

Psalm 12:1-7  
Hebrews 11:8-12

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
Victor M. Wilson, Pastor

Time

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary  
July 2, 2006

## **TABLE OR ALTAR: SERVICE OR SACRIFICE**

War has a bold way of reshaping theology, of taking beliefs long held sacred and holding them to the fire to see how resilient our doctrines are to the heat of stress.

There's one element of worship that long characterized the outlook of the Church. It was the communion table; specifically, where it was placed and what form it took. If the place upon which the elements were set had a solid appearance, like a box, then it conveyed the sense of an altar and a sarcophagus. An altar is a place of sacrifice where a death takes place, and a sarcophagus is a tomb above ground in which the dead are laid to rest. The image and the sense of fellowship created by a table, however is very different. One cannot put one's feet under an altar. A table is where a family gathers, a group of people bound in a life sustaining fellowship together. A table is a place where we nourish ourselves and each other as we share the moment with the real presence of our Lord.

The question the church has struggled with over the centuries is: which is the right or proper representation of the supper. The Catholic Church had said that the Mass or Eucharist, what we call Communion or the Lord's supper, is the reenactment of a real sacrifice, the death of Christ, hence at the "altar." Most Protestant churches, however, believe it is both a memorial meal, an act of remembering and an equipping for service, a place to receive nourishment for the tasks that face us. Consequently, this is a communion "table," for a meal.

Which one, then, is right, table or altar, sacrifice or service, that is, a place to receive nourishment, from which we are to be sent out? The presence of our troops in the Iraq/Afghanistan war assures me that it is both.

I doubt if there can be any more real, more deeply felt reception of the Lord's Supper than among our troops in the theatre of war, and no doubt their loved ones at home. Can there be anything which more urgently contrasts the sweet taste of life and the sour taste of death than when bread

and cup are taken while their lives walk a knife edge of uncertainty. All that is bound up in the sacredness and mystery of this supper is so palpable in the lives of our troops right now.

-- life that stands ready to be taken away, so that others might live, as in this meal.

-- the prospect of dying is unfailingly imminent, especially for those at the front, just as dying is a token of this meal.

Any time we are given our life back... that is pure grace.

I recall sitting for two hours over breakfast one morning in the hospital with a former infantry captain. It was early and we were waiting for a word of his four year old daughter who was having surgery.

Somehow, the conversation got around to Vietnam.

I recall sitting in near shock as he talked of his final few weeks of a two year assignment. He talked quite without melodrama or bravado. He told me how only two of his original company made it through combat time. How death became a daily expectation, rather than a hope of evasion. How his last orders were to lead the first platoon of an advance party into a village which was known to be heavily fortified by Vietcong. How they did not think that they might die; they knew they were going to die. How each succeeding company might gain a few more yards, but for them it was unquestionably their last mission.

I remember listening to his story unfold, almost matter-of-factly. How caught up I was in the vividness of the moment. I sat across the table from this man in a near empty cafeteria at seven in the morning, wanting to offer a prayer for him as he led me into the village. I sat there, staring into his eyes over two cups of now cold coffee, saying to myself, "He's going to die. I remember feeling, for the first time in my life, the first intimations of what it must feel like to be at war, to stare cold death in the face, to curl my toes over the edge of the abyss, feel that brown taste in the corner of my mouth, and fear rising like a storm in my stomach.

I remember being so caught up in the horror of his experience that I could almost feel the humid air, the dust of the road, and the combat fatigues hard with grime and slick with sweat. How a malicious silence engulfed them as they started into the village. And how the silence continued far beyond their expectation, as if drawing them into a terrible trap, taunting them. How eventually a villager came whispering to them that the VC were housed in a certain part of the village and that he would take them there to surprise them. Which they did. And then it was over. At least the telling of it was, but I suspect that it is never really over. And how I wanted to shout out

with relief, “Thank you, Lord, thank you, Lord,” over and over. I felt as though I had been given my life back. You know what I mean.

In that staggering moment of identification, in the very heart of the story, I remember *feeling* that I was going to die. It was all so palpably real. By sheer grace:

“Thou hast delivered my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling”.

Grace. Sheer grace. Unfathomable grace is what brings us all home.

In a war zone uncertainty and fear are steady companions. This is a Gethsemane experience for these dear people who, like Christ, would all rather that this cup be taken from them, yet are willing to drink of it when asked.

A sacrifice, a willingness to let life be exchanged as an act of duty and obedience, no matter how one characterizes the morality of this war, is everywhere apparent in the midst of war, as it is in this holy supper.

The deep pain of the threat of separation from loved ones and colleagues, so apparent in Jesus last discourse in the upper room in John’s Gospel is everywhere apparent. So, too, is the bonding to friends in the hour of trial, so vivid in this last meal. One cannot distinguish between sacrifice and service in these things.

There are few traditional altars or communion tables in a war zone, but the themes of sacrifice and service which they represent are everywhere abounding. They are embodied all throughout this Lord’s Day:

- in airless tents of mottled camouflage with dry sand floors;
- in the half light of fox holes, the air thick with the sharp smell of cordite on clothing, and the rising odor of stress on too many bodies close confined;
- in moments stolen in the lull of battle—in a M.A.S.H unit; in a service bay; in a huge hanger where the roof spreads like a great firmament over a concrete floor; between steel bulkheads onboard ship; crouched low beside a personnel carrier or a Humvee; on the hood of a jeep.

“This is my body, this is my blood,” takes on a whole new frame of reference.

It speaks of one who died yet lives for us and invites us to become as

he is. He who knows suffering and what it can accomplish. Who knows that through suffering all have opportunity to grow, regardless of how suffering is thrust upon us.

So as we share this meal this day, I encourage you to pause and let your prayer be lifted for those who, in distant lands, share this meal and the faith it embodies. Ask for them the nourishment of God's presence, who gives everything needed for the hour of trial.

Amen