

Seventh Sunday of Easter (B/RCL)
May 28, 2006
John 17.6-19
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

The heart of Memorial Day weekend is prayerful, grateful, solemn remembrance of those who died defending our freedom. I was in a florist shop earlier today, and saw a fresh wreath decorated with purple mums and a purple ribbon. Wondering if it was for a funeral, I asked if somebody had died. When the person answered, “Yes, but a long time ago,” I realized this was probably a wreath to be placed at one of the war memorials in town during a Memorial Day service. The person I was with said, “They didn’t die **just** a long time ago. Some died last week.”

That person was Mark Farnham, my fiancé, an army chaplain up at Fort Monmouth. One of his sad and difficult duties is notifying family members of the death of a soldier, in combat or otherwise. His ministry continually reminds me that soldiers, sailors, airmen, didn’t stop dying after WWII, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War. Americans are still serving and dying today in Iraq and elsewhere. The few protect the many, and sometimes lay down their lives doing it. We thank God for the gift of them, and for the self-sacrificing love they have poured out.

We all know that Memorial Day Weekend isn’t **only** about remembering the honored dead. Because of the three-day weekend it caps off, because of the time of year, Memorial Day Weekend is also the beginning of summer at the Shore. If you doubt this, just look at the traffic ☺. The arrival of summer means picnics and barbecues, plastic forks and paper plates. Those of you who entertain hordes of visiting relatives and friends over the summer months probably buy these picnic supplies in bulk.

15,000 paper plates: how much do you think they're worth?? You can probably get a pack of 100 at Costco for an amazingly low price.... Get one of those flatbed carts, pile 150 packages of 100 paper plates each onto it, go through check-out, and you'd probably spend not much more than what, \$500? Recently, though, a batch of 15,200 paper plates assumed a value of over 3 million, 635 thousand dollars. No bargain, but a miracle!

Pastor Bruce Davidson, who preached at Pastor Ewen's 25th anniversary of ordination a year ago, and who came back during Advent to preach again, is the Director of our Lutheran Office of Governmental Ministry in Trenton. He is our church lobbyist, the only full-time staff person **any** denomination in the state has in place to influence legislators about impending bills impacting the poor. He walks the halls of the statehouse, keeping Christian values before our elected officials as they make laws that directly affect the homeless, the hungry, the **un-** and **under**employed, children living in poverty, single parents, handicapped adults, refugees, immigrants, all those without enough education, power or clout to lobby on their own behalf.

But aren't lobbyists the arm of special interest groups, like farmers, teachers, doctors, gas companies, filmmakers, weapons manufacturers, tobacco producers? Sure they are. But the church is a special interest group, too. Our special interest is taking Jesus seriously when He says, "Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you did it to Me" (Matt. 25.40). Our special interest is eavesdropping on Jesus, overhearing Him asking the Father to make us one as they are one, and doing whatever we can to embody the unity for which He prayed.

Back to the paper plates: Pastor Davidson is not a Lone Ranger as he speaks up for the voiceless in the statehouse. His ministry is also to mobilize **us**, the churches and individual members of the NJ Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, on behalf of those who are waiting for us to become an answer to their prayers. Pastor Davidson is blessed with deep faith, a passion for the poor and eloquence, but also with simplicity. He invited congregations throughout the state to write to the Governor on paper plates, urging him to increase funding for feeding programs throughout NJ. 15,000 people did that, and Pastor Davidson and his helpers decorated parts of the statehouse with those plates. Acting Governor Codey and other legislators read their mail on the walls instead of at their desks☺ that week.

Not wanting to lose momentum when Governor Corzine arrived in Trenton (and probably not wanting to store the left-over plates!) Pastor Davidson took another 200 paper plates to the Conference on Congregational Ministries in March. Participants covered them with **more** pleas for **more** money to stock food pantries and run soup kitchens. Pastor Davidson dutifully hand-carried **those** plates to the statehouse also, and left them in the room designated for such drop-offs, not really knowing who would end up reading them, if anyone. He only discovered later that the Governor was fascinated by those plates and took them home to read, one by one.

The Governor and our legislators were moved. In the midst of a lot of other budget cuts for the current fiscal year, the moneys for feeding programs for the hungry, children, the aged, the poor, rose from \$365,000 last year to \$4 million this year. It increased more than eightfold. It's still not enough, but it's better than it was. And we

learned once again that a unified effort on the part of the people of faith can turn legislators' heads, impact policy and move mountains.

Two paper plates wouldn't have been enough. Two hundred would have been a blip on the screen. 15,200 did the trick, though. Jesus' prayer was that "they may be one, as we are one" (John 17.11). *e pluribus unum: out of many, one*

In the army, no distinction is made among Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Libertarians, Socialists or the Green Party. Every soldier, Marine, sailor, airman, is an American, first and foremost. When a young man or woman from New Jersey dies, he or she doesn't die for the Garden State, but for the United States of America. What sense would it make any other way? In the church, we are not divided up by how we register at the polls. We're strongest, most influential, when we're not broken up into denominations either. What difference does it make whether a voter or a lobbyist is Lutheran, Methodist, Quaker, Nazarene, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist? Jesus' prayer was that "they may be one, as we are one" (John 17.11). *e pluribus unum: out of many, one*

Divisions dilute the good we dare to do for the sake of the Kingdom. Unity extends our reach, magnifies our voice, intensifies our clout, and glorifies the one Lord whose name we bear. *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* says of Christ, "He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free." **Let** us do just that, exercising our rights as privileged citizens to serve the underprivileged and to make the prayer a reality: that "they may be one, as [Jesus and the Father] are one" (John 17.11). Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson

