

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2023

Lectionary Year A: 1 Peter 2:2-10

My earliest remembrance of any significance is my third birthday. I turned three on December 7th, 1976, but due to an operation scheduled for that date at the (then) United Hospital in Grand Forks, North Dakota, my birthday party was bumped ahead a few days so that I was able to celebrate at home.

The most memorable birthday gift I received that year was a "smoking Volkswagen" toy. It was, essentially, a battery operated 1/18-scale Volkswagen Beetle that, when turned on, would travel randomly around the floor, then stop suddenly to bounce up and down in the rear, and puff smoke out of the exhaust pipe as it bounced.

We were much more easily entertained back then, weren't we?

The smoking Volkswagen ran out of smoke not long after I got it, but bounced up and down for many years to follow, requiring only a periodic change of its relatively huge Size D batteries to keep it going. However, I don't anticipate undertaking any restoration efforts on the smoking Volkswagen; in fact, I couldn't even tell you where it is right now, and it may have been discarded years ago.

Just think, a 1/18-scale smoking Volkswagen in mint condition might command more than a few bucks on eBay...but, as anyone bit by the car collecting bug must admit, not everything can be saved! (This applies to cars of both full and miniature scale.)

Most accounts of earliest remembrances in human beings go back to about age

three, with variances depending largely on opinion. I've been told that my earliest memories are not, in fact, my memories, but images that I've constructed in my mind based on things that others have told me. Hogwash, I say! I think I'm able to discern what I really remember...

That said, there probably isn't much -- if anything -- that I can remember that predates the smoking Volkswagen from my third birthday. I don't remember the Bicentennial of the United States, also in 1976. I don't remember a U.S. president before Carter. And I don't remember visiting the farm where my Dad and Aunt Carol grew up -- the farmstead having been sold somewhere around that time.

This, I guess, is the way it's supposed to be. We're "not supposed" to remember anything earlier, perhaps for our own good. The grueling experience of being born, the cutting of the umbilical cord, being nursed, burped, and messing in one's diapers (mine were cloth, I've been told) just aren't things we're supposed to remember. More than that, though, the lack of neurological development prevents us from remembering all that happens prior to about the age of three. So either way, despite what numerous repressed memory "specialists" try to tell us, everything that happens in those early years vanishes from our memory.

But sometime around the earliest memory and the absence of memory there is, for many of us brought up in the faith, an initial exposure to this place called the church. This may have even taken place in that time that none of us remember -- from age zero to three. Many of us were baptized within this timeframe, and, in keeping with the teachings of "baby-baptizing" churches, we were welcomed into God's family with a "visible word" of God's grace...the waters of Baptism.

And we return, regardless of our age, to the waters of Baptism every morning we rise and every time we come to church. Though we may be 30, 50, 70, or 90, we

think of that initial encounter between God and us where we received his grace and began growing in the faith. We rightly have a longing for the clarity and simplicity of a spiritual encounter grounded in the clear and simple meeting of God's Word and an earthly element. In Holy Baptism, the element is water. In Holy Communion, the elements are bread and wine. Either way, we encounter something which we long for...a "spiritual milk" like that an infant would drink, but one that all of us can and should consume.

In Peter's first letter, from which we heard in today's Second Reading, there is a splendid allusion to infancy and spiritual growth...one that calls us not to remain in infancy forever, but rather to grow from infancy into the breadth and depth that is our adult faith. But the adult faith still retains its "infant" character, as the text reminds us: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation..." (1 Peter 2:2).

Growth in the faith can be likened to any development. Just as memories get stuck in our minds from about the age of three onward, so too does the language of faith work its way into our minds. But where the objects of our memories disappear like my smoking Volkswagen, the faith remains no matter what. And that good news we receive in Jesus Christ and in the Church and in the Sacraments is something to which we can continually return. I hope this is something that, as Peter says, is a pure, spiritual milk that you long after -- that you may find grace, hope, blessing, and peace every time you come to this place and every time you open God's Word. As always, taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8, 1 Peter 2:3).

Note that when infants are baptized, parents and sponsors make promises on behalf of children who are unable to answer for themselves. Chief among those

promises are bringing the child into the Christian community, and, with that, educating and nurturing the child in the Christian faith. Implicit in the promises is the need for participation in the Church's worship life, which includes, not surprisingly, Word and Sacrament. One might then observe the related necessity of "doing one with the other." The Word is completed in the Sacrament and the Sacrament is incomplete without the Word. So to not baptize or to never commune is to withhold two very important means by which God comes to us. One might as well close one's Bible and put it back on the shelf, too, and ignore all of Jesus' commands altogether!

Thus, we have Scripture readings and sermons, as well, as a means of getting God's written and spoken communication to us. And this, together with the Sacraments, equips us to go out into the world to bring a glimmer of grace and truth to people who need precisely these things. It is to this living witness to the good news of Jesus Christ that we are called from Baptism onward. Remember Peter's words about living stones? Well, those are the very stones by which we build ourselves into a living witness to God's grace. They are stones made alive by God in Word and Sacrament and continue to fortify the spiritual home that God makes within each of us.

As Peter reminds us, "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). There are great gifts that God gives to us, and our spiritual sacrifice, out of praise and thanksgiving to him, is to give at least a little of what we've been given back to him! As we have been given God's grace in real, audible, tangible, and edible forms, may there be a bit of charity, kindness, compassion, and love that we offer...and if it's to our neighbor, it's as good as if we've given it to God. Jesus reminds us that

those who serve the least of these, my brethren serve him! Again, we are built out of living stones -- given life in Word and Sacrament and fellowship with the Church.

One might even say that the more of these gifts you consume, the more alive you will be!

But it takes an infant-like longing, a longing that Peter directs us to. May we be reminded that God is there not only to reach us in single moments like Baptism but also to reach us in every moment of our lives thereafter. Longing for the spiritual milk and drinking of it is the way in which our faith grows from infancy into adulthood and stays with us all the way to the end.

As we develop and retain memory, we gradually change into the things we hear and do. Had I not been brought into a community of faith centered in Word and Sacrament, I might very well have been denied the very things that make me spiritually alive today. It is the calling of all of you to nourish yourselves, your children, and all the memories, both of the gifts of family and friends and of the gifts that you and they receive in the community of faith. May the faith stick with you much longer than the smoking Volkswagen stuck with me.

Remember the gift, receive it always, and let living stones build up your spiritual house.

Amen.