

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
Matthew 9.35-10.8  
June 15, 2008  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

The Church “lost” a couple good men this past week: not “the Church” as in Holy Trinity, but “the Church” as in “the Body of Christ”. Margie Delaney’s husband, Joe, was buried yesterday. Margie is a member of Holy Trinity; Joe was a member of St. Mark’s Roman Catholic Church in Sea Girt. People in our church building on weekdays probably didn’t realize Joe Delaney **wasn’t** one of our members. He was in and out weekly, ferrying attendance cards back and forth, so Margie could perform her ministry of reviewing them. She goes through every card, making a note of your attendance, and leaving me a phone message when you check off “Would like pastor to call” or “Would like to join Holy Trinity”. Joe Delaney has been the willing and cheerful carrier pigeon of those cards for the past several years. Despite the other ministries in which he was involved at St. Mark’s, Joe always had time for us here at Holy Trinity. Our circle of faith will be diminished because of his absence.

We also got the sad word of another death on Friday, that of Pastor Al Acer, who died suddenly. Pastor Acer has been at Reformation Lutheran Church in West Long Branch for over thirty years. He was a member of the North Shore Cluster of ELCA pastors, to which Pastor Arnie and I belong. Pastor Acer served as Holy Trinity’s interim pastor twelve years ago, after Pastor Scholl left, and more recently we invited him to return to consult with our Endowment, Finance and Stewardship teams here at Holy Trinity, a particular area of his expertise. Al was a faithful pastor to Reformation most recently, earlier to Messiah, Parlin (the church home of Karen Astrom, our former Director of Youth and Family Ministry), to Holy Trinity and to the larger church. He was also a caring friend, generous with his time and talent and humor. Our circle of faith will be diminished because of his absence.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says something very powerful, which touches upon Joe Delaney's life, Al Acer's life, and ours:

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” Matthew 9.37-83

Those men were the Lord's laborers, one as a committed lay person and the other as an ordained minister of Word & Sacrament. Through them the Lord brought in more of the harvest than would have been possible without them.

The harvest isn't made up of food or fruit or flowers, but of faith-filled people. The intended harvest is the joyful gathering of **all** people into God's kingdom, not the somber selection of a few. This hoped-for harvest is **plentiful** because God is **loving** and **generous**:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3.16

And as St. Paul reminds us in the Romans reading assigned for this weekend,

... God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Romans 5.8

“...[W]hile we were still **sinners** ....” As we said a couple weeks ago, that's **surely** all of us!

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

We know why the harvest is plentiful, but **why** are the laborers few?? It's not that the potential pool is small, that there are only a few who are **qualified**. Little Jessica Breanne Mallue is only three months old, and she qualifies to serve as of this weekend, when she is reborn in the amniotic waters of Holy Baptism! No, the laborers are few because only a few have stepped forward to answer the call.

**Many** step forward at Holy Trinity. Many serve, and often in largely invisible ways like Joe Delaney, in and out of the building as quiet as a whisper, or like Margie, checking attendance cards at home, or like our Property team, moving tables and chairs, trimming hedges, painting classrooms and offices, when nobody else is around, like Altar Guild friends, who launder the

altar linens in their homes or the sacristy. There's no doubt, though, that **more** ministry could happen, and those who currently serve would be greatly relieved and refreshed, if more people stepped forward to lend a hand and to offer their particular gifts. Everyone has **some** gift given by God to strengthen the Body of Christ. What is yours?

Several years ago some of us read and discussed *The Purpose-Driven Life*, a popular book by Rick Warren. I don't see eye-to-eye with him on everything, and some of his points drive me crazy, but I **do** agree that ideally every member of a church family gives the gift of time and talent to the faith community. Even our homebound friends who are never in this building, who have little mobility and great physical limitations, give the gift of prayer and encouragement....

We were reminded of a startling statistic at Synod Assembly last weekend: **40%** of the people who live in New Jersey have no faith place they can call home. The only way that almost half of the Lord's field in New Jersey will be included in the harvest is if you take the Gospel outside of this building. I'm not pastor of the 40% of the state that's unchurched. I'll never have the opportunity to preach to any of them, unless the Asbury Park Press reinstates its weekly religion column or unless you, their coworker, fellow student, teammate, fellow Elks or Kiwanis or VFW member, you, their neighbor, beautician, accountant, golf partner, college alum, take the Gospel to them.

In Holy Baptism you received the Holy Spirit, who enables all of us to tell and be Good News. No matter how shy you are, you can tell a friend who's grieving the death of a loved one about our bereavement support group, open to all, or even more simply, you can wordlessly pass along a copy of *Transitions*, the bereavement reflection published in the bulletin. No matter how unversed in matters of religion you may feel, you can invite a coworker who's new to the area to join you at a worship service, to "take us out for a spin," so to speak, to sign up for Vacation

Bible School along with your kids, to come as a visitor to one of our Sunday School classes, or to join the quilters and crocheters who make blankets for Project Linus.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

We're bidding Pastor Bruce Ewen Godspeed at the 8:45 service this weekend, in preparation for his departure to Namibia on Monday, along with the rest of the companion synod team from New Jersey. In the future, Cindy Markus hopes to travel back to our sister congregation, Uundengelo Lutheran Parish in Namibia. In August Alicia Dodds, one of our twenty-somethings, will travel to the Caribbean to serve in the Peace Corps. A few years ago, Kristen Morton served as a Young Adult in Global Mission in England. Most of us will never travel that far from home to answer the Lord's call to labor in the vineyard, but all of us are called to serve at home, if not abroad.

I said earlier that the Church “lost” a couple good men this past week. I should clarify: the Church “militant”, the Church on earth, “lost” a couple good men, faithful Christians, loving fathers, willing servants. The Church triumphant, victorious in heaven, cheering us on here below, **gained** a couple good men. Joe Delaney and Al Acer have each helped in their own way to bring in the Lord's harvest. Their work is now over. Jessica Breanne Mallue's work is just beginning. Ours continues. May our labors be fruitful in God's field, in God's sight. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham