

The texts for the sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost are: John 6:24-35 and Ephesians 4:11-16 . Pr. Martin M. Roth in celebration of his 50th Anniversary of Ordination at Trinity Lutheran Church, McKeesport, PA by the Rev. Dr. William Hankey on August 1, 1971 was invited to preach. Resources: Walter Wangerin "The Ragman and other Cries of Faith," The Rev. Dr. Luke Bouman, The Rev. Nathan Nettleton.

Recently, I watched the All Star Game of the 2021 Major League Baseball Season and I must admit that I also watched the night before for the Home Run Derby--the point of which is to have the leading hitters of the current baseball season compete to see who can hit the most home runs one after another in a limited time. This strikes me as akin to the crowd who in our gospel text wanted to see Jesus provide more bread...more of what they have seen him already do. "Hit more home runs, Jesus." Those of us who are avid baseball fans realize that baseball is more than a game; it is a metaphor for life in America. Books such as *The Faith of 50 Million*--which explores the depths of the close relationship between baseball and American culture--include sections on the importance of statistics, baseball as a story of redemption, a morality tale, and a paean of praise to diversity and opportunity.

You see, during my childhood, when I was seven years old some 70 years ago, I remember collecting baseball cards that came in a package of bubble gum. The practice--in part--was designed to inculcate in us the American youth the underlying belief that that which is important in defining one's life can be compressed into statistics--such as lifetime batting average, runs batted in, number of home runs, number of fielding awards (the Golden Glove), or the Cy Young pitching award.

And yet, part of the lesson I came to learn over my lifetime of following baseball statistics was that--for the icons of the game, e.g., Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Jackie Robinson or Pete Rose or Shoeless Joe Jackson--"Statistics do not a life make." Some of the real icons of the game--as defined by the statistics compressed on their baseball cards--turned out to be less than icons in terms of the way they lived their private lives off the field of play.

For 55 years, I have watched pastors at synod conventions or assemblies who seemed to me--especially in my earlier days-- to be old men commenting--for the most part lovingly--on the significance of the 50 years since their ordination. Now I am--by the grace of God--in a position to reflect on the 50 years since my own ordination. 50 years ago today at 3:30 p.m. at Trinity Lutheran Church in McKeesport, PA Martin Michael Roth was ordained by The Rev. Dr. William Hankey into the Holy Office of the Ministry

of Word and Sacrament. I am now faced with the same choices those many pastors who came before me had to make...do I remember "what I did" or "what God's gracious Call and the presence of the Holy Spirit extended to the likes of me enabled me to do--often in spite of myself." Depending on which choice one makes, one comes out in a drastically different place.

I acknowledge the tendency to want to quantify what has been done into statistics to put on my "baseball card of life."

Rather, I prefer the focus of our 2nd Reading preaching text today from Ephesians as it suggests an emphasis on the grace of God's Call that some serve as "pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

This makes the 367 people I baptized or the 200 young people I instructed and confirmed or the 17 people I mentored--and who are preparing for or are serving or have served in rostered ministry --or the 423 people I laid to rest wrapped in the promise of God in Christ or the 251 couples I prepared and then married or the 98 people for whom I served as their confessor--through the use of the Rite for Individual Confession and Forgiveness--all point to the Holy Spirit as the source for all that I was able to accomplish.

On April 16th, 1944, I was called at my baptism-- as each of you on the day of your baptism was called--to a life-time of service. I hope and pray that you remember your date of baptism. and if you don't, to promise yourself to research the date, because to remember your baptism is to remember God's gracious Call that stands at the beginning of your life of faith. That is why the sign of the cross as a remembrance of baptism is so important to Martin Luther and to all the baptized.

As our text from Ephesians says, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." The measure of Christ's gift was a total giving of himself to us. "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." Some others would become mothers and fathers, teachers, attorneys, homemakers, farmers, CPAs, health care and safety workers, administrators in higher education, business people, laborers, and carpenters. Those pastors and teachers are "to equip the saints for

the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming." How appropriate it is to hear these words during a time when we speak of "our own truth" with a desire to call it "fake news" when the truth does not fit our liking. "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

This text which speaks of the body and its proper functioning as an analogy of how the church is to function really hits home for me right now in my own life. The onset of Parkinsonian-like symptoms in the last several years such as balance issues, neurological slowing down related to brain function, tremors that affect the ability to legibly write and have cut out my woodworking and carving hobbies, speech issues--volume and strength and the free flow of language--is a real challenge. I am able still to read and to understand, but this is likely my last sermon. If you get a card from me, you will note that it is typed, not written longhand. Making new accommodations to the development of ever new symptoms is a challenge. The image of the body functioning properly I no longer take for granted.

And where does the nourishment for life in the body--whether our individual bodies in their human strengths and weaknesses or the church as the Body of Christ--come from? In the gospel reading the people wanted more bread, or at least they wanted a repeat performance so that they could be sure they had seen what they thought they had seen. They wanted to change the bread of eternal life that Jesus promised into just more bread that perishes.

As I look out over the landscape today, I see that we are in search of food in a wilderness of our own as well. People in our world are either desperate for food, hungry each night and hoping for relief, or else we have all the food that we can eat with leftovers and even waste, yet our lives are curiously unfilled, or unfulfilled. The rich say to the poor, "How can you still be hungry? There is more than enough food for everyone in the world!" The poor say to the rich, "How can you still be hungry? You have so much already!"

Could it be that Jesus' words to those chasing him across the sea those many years ago still have the same truth for us today? "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Our culture,

especially in the wealthy West, has a hard time hearing those words. It flies in the face of most of the things that we have treasured. Aren't we supposed to be building wealth?--or in the words of bumper sticker philosophy, "When we die, the one with the most toys wins."

Like those in the first century, we seem to be chasing a Jesus who will continue to give us the bread that perishes. Look at the continued popularity of the Prosperity Gospel that is launched like missiles from televised pulpits, week after week. They dangle the hopes of future riches before those willing to part with cash in the here and now to fund their ministries and pay for their mansions. In today's religious landscape P.T. Barnum was certainly right--that there is a sucker born every minute. And many do not catch on until it is too late.

But in the scheme of things, our desire to make a big splash in the world, our need to build up our pile of possessions, is nothing more nor less than a desire to deny our mortality.

The people who had been freed by Yahweh from bondage in Egypt and who wandered in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land learned that Yahweh would give them the things they needed. They also learned not to hoard their bread (it would smell if you kept it for more than a day) and to share it with those who could not gather for themselves. The manna was the bread that Yahweh gave them as they were learning how to be the servant people they were called to be. In John's Gospel, the chasers of Jesus remembered the manna, but not the lessons of the manna. So Jesus begins to teach them again about what the true bread from heaven does.

But then he makes a bold move. He says, "I AM the bread of life." He identifies himself with Yahweh, the great I AM. He identifies Yahweh as the bread of life for the world. This is in contrast to the bread which feeds but does not satisfy. The question is "how?" How is Jesus the bread of life? How does Jesus satisfy hunger and thirst? How does Jesus provide life for the world?

In answer, one analogy--suggested by Walt Wangerin, Jr. in his book RAGMAN and other CRIES of FAITH--is found in a particular species of spider. While most spiders leave their eggs in a sac and wander off, one species does not leave them thus to chance but stays to protect them and find food for them. Like all spiders, when this one eats, she injects her poison and digestive juices into her prey and the victim enters her stomach as she sucks out the life and the food from the body's empty shell. Except when there are no victims. When there is no food for the little spiders, the mother of this species will inject her poison into her own body and give her young one last meal, herself. She dies and

gives them life.

Against such a backdrop, Wangerin sees in the Christ of the Cross one who gives himself for the life of all. When we feast at Christ's table, it is his own life poured out for us that becomes our bread. It is in the giving of himself that he is most alive, even as he dies. And those of us who follow--rather than chase--Jesus learn the simple truth from his Living Word: we are only filled full when we empty ourselves. Jesus is the bread of life not for what he puts into our stomachs, but rather for how he teaches us to live, really LIVE. In the meal of communion he is shaping us into his body and preparing us to give ourselves in the same way as he gives himself. Those who have dared to follow this radical way find life in more vivid color, find purpose and meaning beyond "winning" the game of life.

Today, I give thanks to God for my Call to the Ordained Ministry of Word and Sacrament. It has been a joy to preside at Holy Communion a minimum of 3,108 times in order to feed the people of the church on His Sacrament of His Body and Blood and to be able to prepare and preach approximately 3224 times the saving word that is Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Pr. Brenda, I appreciate your gracious invitation to me to preach and assist with administering the sacrament as a way of celebrating the 50th anniversary today. The gift of the work of ecclesiastical art by our favorite artists given to the glory of God and in honor of our ministry in your midst is humbling to us. How appropriate it is that the focus of the icon is of Christ offering himself as his body and blood for the world.

And I say to all of you, no matter what your age is, to consider discerning how God's Call has your name on it. He has called you already through your baptism to a lifetime of service, no matter what employment you prepare for. Today I ask you to consider whether God is calling you to a rostered ministry of the church as a specific way to live out your call to lifelong service.

In closing, I want to link back to our gospel reading where Jesus identifies himself as the bread of life, the gracious gift of God to sustain us as we make our way through the wilderness. The road ahead will not be easy, and there is no doubt that there will be times when we wonder why we can't go back to the familiar bondage of the past. But the bread of life, the manna in the wilderness, will continue to be offered to sustain us on our journey. And if we are to make it, we need to recognize that we are depending for our life on the one bread, which the one father has given us in the one spirit. The unity is a given. We are called to be one and to gather together in the belief and mission of the one God. All this is a gift. Let us feed on it with thanksgiving and hopefulness. Amen.