Holy Communion was to be served. About two dozen residents had gathered in the sitting room, waiting in reverent silence. Each lived in a private jumble of unreality. For some, time had lost its meaning, and they lived in days past, peopled by loved ones long dead. For others, speech was garbled and no longer carried to others the intended messages. For a few, bodies no longer responded as they expected: a chair became a prison for one with weak legs, a spoon a foreign object to a memory that had lost hand-to-mouth coordination. Dementia had stolen control of their lives, their location, their decisions, their schedules—their very selves. How precious were the reminders of the deep and abiding love of the One Who Is in Control of Life.

Over the years, Christian denominations often have identified themselves by the unique ways in which they celebrate communion. It may be celebrated weekly or only occasionally. Sometimes it is a part of worship; sometimes it is a separate occasion. The communion elements may be administered by a priest or broken and shared between believers themselves. The actual body and blood of Christ may be present in the bread and cup, or they may be understood to be symbols of those holy realities. But always, the purpose is the same: to enter into a loving, saving relationship with God by eating and drinking reminders of Jesus’ sacrifice for the sin of the world.

And so they were gathered: persons for whom this earthly life no longer made sense and for whom heavenly realities were drawing ever closer. In the front row, on the right side, sat a devout, lifelong Roman Catholic woman; however, in such a setting, denominational differences are blotted out.

The Protestant chaplain introduced the bread with scripture and prayer. He and his female colleague had agreed that he would serve the bread and cup, one by one, to residents seated on the left side and that she would do the same on the right. As they did so, they varied the words of invitation to make them most meaningful to each resident.

“This bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. Take and eat,” and on to the next. “May this common symbol of bread be blessed to its spiritual meaning for the strengthening of your faith.” The female chaplain approached the dear Catholic lady. Casting about in her Protestant memory for the words of the Roman Catholic liturgy, she hesitated for a moment. Then, trying to sound as official as possible, she intoned, “The Body of Christ, broken for you. Eat this in remembrance of him.” The woman took the tiny piece of bread with both hands and slowly and reverently raised it to her lips. Then she quickly reached down and grasped the hands of the female...
Cats are reported to have nine lives, but she must have had at least twice that many. She was in and out of the hospital so often staff began to refer to it as her "second home." Her weak lungs and overworked immune system were no match for the pneumonia that seemed constantly to lie in wait for her. Over and over, the scenario was repeated: her breathing became more labored, she lost her zest for life and developed a little fever. She looked as if she were at death's very door as the ambulance whisked her off to the hospital. After two or three days of intravenous antibiotics, she'd be back, still weak, but nevertheless her usual self again.

On one of those "death's door" occasions, the chaplain came to sit with her as nursing staff made the necessary arrangements for the hospital transfer. Her eyes were closed; her breathing was labored and noisy; her skin was pale, and she lay very still. Is this just another of her eighteen lives, the chaplain wondered to herself, or is this the time for saying goodbye? Knowing that conversation would sap what little strength she had, the chaplain took her hand, and began to sing: "What a friend we have in Jesus...." "Precious Lord, take my hand...." The only response was a continuing weak gripe on the chaplain's hand.

"Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. I looked over Jordan and what did I see? A band of angels comin' after me. Comin' for to carry me home...." With great effort, she opened her eyes and looked directly at the chaplain. "When it's my time to go," she said in a clear but weak voice, "I don't want no chariot."

"Oh?" responded the amazed chaplain. "So what do you want to come for you when it's your time to go?"

"I don't want no chariot," she repeated, with just a hint of that mischievous twinkle in her glassy eyes. "I want a limousine."

...in loving relationships...

The chaplain sat quietly in a chair at the front of the room as recorded religious music prepared the flock for the weekly worship service. Because of a recent foot injury, one foot was ensnared in a clumsy, unattractive walking boot. They probably won't even notice, she thought. Very few of them can keep track of the day or where they are. They're too deeply engrossed in their own private worlds of reality to notice the chaplain limping.

Then, just as the prelude music was ending, it happened. In the midst of the little gathering, a woman stood up and began stepping past - and on - her neighbors as she walked toward the center aisle. The silence was broken only by the giggles of some of the other residents as she walked slowly toward the front of the room. She was oblivious to everyone and everything, except the chaplain's booted sore foot.

She reached the front of the room and stopped, gazing at the wounded extremity as if at an object of great value. She stood still for a moment, and a look of bewilderment spread over her face. Then, with a slight smile, she knelt down and placed one of her hands on each side of the sore foot. As if feeling the pain herself, she gently lifted the foot and its
heavy boot. She held it close to herself for a few seconds and patted it. Then, tenderly, she set it down on the floor again and stood up. A warm, healing smile spread over her face as she returned to her place in the group and sat down.

Worship was a little delayed that morning as the chaplain reflected upon the precious gift she had just received: the blessing of the foot.

...in reconciliation...

The last thing in the world she wanted, she announced to the social worker, "is a visit from some preacher woman." But the female chaplain went anyway. Introductions were a little strained, but when she discovered that the chaplain was more interested in her than in saving her soul, she relaxed. Soon she was sharing stories about herself and about the health problems that had necessitated her move to the health facility.

She was a lonely person. She'd been an only child, and her husband had died tragically just a few years after they were married. Their only child, a boy who was born a few months after his father's death suffered several, serious birth defects and died before reaching his second birthday. She had managed to eke out a living for herself by working as a cook and housekeeper for families who raced thoroughbred horses.

She followed the racing circuit, traveling with her employers from Florida to California, from Texas to New York. Long workdays and constant travel left her little chance for a life of her own. Her tiny room was sparsely furnished and decorated with pictures, not of family and friends, but of horses.

She'd been raised in the church. As an adult, however, she'd had little time for, or interest in, religion. Her conversation was sprinkled with scornful comments about the church along with boasts of her own sinfulness. Beneath this cynical exterior, however, she had a deep inner thirst to understand and experience life's spiritual realities.

She was angry at life's injustices, both to herself and to others.

"When I get to heaven, I'm going to ask God a few questions about why there is so much suffering in this world. If God's so good, then why doesn't he make things right down here?"

"Do you think you'll be going soon?" the chaplain asked.

"Lord, no," she laughed. "I'll probably never make it at all. God wouldn't want an old scoundrel like me."

"Now, don't be so sure. None of us can read God's mind or predict who'll get into heaven and who won't. We may all be surprised when we get there to see who else got in."

"Now, don't you go telling me that heaven is where I'll see all my old friends again," she snorted contemptuously. "I don't have any."

"Well, then," the chaplain asked, "what if I told you that heaven is where you'll see all your old horses again?"

She threw her head back and roared, laughing until the tears ran. It took a while for the hilarity to run its course. Evidently, it had been a long time since she'd had reason to laugh. Finally, she dried her eyes and tried to compose herself. With a piercing gaze, she looked the chaplain directly in the eye. Suppressing one final chuckle, she said, "I like your style. Please come back and visit often."

...in visions...

They were devoted to each other, even after more than fifty years of marriage. As age had taken its inexorable toll on them, they became almost inseparable.

Her mind was alert and healthy, but her heart had grown weak over the passing years. She became short of breath with even the slightest exertion. So, she got around only in a wheelchair, which he was eager to propel for her.

His step had slowed and his shoulders were stooped, but otherwise, his body served him well for one of his age. His memory, however, was gone. He would cheerfully begin pushing her down the hall toward the dining room and then stop. He not only had forgotten where they were going, he couldn't remember where they'd come from.

Together, they were a team. She directed, and he drove. She pointed the way for him, and he provided the "push power" to get her there. It gave them both the independence—and the togetherness—they each needed.

Then she was hospitalized with heart failure and died. At the time, he understood that she was gone. He attended her funeral—guided by family members—and wept at her graveside. However, his overwhelming grief intensified his memory loss, and in the days following, he had not the slightest remembrance of her death. Again and again, he would seek out one of the nursing staff, wide-eyed and fearful, saying, "Where's my wife? I can't find her." Gently, they would explain that she had died. Sometimes his tears would flow again with fresh grief. At other times, he would become angry,
shouting “What? When did that happen? Why didn’t somebody tell me she died?”

The day he insisted that he had just seen her, the nurses brought him to the chaplain’s office. “Where is she?” he asked over and over. “I just talked with her, but now she’s gone, and I can’t find her.” The usual factual reminder about her death did nothing to console him this time.

“I just saw her and I talked with her,” he insisted. “How could that be, if she’s dead?” How indeed, the chaplain wondered and then risked taking a step inside his memoryless world.

“What did you talk about?” the chaplain asked with interest.

“Oh, just like we always did. About work, and the kids, and stuff like that. And she told me she loves me. She always told me that, you know.”

“Oh, what a comfort for you,” the chaplain responded, continuing the exploration. “And how is she? Is she well?”

“Oh, yes, she’s fine—and more beautiful than ever,” he said with the smile of a proud husband. “But where is she? I want to talk with her again, but I can’t find her.”

“Your wife died a few weeks ago,” the chaplain began, silently searching for the gate between dementia and divine comfort. “So she’s not with you in person anymore, but I believe she’s with you in a different way. Her spirit is with you and always will be. Most of the time you can’t see her, but when you really need her comfort, God helps you be able to see her again, like in a dream or a vision.”

“The nurses said they hadn’t seen her,” he continued, struggling to separate his world from theirs.

“Of course not,” the chaplain replied. “God sent her just to comfort you, not the nurses.”

“Oh,” he said, with a smile brightening up his face. “Isn’t that wonderful?”