

Third Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "A Concert, a Luncheon, and Life Lessons"
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35
June 8-9, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Wednesday night was amazing: our Holy Trinity Choir joined the choirs of Manasquan and Point Pleasant Boro High Schools to present a beautiful concert, the centerpiece of which was the Fauré Requiem, an especially meaning-full piece in the wake of the recent deaths of so many Holy Trinity friends.

But beyond the beauty of the music that was played (by a live orchestra!) and the richness of the words that were sung, there was the glorious sight of all those teenagers singing their hearts out, shoulder to shoulder with each other and with adults who were literally "singing the same tune" 😊. How can you be part of a choir and not realize you're part of something bigger than yourself? You're an essential part of a greater whole, you're a member of a community, not a sad island in an anonymous sea.

I was struck by that thought because of where I'd been earlier in the day. I'd been invited to offer grace before the Silent Samaritan Luncheon, an annual fundraiser for the Samaritan Counseling Center right here in Manasquan by the post office. The keynote speaker was Susan Tellone, clinical director of the Association for the Prevention of Teen Suicide. I know Sue from years ago when she a certified school nurse at Manasquan High. She arrived just in time to experience the cluster of suicides between 2008-2012 when 12 local high school youth ended their own lives. She and Pastor Joe Gratzel from 1st Baptist here in Manasquan were instrumental in creating a multidisciplinary community team to respond to and staunch the trauma. That group included school administrators, town officials, clergy, law enforcement and counselors. It's still a model for other communities

dealing with trauma. Sue pointed out how our little corner of the world still holds the dubious distinction of experiencing triple crown trauma: suicide cluster, national disaster (Sandy....) and COVID. Susan was very respectful. She warned us, her listeners, that she was going to ask us to revisit those painful times.... Her topic was “Raising Resilience,” and out of 3 R’s, the first was Remember.

She spoke about **real** emotional or physical pain, and **perceived** isolation and helplessness as factors contributing to a person’s desire to end one’s life. She emphasized that death itself isn’t the desired outcome of suicide: relief from pain is. Adults have more coping mechanisms at our disposal than adolescents do. The frontal cortex isn’t fully developed until we’re in our mid-twenties. It does a lot of cool stuff, including advanced problem-solving. And with time comes experience. We know what it’s like to suffer the pain of a break-up – and to survive. We’ve flunked tests or buried a loved one or been betrayed by a friend or misunderstood by family, then eventually moved on and lived on.

But we also can’t act like the cavalry riding to the kids’ rescue, arriving with all the answers, trying to convince them they’re overreacting to what we see as a short-lived bump in the road. Susan advised us to keep 3 words at the ready when we’re talking to a discouraged or even despairing youth: “**Tell me more.**” In their soulful telling and in our non-judgmental, non-advice-giving, active listening, they are no longer existentially alone. The Holy Spirit may nudge us to share a relevant story from our own experience, but not till the young person has opened up to us and poured out their heart. Kids are pretty much the same as adults: unsolicited advice is usually neither welcomed nor apt to be acted upon.

But if we have a relationship with these kids, so they really know us, our story may speak for itself. If they’re aware of some of the slings and arrows we’ve suffered, if we’re

functioning fully, loving deeply, despite (or maybe because of) our traumas, we become silent witnesses to the possibility of healing after hurt, and our Savior's power to save, not just on the other side of the grave, but this side too. Susan pointed out something very encouraging: we may be able to count the number of youth we have lost, but we'll never know (this side of Heaven) the number that we've saved.

You're a part of that, by the way. Your offerings fuel our Holy Trinity ministries, including the spiritual nurture of our children, youth and families. We're blessed to have a Director of Youth & Family Ministry, Deacon Ned. It's the second hat he wears, about 15 hours a week, along with his full-time work as Director of Music Ministry. In those 15 hours Ned empowers the saints, helping to organize and equip the faithful volunteers who step up to teach Sunday School and serve as youth group mentors. (He also leads our First Holy Communion and Confirmation Connection classes.) Approximately half of Ned's Youth & Family Ministry salary is covered by a financial legacy left by Fran & Al Siemers, who had no children of their own but claimed Holy Trinity's children as their own. Each year we are challenged to find the other half of the Youth & Family salary; often it has come from bequests. It would be a great gift to our faith family and would offer great peace of mind to me, our Youth & Family Ministry team, and our Stewardship and Finance Committees, if giving increased sufficiently to cover that staffing cost. Otherwise we'll be sweating it out again as we prepare the 2025 budget this fall.

It's the intersection of Ned's Worship & Music and Youth & Family responsibilities that birthed Wednesday's concert. We're acutely aware that we not only have to invite people to come into our space; we also have to go out into **their** space. The Holy Spirit surely had a hand in the agreement of 2 Boards of Education to allow their students to

participate in a concert that included sacred music, and to share the costs. 72 youth sang with 32 adults at St. Denis. (The concert couldn't be here because our doll house-sized sanctuary wouldn't fit all the singers and musicians! We're grateful to Fr. Bill for opening St. Denis' doors.) I don't think I'm going out on a limb guessing that many of those kids have never sung sacred music before and probably aren't regular church goers. The very act of singing and listening to the Fauré Requiem is a prayer. So the siblings and adults who came out to support their family members were also swept up in a prayer experience. Ned initiated it, our choir members invested lots of time and talent in preparing for it, and our Endowment Fund covered our end of the cost: money and time well spent. Who knows what the seeds sown through this concert will grow into? At the very least, these kids had an opportunity to showcase and be affirmed for their talents, and they were partners with people of faith who believe the words they sang. They know they are part of something bigger than themselves. They know they have value and are valued.

May St. Paul's point of view in this weekend's reading from 2 Corinthians (2 Corinthians 4:17-18) be our attitude, too, when we confront the challenges life sends our way, including the larger ones that try our souls:

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

William Barclay was a soulful Scripture scholar in the last century, and he's one of my favorites. He writes:

Life has surrounded us with infirmity, although Christ has surrounded us with glory, so that we may remember that the infirmity is ours and the glory is God's, and recognize our total dependence on him.¹

Other than helping us recognize and embrace our holy dependence on God, our afflictions and challenges enrich those who know us and see us cope, witness our resilience, and perhaps remember our example in their times of crisis. Our afflictions and challenges also enrich **us** as human beings. The woman I was sitting next to at the Wednesday Samaritan Center luncheon is a counselor and specializes in teaching mindfulness. She gave me this great suggestion. When I am confronted with something troubling, puzzling, painful, rather than asking, “Why is this happening to me??” I may reframe that and ask, “Why is this happening **for** me?” What golden learning opportunity, what soul lesson, is the Lord providing for me?

Always, let’s ask the Holy Spirit for grace to put what happens to us in this life in the context of eternity, as St. Paul does so eloquently in today’s epistle:

These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There’s far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can’t see now will last forever. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18, The Message)

That’s an important life lesson for all of us, young and old. Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (rev. ed: Daily Study Bible series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 198.

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