

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

May 4, 2008

Acts 1:6-14

Psalms 68:1-10, 33-36

1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Friday evening, I suppose around eight, Happy and I walked in the Relay for Life, in the midst of many, many other walkers. We walked the track at the Valdosta Middle School. There came a moment when the sun was setting, the sky in the west turned flaming red, and the sharp light filtered through the rising smoke of cooking fires at the tents set up by churches and businesses and civic groups in the infield of the track, a forest of tents.

A timeless scene: the vision of the nomad tribes, the Israelites, camped on numberless ancient fields; the vision of armies through the centuries on what was once called "the tented field."

Several years ago a book titled *Being Dead is No Excuse* was very popular. Written by two ladies in a small town in Mississippi, it was a comparison of the funeral customs of the local Methodist and Episcopal Churches, very funny and embarrassingly accurate. There are differences in customs and the use of flowers, when, where, and how receptions are to be held, and, particularly, food.

There is a great difference concerning what might be appropriate music at a Methodist funeral as opposed to one at the Episcopal

Church – but we all knew that, didn't we? However, there is one point of universal agreement, and that is that "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" is listed as "Nevah again!"

"What on earth brought all that to mind," you may ask. It's the lyrics. It's the words and what they mean, not just in history but here, this weekend. "I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps." It's the presence of God, the omnipotent, omniscient God, present in the hearts and minds of His people, gathered for a great purpose – every great purpose. It's the timeless smoke of fires, warming and sustaining fires, smoke rising like the prayers of the saints in incense hovering over the camps of His servants, reflecting the bright, flaming light of His glory.

Causes may be greatly different. The cause may so often be strife and war for many, many reasons. This weekend the cause has been compassion. Those in the tented field are motivated in many ways – patriotism, anger, pride. This weekend, the motivation was love, love for those who are with us no more, love for those with us who are survivors, and love for all those who may come after us: love that motivates us to find the means to make their lives free of suffering.

What better way to say it than in the concluding words of our hymn, "As He died to make people holy, let us live to make people free."

In His Holy Name.