

Fourth Sunday in Lent (C/RCL)
2 Corinthians 5.16-21
March 18, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

The Holy Trinity family enjoys many blessings, including our membership in the larger ecumenical family of the Manasquan Area Ministerium. There are twelve local churches that worship and work together for the sake of the Gospel. During Lent and Advent we eat and study together, too, at noontime Soup & Scripture over at First Pres. Last week Pastor Leitzke led us in a conversation about “Faith Instead of Fear,” a bible study on Jesus’ calling forth of faith and calming of the storm at sea, after our Holy Trinity members had served delicious, home-made soup and our very own cantor, Bill Schoppe, had led us in song.

The week prior our brother in Christ, Pastor Joe Santucci of Hope Community Church, gave the Soup & Scripture devotion. He is part of the Nazarene Church, in which it is the custom to issue altar calls. At the end of his devotion on “Forgiveness Instead of Judgment,” Pastor Joe asked us all to close our eyes. Then he asked those who wanted to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior to raise their hands so we could pray for them.

I admit that as a Lutheran Christian I felt a little uncomfortable at that point. I’ve accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior for as long as I can remember. God and church have **always** been part of my life. When people ask me if I have been “born again,” I always say, “Yes, in Holy Baptism.” I **lived** with people of faith, I was **taught** by people of faith, and faith has always been **alive** in me, by the grace of God.

St. Paul says in the second letter to the Corinthians, which is our epistle today,

...[I]f anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

2 Corinthians 5.17

Yes! But I haven't always caught up with that fact in my thinking or my actions.

Sometimes I forget. Sometimes my thoughts and actions would give onlookers **no clue at all** what happened to me in Holy Baptism, that, in St. Paul's words:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Galatians 2.19b-20

Sometimes my life looks very much like the old decayed creation not the fresh, brand new creation in Christ. Because of that I'm quick to echo whomever it was that said, "God isn't finished with me yet."

Good news, bad news: I've got plenty of company. We believers are all in the same boat.

Why else would Paul go on to say,

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us **the ministry of reconciliation**... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, **be reconciled to God**.

2 Corinthians 5.18, 20

Martin Luther says that Baptism happens once but baptismal dying and rising happens daily. Since we're saints **and** sinners at the same time, the church and world are in need of an ongoing ministry of reconciliation. We're **always** in need of forgiveness and renewal, re-union with God, made possible by Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. God offers us a fresh start each day, countless opportunities to be reconciled with God and with each other, which we undeniably **need**, because we're **always** "missing the mark," sinning in one way or another, needing God's forgiveness ourselves or needing God's grace to forgive someone else.

The sea of God's grace is infinitely larger than the tidal pool of our sin. Some people believe that God can and will forgive anybody **but** them. They believe their sin is so hideous, its fallout so horrendous, that even God will not forgive. In a strange sort of way, they suffer from spiritual pride, convinced as they are that their wrongdoing could ever outdistance God's mercy.

Wrong.

As the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "...[N]othing will be impossible for God" (Luke 1.37). God is so powerful that God not only forgives **our** sin when we ask forgiveness, but God enables us to forgive others, in the most unlikely circumstances....

You probably have heard of Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers, the man of faith and courage who would not sign off on King Henry VIII's divorce of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. For his refusal, Thomas More was imprisoned in the Tower of London, and finally beheaded. The executioner, his head hooded, asked Moore's forgiveness for the act he was about to perform; that was standard operating procedure in those days. What response might **we** have given the man about to deal our death blow?? Here is what Moore did: he gave him a coin, kissed him, and expressed his gratitude that the executioner was about to give him "a greater benefit than ever any mortal man can be able to give me." [John McCain, *Character Is Destiny*, New York, Random House (2005), p. 9.] In the last scene of the last act of his earthly life, Thomas Moore performed a ministry of reconciliation.

Closer to home and in our own time, the world watched amazed as the Amish community embraced the widow and orphans of the man who killed their children in a one room schoolhouse last year. Their response was not expected and is not readily understandable in this culture in which the knee-jerk response to loss is, "I'll sue!" In the midst of their deepest grief, they engaged in a holy ministry of reconciliation.

The Amish are proud to be **in** but not **of** this American, or as they call it, this "English" culture. There are others, though, whose lifestyles are more like ours, who also perform a ministry of reconciliation. Sylvester and Vicki Schieber are the parents of slain graduate student Shannon Schieber, killed in Philadelphia a number of years ago. When time came for sentencing their daughter's convicted murderer, the prosecutor urged them to petition the judge for the death penalty. They refused. Against much opposition from their own legal team, they successfully implored the judge to sentence the man to life imprisonment. Their reason? We'll hear from

Vicki herself next weekend, for she will be our guest preacher. In the meantime, let it suffice to say that the Schiebers take seriously their Christian call to engage in a ministry of reconciliation. They would be the first to say their ability to do so in the midst of their deepest pain comes not from within themselves but from God.

...[I]f anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

We, too, are a new creation. Like Thomas More, the Amish, the Schiebers, let us live like it. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham