

Second Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "The Treasure in a Simply Packaged Gift"
Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35
March 12-13, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

We're in the midst of planning and registration for Good Morning, Good Friday 2022, and I had a hunch this might be Year 25 for our annual children's and youth event. Someone suggested I check annual reports to verify that, and sure enough, the Holy Trinity bulletin of reports for 1997 mentions the **first** annual Good Morning, Good Friday celebration. For one quarter of our 100 years as a family of faith, we've been gathering our children on Good Friday morning to tell the Greatest Story Ever told about our Lord's Passion, death and resurrection, to sing, to make cookies and crafts, to color greeting cards and lots of other fun stuff.

Since I was already dipping into history, I decided to reread the pastoral report I wrote in 1997. Here's how it began:

True story: the woman was browsing at a rummage sale when she unearthed a sweet picture of the Virgin and Child. \$3.00 didn't seem too much to pay for her "impulse buy," so she parted with her three wrinkled dollar bills and headed home with the unexpected find. Later on she realized what a wise choice she had made when someone identified the painting as an original by the 16th century artist Luca Longhi, and valued it at \$25,000.

Wow, true story. I'd forgotten about it. What follows is as true now as it was 25 years ago. It takes on extra meaning for us now, though, as we mark the 2nd anniversary of COVID lockdown when all worship became virtual overnight. No matter how much we longed to receive Holy Communion, we couldn't. Now we can. But do we?

Here's what followed in my annual report in 1997. **You** decide if it's still true:

Everything we do at Holy Trinity, every facet of ministry we perform, is to give God glory and to open people's eyes to the extraordinary value of the simply packaged gifts we receive each week: Word & Sacrament. A Bible

story we've heard before, the pouring of water and signing with oil, a nibble of bread and sip of wine may seem too ordinary and unremarkable to attract people. Why should busy folks make time in full schedules to experience those simple gifts by worshiping...?

People will rearrange their lives and reroute their journeys if they recognize treasure. If the Holy Spirit teaches their hearts that the written and spoken Word, the water of Holy Baptism and the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion are channels for God's love, life, forgiveness and salvation..., they will want to claim that goodness. Who breathes who doesn't need healing from one hurt or another? Who doesn't know the pain of damaging someone or something precious, and longing for forgiveness? Who doesn't need to know we are called by name by One we have never seen, but Who has known and loved us always? Who wouldn't rejoice to be raised up daily from life's little deaths, set on our feet by a loving Savior? Who isn't comforted that for those who believe, life is changed not ended by physical death?

We don't invest \$3.00 and receive a \$25,000 work of art. We invest time in worship and receive the **priceless** gift of the Word of God and the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Both are so important. This is what we teach our children and youth preparing to receive Holy Communion for the first time this spring: the Word of God and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are the means of grace, channels/rivers through which God's love and forgiveness flow into our lives and hearts. Our friend Ruth Walsh, who's now in Heaven (part of the Church Triumphant), has unknowingly given us a show-and-tell to help me explain how **both** Word & Sacrament are so important!

Ruth made this angel for the Women of the ELCA's Christmas Bazaar I don't know how many years ago. Of course it came with two wings ☺. I have the other one. The glue apparently dried up and it fell off. Could an angel fly with only 1 wing?? I don't think so. Certainly a bird can't. We all need both "wings" God gives us: Word **and** Sacrament to get where we need to go spiritually! Livestream worship is great, when we **don't** have another option. If we are **able** to be present in person in worship, though, that allows us to receive the Body & Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, and there's no substitute.

In today's Gospel the Lord pours out His heart:

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34b)

Jesus is anticipating His arrest, torture and death at the hands of the religious leaders and Roman authorities, but I think this can apply to us, too, when we ignore the Lord's invitation to draw close and head in another direction instead. I think the Lord is sad when we choose to absent ourselves from worship, either in-person or livestreamed, for any of the other options open to us. And I know I'm "preaching to the choir here," because you **are** listening to me, you **are** present in one way or another today. But maybe this message will echo in your heart next time you weigh whether or not to worship.

Psalm 27 is such a keeper:

*One thing I ask of the LORD; one thing I seek;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life ;
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to seek God in the temple. (Psalm 27:4)*

Camping out in the literal sanctuary 'round the clock isn't appealing to any of us, so let's understand dwelling in the house of the Lord as being in constant heart communion with God. Let's read it as a sure, enduring sense of God's saving presence, no matter what our day is like. Being in worship weekly, beating a path to the door of this (or another) house of God, is a good way to cultivate a 24/7 sense of divine accompaniment. Receiving the Lord in Holy Communion is a great way to foster spiritual communion with Jesus all week long. Think of it in terms of being with a loved one. Talking on the phone is fine. FaceTime is even better. But do either of those replace being with our loved ones in person? Of course not! Being in worship with our faith family, receiving the Lord's Body & Blood in the Holy Supper, is the closest we can get to being with our Lord Jesus in person!

We have such a treasure in the Eucharist. Celebrating Holy Communion is our chance to obey the Lord's command, "Do this in memory of Me," and it's our invitation to reach out and receive the gifts our Lord first offered the night before He died: "My body, given for you," "My blood, shed for you." That's part of the story we teach the children in Sunday School, it's what we share with them at Good Morning, Good Friday. It's our hunger for the Sacrament, though, our love of the Lord and of the Lord's presence in Holy Communion, our faithfulness and regularity in showing up to be part of this Holy Meal, our recognition of the Holy Treasure in the simply packaged gift that makes the greatest impression on the young ones among us and to anyone on the outside looking in. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham