



*The Way of Grace: Finding God
on the Path of Surrender*

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Finding Grace in Submission

As I walked down the hallway to my office, I thought about the Eucharist I would serve in a few hours. It bothered a place in my spirit like the throbbing a splinter causes in your finger.

God impressed upon me that the sacramental duty required examination, mental and physical preparation, and meditation on the act itself. Instead of preparing, I was concentrating on what it would take for me to perform the duties. It required great stamina just to go through the entire process of reading, praying and offering the elements of communion. With these concerns in the forefront, I worried. Would I lean to the right or to the left? Would I drop the communion wafers? Would I have an attack and lose the ability to keep air in my diaphragm? Would I have enough strength to finish the Eucharist?

I was extremely stiff that Sunday morning. The Parkinson's was making my body sore and causing me to shuffle and stumble. I felt as if I would fall at any moment. And being tired didn't help. I had missed the pattern of a normal week due to travel and had come home spent. I was like a boxer in the ninth round, ready to say to my opponent, "You win."

These thoughts were chasing themselves around and around in my mind as I stepped up to the altar. I stumbled, and my heart pounded. I obsessed, wondering, *Who's watching? Did anyone catch my stumble? What will they think? My church family knows about my disability, but what about visitors? Will I embarrass my community of faith?* The more I concentrated on my inadequacies, my shortcomings and my illness, the more I felt removed from the spirit of the sacrament itself.

I spoke to the congregation: "I have Parkinson's. Therefore if I lean too much to the right or the left, it's not because I've had too much communion wine."

They laughed. I felt at home.

A newly ordained deacon named Andrew stood by my side and prayed over me. He placed a stool up front for me to sit on, and he held the communion plate for me. Sometimes my fingers cramped, preventing me from being able to separate the wafers, so he also did this for me. He stood by my side the entire time as I handed the elements to each person who came to the altar, and while I pronounced words of blessing and affirmation over them.

At the altar, the Lord showed me a truth. The more I concentrated on my disease, the more removed I was from joining in the mystical experience of breaking the bread and serving the wine. But the more I submitted to Jesus *in* this broken body – in the stumbling and stiffness, in reading the liturgy with stammering lips – the more his presence became magnified. My identification with Christ became crucial; his broken body was ministering through my

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Reverend Glandion Carney was associate pastor of pastoral care at St. Peter's Anglican Church in Birmingham, Alabama, until his recent retirement from active ministry. He was involved in *Renovaré* for fifteen years in the capacity of spiritual director and board member. He was also chaplain of the Christian Legal Society for twelve years and has published works in periodicals such as *Christianity Today* in addition to numerous books. Glandion and his wife Marion live in Birmingham where he enjoys volunteering with the Parkinson's Foundation.

broken body. When I went back to concentrating on my shaky performance because of the disease, his presence subsided.

I began to see that Jesus was real and that he was next to me, even in my limited physical ability. I felt something holy, pure and righteous enter into my spirit—a *fellowship of suffering and compassion*. I didn't manufacture this or dream it up. A mysterious thing happened during the Eucharist; my physical limitations became less important and, in a simple way, I saw the love of God for every person who came forward.

Everyone who came to communion that day seemed to receive a personal word of encouragement straight from the heart of Jesus through my words. I saw glimpses into every heart as they approached the altar. Some were sincere, honest people who needed to know that Jesus loved them in a special way. Others wanted encouragement or an affirmation of God's love for them. I could see their authentic hunger for God. I looked in their eyes and saw tears as burdens were lifted.

Instead of speaking the usual words, "the body of Christ, given for you," I said to a young man, "You have been a compassionate father to your children. God is going to be a compassionate father to you." There were tears in the eyes of an older man with a hard, sun-scorched face. For years he had been unable to connect with God and others. "God loves you more than you can ever realize," I encouraged him. To another I said, "God delights in you, you make him smile." A woman who had been healed of cancer and had returned to work heard, "Child, delight yourself in God. He is the source for all your life."

I can only explain this as a supernatural experience, which was not uncommon to the early church fathers as they administered the Eucharist. Those who came to the communion table that morning said they noticed the difference. One deacon said she saw light. Others felt the presence of Christ. I realized that my physical limitations were less important than I had made them. In fact, they were inconsequential. Jesus did his healing work in the hearts of our community, in spite of me.

As I shared lunch with friends that Sunday, I asked whether the service seemed real and honest. I was still struggling with whether those things had really happened or whether I'd made a fool of myself. Their answers left me with a deep assurance that it hadn't been a hoax or self-manufactured but an act of humility and compassion. Christ had come among us, and he had chosen to use the faltering speech and stumbling steps of one of his servants. All it took was yielding to him and taking my eyes off my own limitations. This experience enacted the truth of John the Baptist's statement, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30), the very definition of Christian submission.

— Taken from chapter two, "Experiencing the Presence"

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