

“Tracks of a Fellow Struggler”  
 (or, “What Do You Think Happens  
 at the Holy Table?”)  
 October 5, 2008 – Holy Communion  
 Exodus 20:1-21  
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA  
 James T. Richardson

**Exodus 20:1-21 (TEV)**

- 1 *God spoke and these were his words:*
- 2 *“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves.*
- 3 *Worship no god but me.*
- 4 *Do not make for yourselves images of anything in heaven or on earth.*
- 5 *Do not bow down to any idol or worship it, because I am the Lord your God and I tolerate no rivals. I bring punishment on those who hate me and on their descendants down to the third and fourth generation.*
- 6 *But I show my love to thousands of generations of those who love me and obey my laws.*
- 7 *Do not use my name for evil purposes, for I, the Lord your God, will punish anyone who misuses my name.*
- 8 *Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.*
- 9 *You have six days in which to do your work,*
- 10 *but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work---neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country.*
- 11 *In six days I, the Lord, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the Lord, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.*
- 12 *Respect your father and your mother, so that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you.*
- 13 *Do not commit murder.*
- 14 *Do not commit adultery.*
- 15 *Do not steal.*
- 16 *Do not accuse anyone falsely.*
- 17 *Do not desire another man’s house; do not desire his wife, his slaves, his cattle, his donkeys, or anything else that he owns.”*
- 18 *When the people heard the thunder and the trumpet blast and saw the lightning and the smoking mountain, they trembled with fear and stood a long way off.*
- 19 *They said to Moses, “If you speak to us, we will listen; but we are afraid that if God speaks to us, we will die.”*
- 20 *Moses replied, “Do not be afraid; God has only come to test you and make you keep on obeying him, so that you will not sin.”*
- 21 *But the people continued to stand a long way off, and only Moses went near the dark cloud where God was.*

Her name was **Laura Lue**, she was 10 years old, and she died of leukemia. I learned about her when I read a little book that was written by one of my heroes in the faith, the late Rev. Dr. John Claypool. The title of the book is Tracks of a Fellow Struggler.

I was deeply moved by this little book and that is one reason that I want to tell you about it. Written four years after Laura Lue's death, it is a series of four sermons which John Claypool shared his struggle and his pain and his faith with his congregation.

**The first sermon** was preached a few weeks after the initial diagnosis of Laura Lue's acute leukemia. **The second sermon** was preached about 9 months later, following a long period of remission, then a relapse into a final, active phase of the disease. **The third sermon** was preached a month following Laura Lue's death, and **the fourth sermon** was preached three years later.

I encourage your reading of this little book as a spiritual adventure of growth in faith.

I want to read to you something from John Claypool's **fourth sermon** which he has entitled "**Learning to Handle Grief**." The passage of scripture with which he deals is the Old Testament story of the suffering of Job. In the sermon, Claypool quotes a man named **Hugh Prather** who has written about an illness his wife suffered. As she sleeps by his side, Prather thinks:

*She may die before morning. But I have been with her for four years. Four years. There is no way I could feel cheated if I didn't have her for another day. I didn't deserve her for one minute, God knows.*

*And I may die before morning.*

*What I must do is die now. I must accept the justice of death and the injustice of life. I have lived a good life---longer than many, better than most. Tony died when he was twenty. I have had thirty-two years. I couldn't ask for another day. What did I do to deserve birth? It was a gift. I am me---that is a miracle. I had no right to a single minute. Some are given a single hour. And yet I have had thirty-two years.*

*Few can choose when they will die. I choose to accept death now. As of this moment I give up my "right" to live. And I give up my "right" to her life.*

*But it's morning. I have been given another day. Another day to hear and read and smell and walk and love and glory. I am alive for another day. (from Notes to Myself by Hugh Prather, quoted in Claypool, John, Tracks of a Fellow Struggler, Waco, Texas, Word Books, Inc., 1974, p. 100)*

My friends in Christ, **you and I** have been given another day! Another day to hear and read and smell and walk and love and glory. **You and I** are alive for another day!

And this Holy Table around which we gather reminds us that in this day, and in all other days which lie before us, **you and I** do not have to be afraid.

**TODAY'S PASSAGE IN EXODUS IS ABOUT BEING AFRAID.**

Just listen to the verses immediately following the listing of the Ten Commandments.

*When the people heard the thunder and the trumpet blast and saw the lightning and the smoking mountain, they trembled with fear and stood a long way off. They said to Moses, "If you speak to us, we will listen; but we are afraid that if God speaks to us, we will die." Moses replied, "Do not be afraid; God has only come to test you and make you keep on obeying him, so that you will not sin." But the people continued to stand a long way off, and only Moses went near the dark cloud where God was. [Exodus 20:18-21; TEV]*

My friends in Christ, **the Holy Table around which we gather reminds us that we do not have to be afraid!** God speaks to us in Jesus Christ so that we will not die an eternal death!

We are certainly people of the Law---the Ten Commandments. But even more so, we are people of the grace of God. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

*My inner being delights in the law of God. But I see a different law at work in my body---a law that fights against the law which my mind approves of. It makes me a prisoner to the law of sin which is at work in my body. What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death? Thanks be to God who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ! [Romans 7:22-25a; TEV]*

This Holy Table around which we gather this morning reminds us that we do not have to be afraid. But even more so, this Holy Table around which we gather reminds us of the whole life of Jesus.

We remember who Jesus was,

where he lived,

what he did,

what he said,

what he taught others,

who his friends were,

who his enemies were,

why he died,

why he was raised.

In the Presbyterian Church, when we celebrate this Sacrament, we do not believe that the bread and wine are miraculously changed into His body and blood (as do some Christians); this is known as Transubstantiation; and we do not believe that the bread and wine co-mingle with His body and blood in some mixture of substance (as do other Christians believe); this is known as Consubstantiation.

RATHER, we Presbyterian Christians believe that in the Sacrament of Holy Communion there is what we refer to as **“the real presence”**:

**Jesus is present with us.....REALLY**

**in our hearts,**

**in our thoughts,**

**in our souls,**

**in our midst.**

And the **“in our midst”** is very important for us. They are important to us because these words remind us that we are not **isolated, individual Christians**.

We belong to His gathered Body, the Church.

And so as we commune with God, we also commune with each other, the other members of the Body of Christ. That is why, symbolically, we gather **AROUND** the Holy Table.

That is why, also, that this is an **OPEN** Holy Table.

It is not just a Presbyterian Table; it is open to **ALL** baptized believers, regardless of to which denomination one may belong.

This Holy Table around which we gather reminds us that we do not have to be afraid.

This Holy Table around which we gather reminds us of the whole life and death of Jesus.

This Holy Table around which we gather reminds us of ourselves.

We remember who we are,

where we live,

what we do,

what we say,

what we teach other people,

who our friends are,

who our enemies are,

why we die,

why we shall be raised.

Knowing who we are,

knowing who Jesus is,

knowing what this Holy Table is,

we do not have to be afraid.

In Tracks of a Fellow Struggler, John Claypool has a sermon entitled “*Life Is Gift.*” In the sermon, Claypool says that only when life is seen as a gift and received with the open hands of gratitude is it the joy God meant for it to be. Then Claypool writes:

*A little something that happened to me years ago may help you to understand what I mean. When World War II started, my family did not have a washing machine. With gas rationed and the laundry several miles away, keeping our clothes clean became an intensely practical problem. One of my father’s younger business associates was drafted and his wife prepared to go with him, and we offered to let them store their furniture in our basement. Quite unexpectedly, they suggested that we use their washing machine while they were gone. “It would be better for it to be running,” they said, “than sitting up rusting.” So this is what we did, and it helped us a great deal.*

*Since I used to help with the washing, across the years I developed quite an affectionate relation for that old green Bendix. But eventually the war ended, and our friends returned, and in the meantime I had forgotten how the machine had come to be in our basement in the first place. When they came and took it, I was terribly upset and I said so quite openly.*

*But my mother, being the wise woman she is, sat me down and put things in perspective for me. She said, "Wait a minute, Son. You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all."*

*Here, in a nutshell, is what it means to understand something as a gift and to handle it with gratitude, a perspective Biblical religion puts around all of life. [Ibid, p.81-82]*

This Holy Table around which we gather reminds us that we do not have to be afraid.

This Holy Table around which we gather reminds us of the whole life and death of Jesus.

This Holy Table around which we gather reminds us of ourselves.

This Holy Table around which we gather says:

“Thanks be to God

Who give us the victory

Through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

*(1st Corinthians 15:57; RSV)*

**It is a gift**

**just as is**

**all of life!**