supper as we turn our hearts fully to the Lord?

You know, of course, that when you walk out that door and go back to your routine you are going to be faced with more challenges, more temptations, more doubts about yourself and your future. Why not take a few minutes now and get recharged for those challenges. Think of it as an opportunity to rest a little in His presence before going back to work, and see – "taste and see" if He doesn't reward you with a quiet, hopeful perception of His love and wisdom.

Amen.

Lessons: Leviticus 23: selections
 Children's talk about the feasts in ancient Israel

John 6:25-35, 41-51
True Christian Religion #719

The third lesson:

"The Lord is present and opens heaven to those who worthily approach the holy supper; *and He is also present with those who approach it unworthily*, but does not open heaven to them; consequently, as baptism is an introduction into the church, so the holy supper is an introduction into heaven.

"... The Lord is present with both the worthy and the unworthy, because He is omnipresent both in heaven and in hell, and also in the world, thus with the evil as well as with the good. But with the good, that is, the regenerate, He is present both as to universals and as to particulars; for the Lord is in them, and they in the Lord; and where He is, there is heaven. Heaven also constitutes the Lord's body; therefore to be in His body, is to be at the same time in heaven.

"The Lord's presence, however, with those who approach unworthily is His universal but not His particular presence; or, what is the same, it is an external but not an internal presence. The Lord's universal or external presence causes a human to live as human, and to enjoy the faculty of knowing, understanding, and speaking rationally from the understanding....

"With those, therefore, who only understand what is true and good, the Lord's presence is universal and external; but with those who also will and do what is true and good, it is both universal and particular, that is, both internal and external. Those who only understand and talk about the true and the good, are like the foolish virgins, who had lamps but not oil; whereas those who not only understand and talk about the true and the good, but also will and do them, are the wise virgins who were admitted into the wedding, while the others stood without and knocked, but were not admitted, Matt. xxv. 1 12. From this it is evident that the Lord is present and opens heaven to those who worthily approach the Holy Supper; *and that He is also present with those who approach it unworthily*, but does not open heaven to them."