

Transfiguration
February 18, 2007
2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

When were you last tempted to lose heart? Really. When have you been convinced – or almost convinced -- that the only rational thing to do was to throw in the towel? When have you been so demoralized you flirted with **bailing** on the course you were flunking or on the job that was giving you ulcers or on the relationship that dealt you more pain than pleasure or on the medical treatment meant to save your life that seemed to be killing you instead? When have you been so **disheartened** that you've thought (about anything), "It's hopeless and I should just give up"? We've all had that thought, whether or not we've acted on it. So where's St. Paul coming from when he says in today's epistle, "...we do not lose heart"? (2 Cor. 4.1b)

Traveling in the car on Thursday I heard a radio interview with a twenty-something man named Ishmael who is from Sierra Leone. He was on the airwaves because of the autobiography he has written about becoming a child soldier at the age of thirteen. At that time his village and the rest of his family were destroyed by one of the warring parties that has made Sierra Leone an African version of the killing fields.... He and some other boys escaped with their lives but were transported from one nightmare into another. Realizing that if they didn't take up arms they'd be seen as supporting the opposition, they allowed machine guns to be thrust into their hands, received a one week crash course in combat, and lived the life of child warriors for the next four years. This is a chilling, true story about what's happening in more than one corner of the globe.... It's a horrifying commentary on the state of affairs in our world. It is monumentally **disheartening** news. So what's St. Paul talking about when he says, "...we do not lose heart"?

Closer to home and related to children's spiritual rather than physical welfare, our church family dreamed boldly about having a director of youth and family ministry, built up our staffing challenge fund for years and found a wonderful person to fill the bill in Karen Astrom. Our

ongoing giving wasn't enough to support her salary, though, and at our annual meeting in January we approved a budget which does not include a director of youth and family ministry. That is a **disconnect** for our community that has vowed to spiritually, faithfully, creatively nurture the many children and youth whom God has entrusted to our care, a community that has made the evangelism of Sunday School parents one of our top priorities. It is a genuinely **disheartening** development. So what **does** St. Paul mean when he says, "...we do not lose heart"?

In our individual lives there are people we love who do not fare well, at least in the moment. We pray that loved ones' marriages will flourish, and sometimes they fail. We pray that our own or a loved one's depression or anxiety will lift, and sometimes it worsens. We pray that someone's job will bring satisfaction or make a difference or simply continue, and sometimes it just doesn't happen. We pray that loved ones' health problems will resolve, and sometimes they **still** physically fail, or even die. We pray that God will guide our decisions and sometimes we feel all alone anyway, left in confusion, rudderless in stormy seas. God's apparent deafness to our prayers is **disheartening**, to say the least. So is St. Paul plain **wrong** when he says, "... we do not lose heart"?

St. Paul's whole thought is this:

"Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

God's mercy is mysterious. Four years after Ishmael first picked up a machine gun at the age of 13, a small UNICEF delegation overtook him and his army company. Those global ambassadors for peace, those faithful and tireless advocates for children, saw how young some of those soldiers were and "decommissioned" them by taking them to Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, and welcoming them into a safe space where these child soldiers could gradually heal from their trauma, recapture some of their childhood, and head toward a brighter future.

After some hard-won healing had taken place, Ishmael received an invitation to tell his story at a United Nations conference in New York City. He touched the heart of a professional storyteller, who reached out to him. After returning to Sierra Leone and seeing there was no future of hope for him there, Muslim Ishmael contacted this Jewish storyteller, old enough to be his mother, and asked if he could come to NYC and live with her. She said yes. They live together still. God's mercy is mysterious. But "since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." May those UNICEF workers never lose heart. May the rest of the child soldiers in this world never lose heart.

We have had a temporary change of course in youth and family ministry here at Holy Trinity, but not a permanent detour. Investing in and nurturing our youth and families is not a flash-in-the-pan exercise, a fleeting program that failed to fly, a footnote in a church history book. Youth and family ministry is a mission we have from God. Our Council has approved the use of Endowment Fund dividends to pay someone on a contract basis for specific youth and family projects in the coming year. Under this arrangement, Karen Astrom has graciously agreed to help Pastor Leitzke and me with First Holy Communion preparation this spring. "Thank you, God!" Truly, "since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." Please, people of faith, do **not** lose heart.

We have been praying these last couple of weeks for Rudolf Buser, the husband of adult choir member Waltraut. Rudy died this past Thursday. God did not say "Yes" to our prayers for Rudy's physical recovery. God did say "Yes" to our prayers that Rudy not be left in this life without the ability to live fully.... In Jesus Christ, God has also said "Yes" to our prayers for eternal life as a postlude to earthly life. Our prayer for Rudy's wife and children in this time of loss is that they will not grieve as those who

have no hope, that they will not lose heart. "...[S]ince it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart."

Our altar flowers this Transfiguration weekend call to mind the Easter which awaits us on the other side of Lent. As the vision of Jesus transfigured in glory was meant to hearten the disciples on their journey to Jerusalem, where their Lord would be crucified, so the vision of Jesus transfigured in glory, suffering for our salvation, risen from the tomb, heartens us. "...[S]ince it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart" anywhere along the Way. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham