

The way of salvation; the cornerstone of truth

A sermon by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on April 20, 2008, the fifth Sunday after Easter.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14: 6-7

When my daughter was a little girl, she arrived home from school one day to tell us that one of her catholic friends told her that we don't believe in the "Blessed mother." I explained that we certainly do believe in Mary, the mother of Jesus as the most honored of all people because she bore the Christ child and thus was part of bringing salvation into the world.

When Jesus speaks of the household of God, he is using a metaphor of a large house to emphasize the expansiveness of God's love for all humanity. I like the King James Version that reads *In my father's house are many mansions*. God's unconditional love means that everyone has a place in the roomy realm of God where there are no outcasts. God accepts us as we are and expects us to grow into being more loving, more understanding, a more accepting and forgiving people. In accepting God's forgiveness of us, we extend our own forgiveness to others and do not judge the worthiness of others to receive it.

It may sound exclusive and narrow for Jesus to say that no one comes to God the Father except through him. Does this mean Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists are denied the possibility of reaching God in their way? I have to believe that those who follow Mohammed, Confucius or Buddha will reach God through another path. God knows a great deal more about salvation and redemption than we do. In a pluralistic world of many religions, God must have a way for all people to be saved and redeemed. For us as Christians, God as revealed in the person of Christ is the way for us.

We live in a pluralistic and consumer society and we can no longer rely upon loyalty to one church. People shop for churches the way they shop for cars and refrigerators. There is the story of the man who was marooned all alone on an island for ten years. Finally, a freighter happened by to rescue him. As they brought him on board, they noticed that he was leaving behind three buildings he had built on the island. When they inquired, he explained that the first building was his shelter, the second was his church. "What was the third building for?" "Oh, that was the church I used to attend."

I followed the Pope's visit to the United States last week. I am sure he is a good and godly man and I know that the Roman Catholic Church has the resources for doing great good in the world. I am disturbed by his reassertion that only the Roman Catholic Church has full access to salvation, that they are the one true faith and that Protestant churches lack validity. Pope John XXIII once referred to us as sister churches, but now this Pope no longer considers this to be true. What saddens me is that such an assertion weakens the witness of the Christian church in the world and is, sadly, spiritual arrogance of the worst kind. This claim is based on the assumption whether the founding of the church was given to Peter or whether Jesus meant Peter's rock like faith. The name Peter means "rock." The assertion that salvation depends upon belonging to the institutional Roman Catholic Church and allegiance to the Pope is contrary to what the gospels and St. Paul are very clear in saying that we are saved by our faith, not by our heritage or mere belonging. One of the great principles of the Protestant Reformation is that we have direct access to God and that we are free to interpret the Bible ourselves. Protestant doesn't

mean protesting against; it means *testifying for* what we believe. When we say in the creed that we believe in the holy catholic church, we mean the whole faith for the universal church. In practicing our faith, Jesus died to take away our sins, not our minds.

The Episcopal Church has a catholic heritage in our faith, liturgy and sacramental life while being protestant in our polity and governance, independent of the papacy. The clergy may marry and have families and ordination is open to both women and men and yes, we do honor Mary. We are part of the Anglican Communion because our tradition and heritage is from the Church of England.

It is essential to remember that both Catholics and Protestants are of the same religion; we are all Christians. It is more important for us not to concern ourselves with being Christian than thinking of ourselves as catholic or protestant or Episcopalian. While I am a life long Episcopalian, I am far more concerned with being a good Christian than in being a good Episcopalian!

During the civil rights era in the 1960's, Catholics and Protestants joined ranks and marched in the streets to witness for racial and social justice. Dr. King's dream was that one day we would be judged not by the color of our skin, but by the content of our character. In the same way, God judges us on our faithfulness to Christ, not by our membership in any church or denomination.

In the letter of St. Peter, we read that we are living stones in building a spiritual house. This was written at a time when Christians were under terrible persecution and they had to know who they were, what they believed and how they were to live their lives. We are to rid ourselves of all malicious and slanderous behavior. We are not to envy others or speak disparagingly of them. It accomplishes nothing to repeat gossip about others. Bear in mind that if you hear a story about someone that sounds embellished, it probably is. A mark of a wise and educated person is to discern truth from fiction and not accept things on anecdotal evidence. When people of faith tell half truths and outright lies about others, it only serves to weaken Christian witness.

I like the metaphor of our being building blocks of the church with Jesus as the chief cornerstone. Ancient arches have stood for centuries because the keystone has remained in place. Each time we stand against falsehood, hatred, and bigotry, each time we stand against oppression, violence and intolerance, we are the building blocks in the great wall of faith and truth. When I once stood at the great Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the last remaining evidence of the great temple built by King Solomon, I was reminded that our strength is in each of us being building blocks in the household of God. We are all mutually interdependent.

In Canterbury Cathedral in England, there is the tomb of the 15th century Archbishop Henry Chichele with two recumbent figures, one over the other. The upper one is dressed in the magnificent robes of one of his office and rank in the church while the lower one is a scrawny body dressed only in a loin cloth. In his humility the archbishop knew that it was his inner person that counted before God with whom there is no rank or position of favor. No honor attained in life is as great as our acceptance of redemption in Christ.

We represent Christ by the way we treat others, especially those who can do nothing for us in return. Our job is to part of revealing the way the truth and the life in Christ. Such is why there are no outcasts in the household of God.