

Fifth Sunday of Easter (B/RCL)  
John 15.1-8  
May 14, 2006  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

“Triage” is a word familiar to folks who work in an emergency room or who watch reruns of “M.A.S.H.” It means sorting sick or injured people into categories to determine who gets treated first – or at all. The point is to save the greatest number of people possible with limited resources.

During the Korean War, soldiers who were evacuated from the battlefield were assigned to one of three groups and color-coded accordingly. One color meant the person’s condition was hopeless. He was apt to die, regardless of whether or not he received medical attention. Another color meant that the person’s condition was hopeful. He was apt to live, regardless of whether he was treated. The third color meant that without medical care the person would probably die, and with it he might just live. In Korea in the 1950’s, the only injured soldiers who got immediate medical care were those assigned to the third group.

I just read the story of a man named Lou who was seriously injured by a grenade in Korea. Lou’s leg was so mangled and his other injuries were so grave that the doctor who triaged him color-coded him as hopeless. I don’t know whether Lou realized that as he lay in pain on his stretcher and spoke with an army nurse who took the time to comfort him when she noticed he was conscious. The nurse found out that Lou was from Ohio, just like her. Getting to know him even that tiniest bit made her unwilling to see him die. Breaking the rules of triage, she quickly, quietly changed the tag he wore and graduated him from hopelessly wounded to meriting help.

Seeing the proper color, a medic dutifully placed Lou's stretcher in an ambulance. Two days later he arrived at a mobile surgical hospital and had his leg amputated. His recovery was lengthy but successful. He married one of the nurses who cared for him at the hospital and went on to live a happy life. He ended up with a physical but not a spiritual handicap. Lou went on to live and love.

I found Lou's story in a book of devotions called "Moments for Mothers." The meditation ended with this observation: "All this was possible because a field nurse broke all the rules of triage and changed a tag! Just maybe, the job of the Church is to go around and change tags!" (Robert Strand, Arkansas: New Leaf Press, 2006, Day 27)

Mothers do it all the time. Not just biological mothers, but every woman who nourishes and nurtures us, who believes in us, who tells us that we **can** if we **think** we can, who refuses to accept no for an answer on our behalf, who goes to bat for us, tells the experts they're wrong if they say a handicapped child will never clear a certain hurdle, such as speaking, walking, graduating, marrying, succeeding.

When mothers "change the tags" and save a life, one way or another, they are human channels of heavenly grace. They are serving as flesh-and-blood conduits of divine love and strength. When they are attached to the vine, life-giving sap flows from Jesus through them to us.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15.5)

Apart from me, you can do nothing. Motherhood is a profession that instills humility ☺. That's not just because children say the darnedest things and find frequent ways to embarrass us, but also because children make us realize our limits: the limits of

our patience, of our power, of our ability to protect and to heal. Children drive us to our knees, confessing that some days even our **best** parenting isn't all that **good**, asking for wisdom to choose our battles wisely, beseeching God to keep our sons and daughters as the apple of God's eye and not just ours.

September 11, 2001, hit less than a week after Kristiane started first grade at Manasquan Elementary, which was a new school for her. Every other parent here, anyone blessed with the responsibility of taking a little one to school, knows the angst of waving goodbye as that young person sails into the unknown behind school walls. Five years later, I still never let Kristiane off at school without echoing Martin Luther's morning prayer: "Send your holy angels to watch over her, that the evil one have no power over her." If pastoring didn't keep me on my knees, parenting would!

I'll bet all of us here, parents or not, know what it's like to try to "change the tags" on a loved one, to ward off harm or beckon healing, by prayer. Prayer is our admission that there is One greater than ourselves who is the Life-giver, the Source of all blessing, the inspiration of all that is good, the antidote for all that is bad. Prayer is our conscious abiding in God, clinging to the vine, tapping of the Life-source.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15.5)

The mother who is like a bulldog, nipping at the heels of the powerful of this world on behalf of her child, is also apt to be like the importunate widow, knock, knock, knocking at God's door in prayerful persistence, alternating between a pesky mosquito whine and a divebombing shriek, putting her child in God's clear view, her child's needs first in line before the throne of grace. I've gotta believe that Lou's mother was praying

for him when he headed over to Korea and during every day of his deployment. I have no idea whether his mother was back home in Ohio or in heaven, but either way she was remembering him prayerfully. A mother's prayers avail for much....

A lot of kids probably wonder why their mothers seem obsessed with them saying their prayers or participating in worship. I can clear up that mystery today! Our maternal obsession with our children praying, hearing the Word, approaching the altar, is rooted in our belief that "apart from [God] you can do nothing." Sure, you can win a game or get an A or get a job or find a spouse. But apart from God you can do nothing that **really** counts, nothing of eternal significance, nothing that will make heaven as well as earth rejoice. You see, apart from God, you cannot love, and that is what "bearing fruit" means: it means loving, changing tags, saving lives, giving birth to holy ventures, giving glory to God. You don't have to be a mother -- or a father -- to be a life-giver. You **do** need to be attached to the vine, though. It is through Him, our Lord Jesus, through His death and resurrection, that God the Father, the vinegrower, changed our triage tag from hopeless to saved. The flip side of "apart from [Jesus] you can do nothing" is "With God all things are possible" (Luke 1.37). Thanks be to God! Amen

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