

Viaticum – food for the journey

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on August 9, 2009, the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

I am the bread of life.

John 6:48

Our basic instinct for survival requires daily nourishment and bread is one of our most basic forms of sustenance. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer for "our daily bread," we are asking for both spiritual as well as physical sustenance basic to our total well-being. In a world that has no shortage of food but increasing numbers who are malnourished, it is difficult for us to feel the hunger pangs of the starving people if we are well fed. When we are able to empathize with their hunger we can make a compassionate response in practical ways.

During their years of wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites discovered a special form of bread called manna. It appeared every morning in the dew frost in the form of a seed that could be ground and baked. Its taste was like the unleavened bread or *matzoh* used in the Jewish Passover celebration similar to the unleavened bread we use in this sacrament of the Eucharist. The Israelites believed manna to be a direct gift from God to sustain them during their long journey in the wilderness. When they added yeast and let it bake in the sun, it gave them sustenance that became their bread of life.

An old tradition in Roman Catholic homes was to keep a cabinet hung on the wall of the home called a *viaticum*. Under an image of Michelangelo's *Pieta* there was a compartment that contained the necessary elements for the "last rites," that included chrism consisting of olive oil and balsam used to anoint the dying. A last confession was made after which the sacrament of the Eucharist was administered for the last time. *Viaticum* in the Latin means "provisions for the journey." The departing soul was then ready for the final journey to heaven.

Jesus himself is the bread of life. In partaking of the elements of bread and wine in this great sacrament of the Eucharist, we are reminded of his whole person, his life, his teaching and his great love for us. The one who lived and died and rose again for us provides us with all the sustenance we need. Each week as we gather around this altar to receive the sacrament, we are remembering what his reconciling love means for us.

Through our baptism we are initiated into the Christian community and receive our identity in our Christian name as well as our membership in the church. It is essential that newly baptized members be nurtured in every way to know Christ personally. The Christian community is strengthened through the support and nurture of those who teach by example. I grew up in a family in which the church was the center of our lives but it wasn't until I was in college that I became aware of the place of Christ in my own personal life. It was then that I learned some very basic teachings of Christianity when the full meaning of Christ came together for me.

That which is supposed to bring us together as Christians all too often separates us from each other because of perceived differences in the understanding of the Eucharist. You can read volumes on the subject and take courses in Eucharistic theology, but this great sacrament is better experienced than explained. The bread is the *spiritual* remembrance of the whole person of Christ given for us and the wine is the *spiritual* remembrance of his sacrifice of himself for us. In the Eucharist, we are thanking God for what has been done for us in Christ and as we offer ourselves in return in service to God. Thanksgiving and offering are the two most essential aspects of this great sacrament.

The essential meaning of this great sacrament of the Eucharist is summed up in a quatrain attributed to John Donne, the 15th century preacher, poet and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London and often quoted by Queen Elizabeth I:

*T'was God the Word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it;
And what the word did make it;
That I believe and take it.*

It is wrong to think that we were born in sin. Newborn infants do not inherit the sins of their parents. They are free from sin and therefore are in a state of grace and total innocence. While in this spiritual Garden of Eden they are in a pure and innocent state of being. Until then, they cannot be held responsible for their actions unless they know and understand right from wrong, truth from falsehood. It is when they willfully choose to go against that which they know to be the right way that they enter the world of sin. By their baptism into Christ they have the opportunity to be redeemed.

Our education as Christians begins in infancy in knowing that we are in an accepting and safe environment where we are affirmed and loved. It trivializes the sacrament when children are baptized, but receive no nurturing in the Christian faith. If a baptism is to have any authenticity, children must be given the advantage of being part of the living, growing nurturing family of God.

Growth in the knowledge of Christ is like a postage stamp. If the stamp has the proper adhesion, it will stick to the envelope and bring the letter to its destination. But if it lacks the sticking power, it is lost. If the stamp falls off, it won't go anywhere. A child who is a Christian in name only with no chance of knowing Christ will have a faith that won't stick and won't go anywhere. Just as the letter without a stamp is returned for postage, they can be brought back to their point of origin to be redeemed by God. The challenge for all of us is whether or not our faith has any sticking power.

We are currently preparing for our new Church School season to begin on Homecoming Sunday on September 13. Our goal in Christian nurture is to see that our children have an authentic and visible faith that will be evident in the way they live their lives. The purpose for Christian teaching is for all of us to grow to our full potential as members of Christ and to have sufficient faith to sustain us when the going gets rough. In the letter to the Ephesians, we are to learn the importance of showing kindness by being tenderhearted and forgiving. That is essential to our being a vital, healthy and gospel-centered Christian community.