

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23  
July 10, 2005  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

They want to be sure that conversion isn't a flash in the pan. After people called "inquirers" answer the altar call at a Billy Graham crusade, like the one in Flushing a few weeks ago, they are not left to their own devices. The Graham organization follows up faithfully. Each inquirer fills out an information card, and within hours the Graham workers have contacted a local pastor with the name and phone number of the person who has surrendered his or her life to Christ. Within two days, a counselor from the crusade phones the inquirer to check in, and makes another call three weeks down the pike. If a local church hasn't contacted the inquirer (the aspiring Christian) within two months, then the Graham organization sends out what's called a Blessed Assurance letter to the pastor it contacted initially. The letter says they're going to pass the inquirer off to somebody else if the pastor doesn't reach out within a couple days.

An article in the paper said,

Some people have compared this process to closing a sales deal. [The Graham organization's V.P. for training] prefers a different analogy. "It's the same as a child," he said. "As soon as a child is born, it is put immediately into its mother's arms. It needs care to survive from the first moment. A **spiritual** baby needs the same care." (*NYT*, 6/25/05, B5)

Billy Graham and his team realize that seed that sprouts quickly may fail fast. In the parable of the sower and the seed, the seed that fell on rocky soil "sprang up quickly," probably because there was a ledge of rock under a thin layer of soil that got warmed by the sun. The seed germinated quickly but didn't have any depth of soil in which to sink

its roots. The little seedlings soon got fried like eggs on a summer sidewalk. Other seeds made a good showing initially, but had the life squeezed out of them by thorns that grew up beside them and strangled them.

This can be a harsh world for a little seed to survive in. Fledgling Christians can easily fall out of the nest. Billy Graham and company know this and do what they can to nurture new and newly revived believers in the faith by connecting them with local faith resources. They don't **put** it this way, but their philosophy seems to be, "No one goes in – or goes out – alone! Christianity is a team sport." In order to increase the chances of success, we have to minimize isolation and maximize community. That's why we're here on a sunny Sunday in July and not just on Christmas and Easter ☺.

As the Book of Proverbs says, "A threefold cord is not easily broken." The encouragement we give each other is priceless. The disappointments I cannot tolerate when I stand alone become bearable when two or more of us stand or work or pray together, gathered in His name.

We don't have altar calls at Holy Trinity, other than the invitation to come and eat at the Lord's Table: "Come to Christ, the tree of wisdom; be fed, be sheltered." But we **do** have plenty of folks to nurture in the faith. We have our own members, we have visitors who come to worship with us, we have neighbors and family members and co-workers who have no church home whom we **could** and **should** be inviting to "Come and see!"

The inviting and the attempts to foster faith in friends and family can be frustrating. **How many times** do we have to ask a friend or acquaintance to come and worship with us before it happens?? How many times do I have to tell the confirmands

that eternal life is a gift and not a reward?? How many times do we have to put out the call for more worship assistants and ushers, more property volunteers, more Sunday School teachers, before the call is answered?? A **lot** of times.

It was the same for Jesus. His ministry wasn't an unending series of glory days. He was healing lepers, giving sight to the blind, preaching more-than-memorable sermons, raising the dead, and succeeding in totally turning off the religious establishment. What did the powers-that-be have to say about the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth?

“By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” (Matt.9.34)

Go figure.... The Messiah had arrived, but he wasn't good enough for them.

The whole point of the parable of the sower and the seed is to urge on those who are getting discouraged that their efforts don't seem to amount to anything. Whether you're a frustrated parent despairing of having **any** ability to shape your child's life for the better, or an anxious Sunday School superintendent worried about enough teachers to cover next year's classes, or a tired Care Corps coordinator, wondering where the deviled eggs will come from for the next funeral luncheon, or a faithful Stephen Minister wondering if the hour a week you spend with your care recipient is truly making **any** difference, take heart:

“The harvest is God's doing, and God is faithful.”  
*New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 306

Someone else has said:

“Evangelism must be pursued enthusiastically in spite of what appear to be meager results. **Our responsibility is to sow the seed; only God can give the increase.**” *Interpretation*, p. 154

This last week I wrote the copy for our Back-to-School edition of *Fresh Winds*, the quarterly insert we publish in *The Asbury Park Press*. It goes to fifteen thousand homes. I advertised our upcoming fall Weekday Spirituality series, which will begin on Wed., Sept. 14<sup>th</sup>, with a discussion of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, complete with Harry Potter Jeopardy. If **one** person from outside our Holy Trinity community attends the book discussion, enrolls his or her child in Sunday School, or joins us for worship because of the blurb in *Fresh Winds*, I will be happy. And I will also realize that those who don't come have been fed, regardless....

“The harvest is God’s doing, and God is faithful.”

“Our responsibility is to sow the seed; only God can give the increase.”

When, for whatever reason, you ask, “What’s the use?” hear this answer:

Such use that any word for Christ, any love shown for his sake, will in some [people] find welcome and nurture, and become a hundred gospels and a hundred deeds of love. *Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 409, exposition

The love of God incarnate in you is the ultimate altar call.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson