

*A Day to Celebrate, a Day to Remember*

Seventh Sunday of Easter  
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

May 24, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

For Jesus, at least as John portrays it in this morning's gospel, at last the end is within sight. In the gospel lesson this morning, we are privileged to overhear Jesus' prayer for His disciples and those who follow after them in continuing Jesus' ministry and mission to the world. His primary concern is to see that there's a seamless transition from His physical presence to the disciples functioning as a community of faith as they carry out their task without His physical presence.

Which of course, is a primary concern at Trinity right now as we approach the transition from one senior pastor to another. Here too the concern is that we work together to ensure a seamless transition from my ministry, through the ministry of an interim senior pastor, to the beginning of a new ministry under the leadership of a new senior pastor.

And the heart of our Memorial Day Services is to recall the very costly transitions in our national life that have made possible the freedom and security which we enjoy today. There was the strife of the Civil War which ushered in a new unity – the United States. There were the terrible conflicts of the First World War – do you remember, the “war to end all wars.” But beloved I suspect as our Lord taught about the poor, so we might also understand that wars will always be with us. And there was the Second World War, and the Korean war and Viet Nam, and this very day, men and women in our armed services continue in mortal combat, each conflict claiming an enormous price of limb and psyche and life, in all of which men and women gave their lives for the transition into a better and nobler future.

But it's not only those who lay down their life who suffer. There are the survivors, the comrades in arms who went on to live. There are the husbands and the wives whose partner never came home; the unrequited loves when boyfriends and girlfriends didn't return; the grief and pain of sons and daughters, brothers and sisters who continue to grieve the loss of those they loved. Lives impacted forever.

Jesus understood how the way of the world impacts on the life of people of faith and was alert to the pressures His disciples would face after His death and so in their presence, He calls upon Almighty God, His Father, to equip the disciples for what was to come. His prayer is brief and consists of four petitions. First, He prays for the disciples and the communities of faith they will establish, that they will maintain their distinctive life in the world. And what, beloved, has become of the community that can no longer be distinguished from the culture in which it's found? Jesus prays that they may not be overcome by the ever present cultural and political pressures of the larger community in which they exist. There is constant danger that the community of faith, the church, will find itself drawn into the politics and political issues of the

time or at the other extreme will withdraw completely from the world and live for its own sake. And both extremes we see around us today. Both extremes can so easily overtake the church and finish up distracting it completely from its real and authentic mission and ministry. Judas' own capitulation to the pressures around him is a salutary and sobering example of what can happen.

You see, beloved, to live as God's faithful people, as disciples of Christ in the world, is a risky business indeed, and the church is only safe when it keeps Christ's example, Christ's teaching and His mission at its center.

So it is this morning that we baptize Leah Dilani Balasundram, admitting her to the Christian church in general and to Trinity in particular. As part of her baptism, Reuben and Debbie, you have promised before God to raise her in the faith. And we – you and I, do you remember – we promised before God to pray for her and support her in her life of faith and discipleship. The unity we show in making such promises is exactly what Jesus prayed for next.

He asks that the community of faith will join in the mutual relationship that He has with His Heavenly Father, and that the community will strive to develop that same relationship of mutual compassion and caring among one another, and when it does, we “abide” in His love, and therein lies the heart of our unity.

The final petition that Jesus offers is that God sanctify the church; that He set the community of faith, the congregations, apart from the larger culture and society in which they find themselves, because the two are not identical at all. Not that they retreat from the world, but that they live and witness in it without letting it (the world, that is) shape, define, or direct their mission. Such a community of faith is not set apart by its doctrines, nor is it set apart by its virtues. What makes it a community of faith, and distinctive, is a gift from God, who assigns it a special role to play and who calls it to live and witness and proclaim the good news.

Now for those of you who have been keeping count (and I'm pretty sure some of you have), there is yet another petition, the third petition, and perhaps the most surprising petition of all. Jesus prays that the disciples, those who follow, the communities of faith, the congregations in Jesus' words, “may have my joy made complete in themselves.”

The joy of which Jesus speaks is not happy smiles, or laughter, or warm hugs. It's the joy that comes with a deep sense of the reality that God cares deeply for each and every one of us, just as the ideal parent cares for the ideal children. It's the knowledge that when we baptized Leah Dilani, God is adopting her as a beloved daughter, a princess, whose final inheritance will be the kingdom of heaven.

Just so, you and I, in our baptisms, have been adopted as beloved and priceless children, princes and princess of the kingdom. But it is more. It's the realization that God Himself joins us in our suffering and grief. You see, God knows what it is to lose a beloved son who lays down his life in the face of military might and political power. Be absolutely clear, no one human being dies without God's suffering; not one fallen service man or woman who lays down their life does it alone, though no other person may be there, God is!

With the same compassion and grief and purpose when He stood with His own beloved Son at His laying down of life for us at His crucifixion, beloved, none of us ever walks alone. Though some of us may choose to turn our backs and walk away, so great is God's love for us that He allows us to abandon Him, but the good news, the astounding news, is that He never abandons us.

So Jesus prepares His disciples and Himself for the end of His earthly life; but that will not be the end, He will rise again. Nor does His earthly departure leave us on our own.

Next week we will celebrate Pentecost, the gift of the comforter, the companion, the Holy Spirit who dwells in us from our baptism on. We have the Word, God's word, the Word of life. That's what it's all about. Life now and life after death.

So Leah, give it all you've got. Celebrate! Your new life has just begun.

Celebrate Trinity! Celebrate the fact that you are about to enter a glorious new chapter in the life of the congregation and as a great mission station.

And let us all celebrate this Memorial Day; celebrate for the valor and commitment shown by those who, for us and our freedom, laid down their lives.

Amen.