

Seventh Sunday of Easter (A/RCL)

1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11

May 4, 2008

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

This past Thursday our local churches hosted a National Day of Prayer gathering at the Manasquan Gazebo by the post office. Some of you may have seen the article and photos on the front page of the Local Section in Friday's Asbury Park Press. (Bill and Betty Schoppe are quoted and pictured in that article.) One of the reporters asked Pastor Reggie Albert of the Methodist Church here in town, "What is your purpose? What do you hope to accomplish here?" It seemed like a strange question. Isn't it pretty clear that **prayer** is the point?! But more than prayer – **shared** prayer for our neighborhood, nation and world – a public witness to our unity in Christ.

The end of this weekend's Gospel is Jesus' prayer for the unity of His followers:

"Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." (John 17. 11b)

Here at Holy Trinity, we benefit from the answer to Jesus' prayer. Like our nation, whose motto is, *E pluribus unum*, "Out of many, one," our community is made up of many unique individuals with varied and rich backgrounds. New members received this weekend into this household of faith exemplify that diversity. They include cradle Lutherans, those with Episcopal, Methodist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic roots, and folks with no previous religious affiliation at all. We who welcome these new members are as diverse as they are. Somehow, all of us have found a home here, live in harmony (most of the time ☺), kneel in adoration, rise to serve, and go forth blessed to be a blessing in the world.

It's the lesson from First Peter that reminds us of those things that bring unity to a richly diverse community. **Humility** is high on the list. There is no harmony without humility.

1 Peter 5.6 says,

Humble yourselves... under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

The letter writer is talking about humility in the face of the kind of suffering we talked about last week: being persecuted by outsiders because of our devotion to the Gospel, being discriminated against by non-believers because we're Christian.

Humility within the community of faith looks a little different. It's not humiliation. It's not painful. It's a holy, comforting sense of perspective, the realization that we're creatures, not the Creator. No one among us is the "be all and end all," because that describes God, not us. Humility is the wisdom that we don't have a corner on the market of wisdom. It's the ability to imagine that someone else may be divinely inspired to see something that we don't or can't. Humility is not meekness. It's quiet strength and total confidence that God "will exalt [us] in due time" (1 Peter 5.5b).

Meanwhile, the author of First Peter tells us, we can "cast all [our] anxiety on [God], because [God] cares for [us]." Someone put it this way: the God who is strong, is strong to save as well. The many can only become one if they acknowledge that God is the only true source of security for the family of faith, that the Holy Spirit is the only true source of inspiration for the household of God, that eternal life is this: "that [we] may know ... the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom [He] has sent" (John 17.3). As we said last week, we are not to fear what non-believers fear.... We are to fear nothing but the loss of Christ.

There is unity within the community when there is humility, when there is dependence on God, especially in the midst of our fears and anxieties, and when there is discipline, an unusual and perhaps scary word for adults to hear, because we usually use it in reference to children. But in the First Letter of Peter (5.8-9a) we read,

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith...

We discipline ourselves by abiding in Christ, being in constant communion with our Savior through prayer, dwelling in the Word by reading Holy Scripture often, living in community, participating in the worship and service of the Body of Christ, and keeping the word, as Jesus tells the Father His disciples have done (John 17.6).

Being disciplined isn't just avoiding temptation. Being disciplined is choosing to act as we are commanded, to go out of our way to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Our Ministerium gives us a powerful witness of what it means to be unified and proactive for the sake of the Gospel. Yes, we bring our different congregations together for the National Day of Prayer, Good Friday and Thanksgiving ecumenical worship services. But worship is not the only thing we do together. We also work on behalf of those who are, as Mother Teresa said, "Christ in his most distressing disguise of the poor." Humbly, aware of our dependence on God, in as disciplined a way as we can muster, our local churches speak with one voice as advocates of victims of domestic violence, through the organization 180: Turning Lives Around. We not only speak out against domestic violence, we give money to underwrite the local domestic violence support. We hope to work together to bring Family Promise, also known as the Interfaith Hospitality Network, into our southern Monmouth area, to band together with space and volunteers to provide shelter for homeless families, as I mentioned a couple weeks ago.

We are not resident aliens like the folks to whom First Peter was addressed, but we have "strangers in our midst," immigrants right down the street, waiting in the Acme parking lot for day jobs to feed their families. Our Ministerium is looking at ways to assist those brothers and sisters in Christ, who don't share our nationality but who do share our humanity. In the past we've also banded together to speak out against capital punishment, an often divisive issue within our congregations, but one which we felt compelled to address as a body of local church leaders.

Our congregation is blessed to be growing this weekend in numbers and diversity and unity, through affirmation of baptism of twenty adults and children and through the baptism of one infant, Aidan O'Hare Lockie. Both within this Holy Trinity community and within the broader family of the Manasquan Area Ministerium and the Body of Christ way beyond this neighborhood and throughout the world, we know that there is a distinction to be made between differences of opinion and dissension. May Jesus' prayer the night before His death that we may be one, as He and His Father are one, make us humble, dependent on God, disciplined, rich in diversity and strong in unity, for the sake of the Gospel. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham