

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
September 7, 2008  
Romans 13.8-14  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Tropical Storm Hanna is blowing in the beginning of a new Sunday School year! A lot is happening at Holy Trinity this weekend, and wet weather won't dampen the Spirit among us! Tonight we're celebrating the baptism of baby Ava Lyn, welcoming her into this faith family through her baptismal dying and rising in the waters of grace. This evening we're also starting a new year of Confirmation Connection with our junior high youth, preparing them to affirm **their** baptism through two years of worship, service, study and fun. Tomorrow we're launching a new Sunday School curriculum and a new Sunday School time for the younger children. Over the summer we initiated a change in the start time of the second Sunday service (from 11:15 to 10:30), to encourage and enable parents who otherwise **wouldn't** worship, to do so during the Sunday School hour. At the 10:30 service we're giving Bibles to the parents of our third graders so family and friends can inscribe them before they're formally presented to the children on All Saints Sunday. These are the same children who will prepare to receive Holy Communion for the first time in the spring. Our high school youth will meet in Breakfast Club this weekend, too, beginning a year which will culminate in their attendance at Jesus, Justice & Jazz, the national youth gathering in New Orleans this coming July. Exciting stuff!

We're talking different age groups, activities, days and times, but it's all part of the same patchwork quilt of Christian care. We're highlighting the connection between heaven and earth, shining a spotlight on God, acknowledging the amazing Gift of God who is Jesus Christ, imploring the Holy Spirit who has called and gathered us to enlighten us as well. We're telling the Gospel story in as many ways as we can, teaching young and old to live it out. By the grace of God, we are both telling and being Good News.

As Ava Lyn is baptized, her parents are asked if they will raise her in the faith, bring her to worship, teach her the fundamentals of faith: the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments. I predict that Kara and Don will say yes ☺. Over the years may they keep their promise, and find a blessing in this community, where their daughter is already known by name, where she will be fed on God's Word and eventually where she will feast on the Lord's Supper. Here the family of faith embraces her, as a "visitor" 'til now, and from here on in as a member of the family. She who is now carried forward will someday toddle forward to receive a blessing, and then run forward to sing in the Cherub choir, and then excitedly kneel at the rail to receive her first Holy Communion, and then nervously stand at the lectern mike to read her faith statement on the day she affirms her baptism, as our second year confirmands will do in the spring.

No matter their age, we teach young and old that **love is the heart of faith**: God's love for us in giving us life on this earth, God's love for us in giving us eternal life, through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, God's love for us in sending the Holy Spirit to enable us to love, even and especially in Jesus' physical absence.

As St. Paul says, in his letter to the Romans, as translated in *The Message*:

Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code... finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love. (Romans 13.8-10)

The love St. Paul is talking about isn't hearts-and-flowers romantic love. He's not describing an airy feeling, or an emotional state. The love St. Paul talks about is caring-in-action, actively doing something on somebody else's behalf. Paul knew that when Jesus said, "Love your enemies as you love yourself," He wasn't referring to warm fuzzies. Jesus meant we **shouldn't** do anything to harm our enemies, and that we **should** do whatever we can to help them.

Remember last week's epistle? If your enemy is hungry, give him a sandwich. If she's thirsty,

get her a drink. Not because it will keep them guessing what you're up to or because it will be downright painful for them to receive from you, but because your care may uproot ill will and replace it with good will, and that would glorify God and bless the earth.

Elsewhere Jesus says, "What credit do you really think you deserve if you just love those who love you??" "I say, love your enemies...." That's one of the tough lessons we try to teach. C.S. Lewis had insight into how hard and how simple this can be. In his book *Mere Christianity* he advises us:

Do not waste your time bothering whether you "love" your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.

Macmillan, 1952. Reprinted in *The English Spirit*, ed. Paul Handley (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), p. 217.

When we love one another, no matter how hard it is or how much it costs us, in a very small way we're repaying the debt we owe to God. You see, God gave His Son for us, a priceless gift we could never reciprocate, a kindness we could never match. We could never repay God fully and we can never do it directly. But it gives God joy when we thank God by being good to God's children. "Thank you, God, for the food on my table. Here's a jar of peanut butter for somebody's else's table. Thank you, God, for the gift of friends and family. Show me how to befriend someone who is lonely. Thank you, God, for this gift of health. Let me serve those who are sick." Thank you, God, for hearing and answering me. Put me in the right place at the right time to become an answer to somebody else's prayer. Teach me to love. Teach me to teach others to love, both in word and deed. Amen

