

Seventh Sunday of Easter
The Reverend John H. Brock

May 23/24, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

First Century Jerusalem. The disciples have seen their mentor, their leader, their friend, Jesus, to be arrested, tried, convicted and executed. Three days later they are told that his body is gone, and then they discover for themselves that he is, in fact, alive. More than that, he hangs around for another forty days before he leaves. The second time that he leaves, though, it is not quite as messy as the previous time. There is no bloodshed, and there is no Roman guard. It is just a mountaintop experience, and had you been at Thursday night service this last week with Pastor Easton over in the chapel, you would have heard all the Ascension readings and been able to celebrate that.

You would have heard how there were two guys, after Jesus rose and ascended into heaven, two guys in white robes standing there looking at the disciples, while they were sort of going “duh” into the sky. These two guys said, ‘what are you doing standing around here looking into the sky for? Didn’t Jesus say that he wouldn’t leave you, that he was going to send you some help? So go, do what Jesus said.’ So off the disciples go, back to town, back to that same room that they have become so familiar with. That upstairs room where they locked themselves in, and where Jesus had shown himself to them. The resurrected and risen Lord.

They can rejoice this time though, that their friend, their mentor and leader, has now become, indeed, their Savior, their Messiah, their Lord. So they are back upstairs, in this Upper Room, and they looked around and suddenly realized there were only eleven of them. Aren’t there usually twelve? So they set out to rectify that. The manner in which they chose to rectify that replacement was a simple, yet I think, a rather radical plan. They prayed. Then they prayed some more. When they were done praying, they prayed some more.

They had two people in mind. The first guy was somebody with three names: Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus. The other guy was called Matthias. Now, I have to tell you, to be honest, in scripture before this, we really had not heard of either of these guys nor do we hear anything about them after the first chapter of Acts. We do know, according to *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, which was first published in 1563, that Matthias was supposedly “stoned at Jerusalem and then beheaded.” But, that is not important. What we need to be aware of today, is that there was a personnel change going on. A change that was handled by prayer and appointed by God.

Twenty Centuries later, we here at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, are facing a personnel change as well. In just a few more months our friend, our leader, our mentor, the Rev. J. Steward Hardy is going to retire (January 17, 2010, if you’re keeping track). After almost 21 years as our senior pastor, he is stepping down. I, personally, think that he deserves a bit of a rest, but I also do know that he will be very much missed. He wants to go spend time with that little

granddaughter of his down in Texas. And, I think he wants to get to know Mrs. Hardy again. But, once he is gone, and even before he is gone, where is a whole process that we, the congregation that makes up Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, needs to go through. What you need to do first and foremost on that list of what we are supposed to do, as a congregation, is pray, and then pray some more; and when we are finished praying, pray again.

During the process, and I know that it has been presented to the congregation, but give me the liberty of going over it again. Next January, we are going to have an interim pastor assigned to us. That will be an individual who has had experience as a senior pastor. This person may or may not be a semi-retired person themselves, but regardless, they will be serving here at Trinity in a full-time capacity. Once here, that interim's responsibilities are basically to help us to continue in our ministry all the while we are looking for a new senior pastor. The interim pastor will NOT be eligible to become our new pastor, and will probably be with us for about a year.

During the time the interim pastor is with us, we have to do what is called a "Congregational Self Study." We have to examine how many times of worship we have, and what kinds of worship we have. Do you know that we have five times of worship each week? We have three times on Sunday morning, 8:15 and 11:00 in the Nave, and 10:45 a.m. here in Fellowship Hall. Thursday evenings in the Chapel, and Saturday night services at 5:00 right here (were you aware that we have a Saturday night worship?). They want to know what has worked – what have we done that has worked well. What types of ministry are we, as a congregation, involved in? Here in the community, in the Lower Susquehanna Synod, throughout the state of Pennsylvania, the country, and around the world. The study will want to know what we, as a congregation, want to accomplish.

We're going to consider the gifts and talents of each of the individuals who are presented to us and each of us, as members of the congregation, may submit names to the council for consideration as senior pastor. At this point, I want to make it clear that the current Associate Pastor of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church does **not** want the position of a senior pastor. I enjoy very much being the Associate Pastor, and I feel that I am a really good Associate Pastor, and would like to continue being in charge of the Saturday night worship (did you know that we have Saturday evening worship?).

Fortunately, thanks to our new mission and vision statement, that we as a congregation voted on, we have begun some of this self exploration, but we will have to continue to do it when we begin the paperwork, which we are not officially supposed to do until after Pastor Hardy leaves. But during the next several months leading up to his retirement, during the time that the interim pastor is with us, and all the time that we are going through the call process, we as a congregation, and we as individuals, need to be in Prayer. Just like those apostles, over two thousand years ago, who were in prayer in order to figure out how to fill their vacancy.

Now I have in my lifetime heard people who say, 'what good does prayer do? I feel like I am talking to myself. That I am talking to a brick wall. That I have never really ever seen any outcome to prayer.' They say this because we live here in North America, and we are so accustomed to this instant gratification thing. But prayer often takes times. As an example let me relate a story about an event that happened in Leipzig, East Germany in the fall of 1990. This

story comes thanks to Pastor James A. Harnish, who at the time that it was printed was Pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Orlando, FL

“In Leipzig, East Germany there was a church called Nicholai Church which was a large old cathedral church in the heart of Leipzig. “Years ago a group of people in that church began a Monday night prayer service to pray for their nation, to pray for freedom, and for peace. Monday night after Monday night, year after year, they have been there praying. In May of 1989 the group began to grow with persons who wanted to emigrate out of East Germany. You remember when the barbed wire was opened and they were permitted to immigrate into Europe. When the emigrants left, their places were taken by people who were determined to stay and work for change. They kept coming back to church, week after week, sharing, praying, drawing spiritual strength for their struggle, just the way men and women went to church night after night during the Civil Rights marches of the ‘60s to find the strength to go out and face the struggle again.

““The police began to take notice of the prayer services, and on 4 September, as they were leaving the church, the pastor and a group of people were attacked by the police. The pastor began teaching the principles of nonviolent resistance, based on the Gospel, interpreted by Ghandi, and applied by Martin Luther King, Jr. The group continued to grow. They became known as “The New Form,” which would later become the opposition party. On 25 September, 6,000 people packed the cathedral that Monday night, and on 2 October, 20,000 were waiting outside the door to join in the protest march. The rest is history.”

When those first Christians prayed together in East Germany, would you have predicted that their prayers might have actually come true? Providence comes to those who pray.” You might remember that that was the fall that the Berlin Wall came down. The small group of people who began to meet weekly to pray, not to conspire against the government, not to seek to find a way to bring the wall down themselves, but met week after week to pray.

We are in a similar time. No, we don't have a wall that we want to tear down, but we are to prepare for a time of transition. We ourselves, and we as a congregation. We are called upon to pray. We are called upon to pray for guidance, we are called upon to pray for our retiring pastor. We are to pray for our interim pastor and we are to pray for our new senior pastor. We are to pray for God's will to happen within us, as a people of God.

Just like the people of Nicholai Church, just like the disciples 2,000 years ago, we too are called by our faith, by our baptism to pray. Amen.