

**Sermon, 13 April 2008—Fourth Sunday of Easter**  
Acts 2:42-7; Psalm 23; I Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Most of you will have heard by now that Marion Martinson died this past Thursday. Her kidneys collapsed on Tuesday, and even after surgery to remove infected tissue and after dialysis, they did not return to function, and she died early Thursday afternoon, quickly but peacefully. The visitation is from 4 to 8 p.m. today at the Miller-Carlin Funeral Home on Roosevelt, and her funeral is at 10 a.m. here tomorrow morning. In the midst of life, we are in death; the loss of Marion cuts deeply into this congregation. Several of you have spoken to me fondly of your memories of her. I hope you can join her family to celebrate her life and to commend her to God.

At the same time, in the midst of death, we are in life; we Christians assert that death is not the end, but that love endures because we are held together in God. This is precisely what the sacraments communicate to us. Marion's death brings these reflections home. Baptism and Eucharist must be more than a holy hazing and a club lunch. Only if God has acted and continues to act in these two events do we have any consolation and any hope. In the face of loss, our need to understand what we have been given in these two actions and to claim that gift becomes even more timely.

There are two great waves of prayer that run up the beach of the Service of Holy Communion: the Prayers of the People and the Eucharistic Prayer. Twice we gather our intentions and thoughts and hopes and deepest longing. We stand when we pray, to express our alertness and readiness, our attention and respect. Sometimes we kneel, to remind ourselves by our posture of our incompleteness, even weakness, and our need and humility.

In that first great wave of prayer—the Prayers of the People—we collect what we carry daily and present it to God in light of what we have heard in Scripture and in light of the faith we affirm. The Prayers of the People come after hearing what God did on behalf of our forbearers in faith and after affirming our own faith through the words of the Creed. Given what God has done and given our belief that God continues to purpose what we have heard that God purposed in ages past, what are we made confident to bring up before God? Given what we have discovered about God’s will as it is revealed in Scripture and given our bold claim in the proclamation of the Creed that we place ourselves in the company of those who trusted in God and were delivered, what are we now ready to request?

We should, from every corner of this congregation, heave up from our hearts what makes them heavy and tender, even what softens them with joy and thankfulness. Here is the first place where our memories of Marion, our hope for her, our gratitude for her, are presented before God from each of us, so we become witness together of what we hold together. These fragments of our concerns and our obligations and our delights are heaped up between us all, to be sorted and pieced together. After Jesus fed the five thousand, his followers collected twelve baskets of leftovers. But in the Prayers of the People, we run that film in reverse: we start by collecting in the baskets of prayer what is ragged and unfinished and unsettled and raw in our life, and we then present those torn bits back to God, who helps us see them as one loaf of bread, one intention of reconciliation and healing and peace and life with God, for Marion and for us, which we share as one people.

The great question every time we gather to pray as one congregation is this: are these words in fact one prayer or are they the shuffling of our most recent notions and urgent emotions? Is there anything that fuses these various

requests? This is not a theoretical question. A surprising number of Christians live spiritual lives of parallel play, each with their toys in different corners of the nursery until naptime. Some make it as far as the age of make-believe, trying to get others to live out their spiritual fantasies. Others make it to adolescence, where they at least arrive at a willingness, on a good day, to sit blankly with their arms folded until this “whatever” that folks around them seem to be caught up in is over and they can go shopping. Any of those three approaches to prayer, it seems to me, falls short. As our dear older brother Paul urged, “let us grow up to the full maturity of Christ.”

If nothing is going on here on Sunday morning, we could use the time more effectively doing other things—or even resting up for work. If you leave church as isolated and compartmentalized as you were when you arrived on Sunday morning, then nothing different than your ordinary daily experience, which creates that isolation and compartmentalization to begin with, is taking place here. If nothing changes when we are together in this room, then why are we here? If nothing changes in you when we pray and praise together, then where on earth do you ground your hope?—and we want hope for Marion and for all of us. If we do not touch reality here, then where on earth can we be taught how to love what is other than our own desires and our own flesh?—if we can learn to love anything that is not our self. For the life of me, I do not see how these are “heady” questions—I mean that: “for the life of me”—they seem instead the most vital things that fold their wings and settle in silence between us Sunday after Sunday.

So having collected the fragments of the Prayers of the People, we turn, after the offertory, to the prayer we pray over the bread and wine. As with baptism, we do this as an act of obedience. That young man, sitting with his friends after three years of heroically and joyfully rattling the cage of his age,

knowing he was likely to pay for that vigor and vision with his life, gave them broken bread and asked them to remember when *they* broke bread how he had broken himself open and given himself; and then he gave them a cup of wine, saying that he had poured himself out to make something new, and asked them to remember that God had made a new promise to them, a promise of restoration and liberation and reconciliation. And when they remembered him in that way over bread and wine, he was present again, known to them again, and his followers, holding on to what he had taught them, were bold to say that, more than simply remembered, he was *with them* again in that meal and *in them* because of it.

So this prayer is above all else our grateful remembering of Jesus. You have it printed in your bulletin if you wish to follow it as I speak.

Now, while it is true that God knows our needs before we ask, that does not mean that there is no point to asking. Our own ability to be clear about what we want and to whom we are speaking is the most beneficial discipline prayer can offer us. If we do not know what we want, we will never recognize it when we get it. If we are not looking for anything, then the church is the wrong place. If we do not know to whom we are talking, then it's probably just as well that we are the only ones listening.

For more than fifteen hundred years, the Eucharistic Prayer has opened with a conversation between priest and people. If at any point you decide not to respond, the priest can go no further, because consent to pray together has not been given. Look at the conversation. First, we bless each other, asking that God be with each. Then the priest asks you to lift up your hearts—not “Buck up your hearts;” not “C'mon, get happy;” not the devil's version “let's pretend we're all OK.” To lift up our hearts is to bring our hearts into the presence of God. It means this: “Set aside for these moments everything that tugs at your

heart, all that draws you away, all rivalries for your affection and attention, and bring yourself to stand, like the seraphim, before God.” The congregation consents and states that its hearts are open to God. The priest then suggests that the way to use this collected and attentive state is to give thanks to God; and the congregation agrees that giving thanks to God is the right thing to do. This prayer, in other words, is to be nothing at all but a prayer of thanksgiving. We have brought God gifts because we are grateful, and in this prayer we are going to name our reasons for gratitude and to ask only for those things that God has already promised to us and given to us, for which we are more grateful than for anything else.

Every Eucharistic Prayer then begins to name before God the history of salvation: creation, the calling of Israel, the words of the prophets, and finally the act that created us, the church, which is the gift of Christ. We are not asking God for anything in all of this; we are only naming the wondrous gifts for which we are grateful. We pause twice during that recollection. First, the congregation sings a song of praise composed of two verses from Hebrew Scripture. Isaiah saw the seraphim hiding their faces from God’s splendor and heard them calling out to each other that God is holy and that all creation is filled with God’s glory; we use the words Isaiah tells us he heard. The second verse is from a Psalm sung to accompany a victory procession in the Jerusalem Temple: blessed are all those who approach in God’s name. The second pause in our recollection of gratitude is the priest’s, who stops to remember the words that Jesus said over the bread and wine. To make sure we remember that last supper, the priest acts that memory out, handling the food and drink.

All this remembering culminates in the words of the congregation, who remembers the heart of our faith: Christ died, Christ is risen, Christ will return. Past, present, future—Christ present and alive in it all. Then, having

remembered all of this, we offer to God what we have brought forward as a token gesture of our gratitude: these gifts, this bread and this wine, which after all are not ours but God's, because God made them.

Only now do we make a request of God. Given everything about Jesus that we are grateful for, most of all for his present risen life, we have a request: "Send your Holy Spirit on these gifts." We ask that this One whom we believe to be spiritually present may be physically present in what we have given God, really present as he was with his disciples, the Word made flesh now the Word made bread. In addition to that, we ask in this prayer that the Holy Spirit descend on us also, because we also presented our selves to God when we lifted up our hearts at the beginning of the prayer. We also are on the altar. The transformation we request of ourselves is just as improbable and dangerous as the one made of the bread and wine: we also are to be transformed into Christ together, not individually, but corporately. We are to be made one in Christ, united to Christ, one with each other because we are one in him.

This double descent of the Holy Spirit upon the gifts resting on the altar and upon the gifts standing around the altar, dear sisters and brothers, is the mystery of this prayer. Not only the bread and wine are to be infused with the presence of Christ, but we also are to become together the person of Christ. The Body of Christ on the altar is to be received by the Body of Christ in the sanctuary. Augustine of Hippo would hold up the consecrated bread before the congregation and say, "See what you are; become what you see." And, of course, this prayer that we may be one is nothing more than the continued reenactment of the last supper, because that night Jesus also prayed that all his followers might be one as he and God are one. So we ask for ourselves only what he has already asked on our behalf—and the one who wills it has the power to accomplish it.

This is the point, you see; this is our comfort and our hope. Because of this, Marion is not lost to us. Because of the potency of this prayer, Marion remains one with us even as she now praises God on the farther shore of that river. This is not, for Christians, a remote thing. Remember Martha said to Jesus, “I know my brother will rise on the last day”—as if she meant that for the time being he is lost to her. Jesus responds, “I AM the resurrection”—an absurd claim, unless the Word of God is powerful to accomplish its own purposes; and how can we believe that it is not? So every Eucharistic Prayer ends with the request that is inevitable if we have been made one in Christ, which is that we be brought, with all God’s saints, into the joy of God’s eternal dominion.

Then, my dear brothers and sisters, all this having been done in this prayer—the distance between nature and grace shown to be overcome in this specific bread and wine, the alienation between human beings and between God and humankind shown to be reconciled in the oneness of this specific congregation as Christ—then, finally, we are ready to use the very words of Christ and pray his specific prayer, because we are truly him and therefore his words truly our words now. So we call God what Jesus called God, and because Jesus said it, and because we are one with him, we are now bold also to say, “Our Father.” We might be shaken to think that we are the offspring of divinity, heirs and creators of reality, forever at home in the real present, which is God’s dwelling place. As we pray these words, Christ prays them. The one voice praying them is the voice of Christ, with whom we have been made one. At that moment, you are Jesus at prayer again, pleading for the reconciliation of the world. May this prayer in you never cease, until it becomes the praise of all the saints, who in eternity proclaim the glory of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, now and forever.