

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany (RCL/B): "Here for Those Who Aren't Here Yet"

Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2024

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This day of the annual meeting seems as good a time as any to remind everyone: "We are here for those who aren't here yet." The first time I entered this sanctuary was 27 ½ years ago. My first thought was, "Oh, there's no stained glass." I didn't yet know the joy of standing in the pulpit and seeing a fiery red cardinal in the beautiful holly tree that used to grow right outside that window. I hadn't yet been startled by the unexpected sight of our across-the-street neighbor with his camera and 2 foot long zoom lens, standing on the lawn at 7:10 on a Wednesday morning, taking pictures of the red-tailed hawks that use our steeple as their crow's nest. I hadn't yet been distracted during worship by the beautiful sight of the first snowflakes of the season sifting down from the sky. But most of all, I didn't yet realize how great it is that our clear glass windows mean that we who are **inside** the sanctuary can see **outside** and be reminded of the world our Lord Jesus came to save. The view always reminds me: "We are here for those who aren't here yet."

We'll discuss the budget at today's meeting, and it will include money for the upkeep of our buildings and grounds. We are proud of how beautiful they are, and we are grateful to our Property Committee for keeping them that way. We also want to remember that this place isn't an end in itself. It is a launching pad, a springboard for our ministry out in the world. It's where we are nourished on Word & Sacrament, where we teach our children and youth, study the Word, build community and strengthen relationships among ourselves, so that we can go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel, if necessary using words, and in all things serving our neighbor.

People out there are dying for lack of the grace we find in our faith, the love we receive from our Savior. They despair of their failures in love because they know no Source of forgiveness. We do. They die of loneliness for want of this kind of community that sustains us,

multiplying our joys and dividing our sorrows. They turn to substances and activities that blunt their pain but can be ultimately deadly, because they don't know where true, lasting healing can be found. We do.

So when people **do** heed the Spirit's call and come, when the Holy Spirit nudges them in our direction, guides them to our door, or to our livestream, let us extend the warmest welcome we can! Part of that welcome is beautiful worship: reverent liturgy, relevant preaching, soul-nourishing music, tasty goodies at coffee hour ☺. Friendly people in the congregation are very important, too. (That's just a little reminder to never say, "Excuse me, you're sitting in my pew"!)

Our prayer of the day includes this "ask" of God: "Bring wholeness to all that is broken....", like Jesus brought wholeness to the man in the synagogue with the unclean spirit in today's Gospel. What a great reminder that even on holy days like the Sabbath and in holy places like that synagogue, worshipers bring their brokenness. You who came today brought along your concerns about loved ones, your preoccupations about the state of the world, your arthritis, your sore back, your bum knee, your tension headache, maybe even your craving for what you know could kill you. We don't leave that stuff at home. We arrive with our baggage and Jesus doesn't say, "You can't bring that in here." Jesus never says, "You don't belong; leave," as I'm pretty sure a lot of the people in the synagogue wanted him to do with the disruptive man. He confronts whatever unholy thing is "possessing" us and casts it out. "Be silent," "Be muzzled," "Shut up and come out of him!" Jesus tells the unclean spirit, and it obeys. It was grace that led the man with the unclean spirit into worship that day. It is grace that has led us here today. We can anticipate some form of healing every time we receive our Lord in this Holy Supper. "Life, forgiveness and salvation" are the divine medicine He offers in His Body & Blood. He truly brings wholeness to all who are broken.

As a pastor, a minister of Word & Sacrament, my particular calling is to share the Word of God in life-giving ways, to baptize and to preside at Eucharist. It is also to shepherd the flock, under the guidance of the Good Shepherd. If called as deacon, a minister of Word and Service, Ned's stated calling would also be to share the **Word** of God in life-giving ways, particularly through music, which Martin Luther called "that fair and glorious gift of God." In addition to music-making his **service** includes working with our children and youth, teaching and mentoring them in the faith. Ned **has** been performing this ministry among us, most recently since 2019, and previously for an additional 5 years. A formal call enabling him to be ordained as a deacon would be our affirmation of the dedication he has shone in furthering his studies and broadening his ministry through field work and chaplaincy, and also acknowledging the discernment of the larger Church which has endorsed his candidacy and judged him as having the gifts necessary to become a minister of Word and Service in this Church.

What we **both** do, and what Peter Seggel, our pastoral visitor, and Mary Burdwood, our office manager, do, is to enable the saints – and that's **you**. Think of it: how many people outside these walls do you encounter in a week? Add up all the folks whose lives will be touched by all of you between now and next Sunday. That's ministry multiplied! The majority of folks I connect with are already part of Holy Trinity or another faith family. You all are the ones out in the mission field of the world, the world we can see through these windows, the world our Lord was sent to save. May the Holy Spirit use you to sow seeds of hope in the field of the world, to encourage fainting hearts, to be a healer in your own unique way, to invite those who are outside to "Come and see," to make whole all which is broken. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham