

Sixth Sunday of Easter (A/RCL)
May 1, 2005
John 14.15-21
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Can we **love** someone who has **left**?? If folks are **physically** absent, can they still be **emotionally** and **spiritually** present to us??

When we're away on vacation, we send postcards to family and friends back home. "Hi! Thinking of you ☺." **I'm** out of sight, but **you're** not out of mind. When I was a young parish pastor, I happened to stay at the same B&B on Great Cranberry Island in Maine as a seasoned parish pastor. I noticed he had a whole pile of postcards he was writing out one day. He told me he was mailing one to each of his shut-ins back home. He encouraged me to do the same. I gladly took that page from his book. Now when I'm away for awhile, I send postcards to our homebound friends. The healing word is, "Hi, even during my get-away, you're on my heart." **I'm** out of sight, but **you're** not out of mind.

We include the same message in the care packages we send to our deployed military personnel and college kids. **You're** not at home, but those of us who **are** remember you with love. That love arrives in the guise of peanut butter, instant soup, homemade cookies and juice boxes.

Have you had a chance to check out our updated Adopt-a-Platoon info on the Youth and Family Ministry bulletin board in Fellowship Hall? Mark Rudnitzky, one of the coordinators of our Adopt-a-Platoon effort, e-mailed the sergeant of our Marine recon platoon and asked him to quiz the fellows about what they want **in particular** in their monthly care package from us. The reply we got back just about brought tears to my

eyes. In addition to things like white socks, WD40 and new DVD releases, these brave young men are requesting things like Little Debbie cream cakes and frosted circus animal crackers. We'll be sending them along, with love and prayers, with the implicit message, "You may be out of sight, but you're not out of mind."

Unlike the homebound friends to whom I mail postcards and the Holy Trinity members who get the care packages that our Evangelism Committee puts together, none of us has ever met these Marines. The great thing is, it doesn't matter. In reaching out to them in love and care, we are **being Church**. It is "good news" to these guys that we remember them. Because of who we are, part of the Body of Christ, our care packages are **embodiments of faith-active-in-love**, a sign of Love living among us.

A couple weeks ago I put out there the belief that "a lone lamb is a lost lamb." An isolated Christian is a contradiction in terms. A "loner" Christian doesn't even make any sense. We are Christians in community. We are members of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, no individual part of the body can stand alone. The eye needs the ear needs the heart needs the head, who is Christ.

In talking about the Good Shepherd two weeks ago, I also said that the Good Shepherd's main concern is the **flock as a whole**. We Lutheran Christians don't buy into a "Jesus and me" theology that privatizes religion. We are committed to church-as-community. We remember Jesus' words, "Wherever **two** or more are gathered, there am I in the midst of them." It doesn't cut it for us to say, "I can worship God as well on the beach or on a boat as in the sanctuary." There is no Holy Communion with God **or** God's people on the beach or on the boat, there is no proclaimed Word there to nourish our souls. There is no gift of time and space set apart, consecrated to God, on whatever

our preferred playground is. There is no detour from the path of pleasure to praise God, when we choose to play rather than to pray. Play is a gift of God, too, but it meant to refresh and gladden us, not to replace our communion with God.

It is to the **community** of faith and not to **individuals** that Jesus makes His great promises. Listen to this:

Jesus does not promise the Paraclete [the Holy Spirit], or his own return, or the home-making of God and Jesus to individuals (14.23), but to a community who lives in love... to those who mirror the divine communion in their human communion with one another. (*New Interpreter's Bible, "John,"* p. 749)

The **promises** of God are made to the **community**. God's promises are **kept** in **community**. We cannot thrive without community. We cannot fully living out our vocation as Christians apart from community.

True, the Church is imperfect. It's a divinely inspired institution but it's made up of human beings as imperfect as any. We've all heard people say, "I wouldn't waste my time going to church. I know too many **hypocrites** who belong to the church." To that I say, "Absolutely. We are hypocrites, liars, gossips, sinners all. That's why we're here – for forgiveness and regeneration. This is, after all, a hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints." The promises of God have been made to this imperfect community. God's promises are kept in this imperfect community. We are able to thrive in this imperfect community. We live out our vocation as Christians within this less-than-perfect community.

The more we live our communal life in love, the more perfect we become. The more strangers we befriend, the more Marines we call brother, the more battered women we call sister, the more children we take under our wing, the more often we come to this

place to be fed on Word and Supper, the more often we leave through the servant's entrance into the world, the more we speak up for the voiceless, the more we exert our power on behalf of the powerless, the more human need we address, the more faithful we are in naming the world's "unknown god" (cf. Acts 17.23) as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the more brightly we shine with the light of Christ, the more Spirit-filled we become – the more divine communion we people of Holy Trinity will have with **the** Holy Trinity.

Can we **love** Someone who has **left**?? This coming Thursday, Ascension Thursday, reminds us how Jesus has physically left this earth. But we can still love Him. He is physically **absent**, but He is emotionally and spiritually **present** to us in this imperfect, holy community, the Body of Christ, through the power of His and the Father's Holy Spirit. When we reach out as a community in love, we extend their presence into the world. Wow!

Amen