

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 5, 2012
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The Cost of Free

I spent some time this week and last working on our Christian Education program for the fall. Last week I spent a day in Roanoke at the Diocesan Office in the Bishop Marmion library looking at different curricula. This week, on Wednesday at 5 pm, I will have a meeting with the parents of the children who go to this church to decide what type of program we want for Christian Education in the fall. I often joke that the best Christian Education program for a church would be to charge each parent \$300 per student at the beginning of the year, and then every time the child shows, the parent gets \$10 back. If they don't show up, the church gets to keep the money. The church can't lose. The church gets educated Christians or a new revenue stream; we get the benefit of an educated membership or you get you to contribute regularly.

Sometimes I think that the reason that the church gets so little respect is because we give everything away. In a market economy like ours, "Free" could also mean cheap or shoddy, or of little worth. Of course, we ask for donations and we preach that everyone should return to God the first fruits of time, talent, and treasure, but the church ministers to everyone without regard to what they give. You all will get the same bread, the same wine; you will hear same sermon and all of the seats in the church are on a first come, first serve basis. We expect the church to operate on a "free to all" basis. When it doesn't, people get upset. I remember at my father's funeral, after the wake and before the service at the church, the funeral director called my sister and me into his office. He showed us an itemized bill for the funeral which included the casket, the hearse, and the use of the parlor and also a line item for the Priest and the Altar boy. The funeral director explained to me that the line item for the Priest and the Altar boy was for my "convenience;" I just had to write one check. Maybe I am making a distinction without a difference, but suggesting a donation and having a line item on an invoice, priest, altar boy -- \$150 is not the same. I know the difference between being billed and being asked for a donation.

There is not and should never be a monetary value placed on the Sacraments or the sacramental acts of the church. This church has never and will never charge for any of its sacramental acts.

But then, we run the risk of people taking what we say and what we do as without value. People believe that if you do not pay for it, it must not be worth much. I do not know if you have ever noticed that on some charitable donation receipts from churches and religious organization, you will often see a disclaimer at the bottom of the receipt indicating that for their donation the person received "intangible religious benefit" that "have no monetary value." Or put another way, you paid your money for nothing as far as the IRS is concerned.

In today's Old Testament, Gospel, and Psalm we have bread as the motif. Bread is the staff of life. Almost every culture has as food staple bread made of flour from some grain -- wheat or rye or bran -- mixed a little with water. Bread is a basic food for life. In the Old Testament God provides a bread-like substance, manna. The people of Israel are afraid of dying of starvation in the wilderness and so God gives them manna to save their life. Our Psalm today reads: "He rained down manna upon them to eat and gave them grain from heaven. So mortals ate the bread of Angels he provided for them food enough." Free Bread for everyone; there for the taking. But, then comes one of the saddest verses in all of Scripture. Verse 29 in Psalm 78 is followed by verse 30, one not printed in today's readings. We read: "So they ate and were well filled for he gave them what they craved; but they did not stop their craving though the food was still in their mouths." The Israelites missed their fleshpots in Egypt because the little that they had in Egypt they worked for. I'll never be able to prove it but I believe that if God had charged the Israelites for the manna, they might have appreciated it more.

The Gospel for today is more wonderful than the story of the manna. For instead of physical bread for mortal bodies, Jesus offers spiritual bread for eternal life. This bread, too, is free. It is a gift from God. But, this bread, though free, is not cheap; it will be paid for by Christ with his own body sacrificed on the Cross. Still, the bread of life has no monetary value. The cost in real

dollars for access to the bread of life is negligible. A few drops of water and a few grains of flour, a few words said over the bread and wine, what is that worth in constant dollars? The wine that is used on the altar is Fairbanks Port you can buy from Kroger. The wafers are dabs wheat flour and drops of water. The full retail value for eternal life in water, wine, and wheat is probably a penny or less.

Free to you, free but not cheap. For with the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior your life is forever changed. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “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. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore, it is said that when he ascended on high he made captivity itself, captive. He gave gifts to his people.”

People who are baptized are given a great gift. People who are baptized accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. People who are baptized put their whole trust in Christ’s grace and love. People who are baptized know who they are, why they are here, and where they are going. This gift of grace is free, but living into this gift of grace is not cheap.

My son, Roy, is 27 years old now, but when my son, Roy was in 6th grade, he broke his elbow. Yes, that is as painful as it sounds; he broke his elbow. He was carrying our dog down the hall in our house when Roy tripped over a suitcase. Afraid of falling on the dog, he twisted himself and hit the wall elbow first trying not to fall on the dog. He had surgery at a hospital, two stainless steel pins, some wire while under general anesthetic. They sent Roy home the same day, outpatient surgery, with a prescription of Tylenol #3 with codeine for when the anesthesia wore off. His mother and I set him up with ice packs and we watched him closely to make sure that he did alright with the effects of the anesthesia and painkillers. And so here is this 12 year old kid propped up on the couch with his elbow resting on an ice pack and a pillow, in front of the television with a T.V. tray with chicken noodle soup to be eaten with his left hand because it was his right elbow he injured. (It’s always your right elbow, right, that gets

banged into the wall!) Before he ate his meal of chicken noodle soup, Roy bowed head and said his blessing, “Oh the Lord is good to me and so I thank the Lord for giving me the things I need the sun and the rain and the apple seed, the Lord is good to me”.

The Bread of Life only costs you your love and devotion to Jesus Christ, throughout your entire life and in any situation; because you know your life is in God’s Hands. You get the sacraments for free and then, whatever your state or your condition, you thank God you are saved. From cradle to grave in sickness and in health you say “the Lord is good to me.” And he is. He saved you for free and eternal salvation is priceless. AMEN