

100th Anniversary Manasquan

I want to ask you a question – why church? Why do we gather together as congregations and pray, sing, listen, commune, and serve? Asked another way, why has Holy Trinity Lutheran Church existed for 100 years and why does it exist today? What’s the reason those faith ancestors were called together 100 years ago?

Reading over your history, you might conclude that there are lots of answers to the question. There were Lutherans in the area who didn’t want to keep going all the way to Asbury Park to worship or the fact that there was an empty church building just waiting for a new congregation to make it home might be two.

But I want to suggest that the answer to “why church” comes from our scripture texts today. Yes, this odd collection of readings that challenges the comfort of the wealthy and comforts those who live in poverty point us to the answer as to “why church”.

Whether it is Amos or 1st Timothy or our gospel reading from Luke – God’s word challenges us to love our neighbors, to cling to that which gives us life, Jesus Christ. These readings paint vivid pictures of the disparity between people of power and wealth and people on the margins of both. These hard readings tell us how to live together as God’s people and exhort us to put our faith, not in material wealth, but in the treasure of the gospel.

How could we ever do that, except by gathering with other believers and coming together as church?

Scripture tells us – we are called to love God and serve one another. We are called as believers who actively love others in Jesus’ name. Here we learn the purpose for the church, the purpose for this congregation, the reason those original founders of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church came together in the first place.

Here’s the answer to the great “so what” question. Why does this, or any congregation exist – in order to love others in Jesus’ name. In order that we will show the marvelous gifts of God by what we do in Jesus’ name. In order that we will bear witness to the God of love and grace and mercy who loved us in the first place.

God claims you and calls you together so that as you go about your daily life you will show others who God in Christ is. We are church in order that we might save and change lives in Jesus’ name. We are church in order that the world will know and live as chosen and beloved children of God. We are church for a purpose – we exist to bear witness to those who are not here so they, too, might come to realize the love and grace and mercy of God.

100 years is a long time for a congregation to carry on this mission. Many congregations don’t live to see 100 years. Not many institutions in general live to celebrate 100 years. But God has been active and alive and calling this congregation into Jesus’ mission for these past 100 years and will continue to do so as long as that mission continues.

One way to phrase our calling is to say that God’s mission has a church – this church. God’s mission to claim and bless the world has you. For 100 years and counting, God’s mission has had Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. A lot has changed over those decades. And much has remained the same.

Thinking back to those first people who gathered to join in God’s mission through Holy Trinity, I can only imagine how they would have been quite different from us.

First of all, neither Pastor Mary nor I would be standing up here leading worship – serving as your pastor and bishop! Women wouldn't even have been allowed to serve on the church council.

Men, you wouldn't have dared come to church this morning wearing anything less than a suit and tie. Children were nice to have around, as long as they sat quietly and didn't disturb the adults.

And of course, no one ran off to other activities on Sundays, as this is the Lord's Day and everything else could just wait until Monday.

But as much as things have changed, the center has remained the same. We are still gathered around the promises of God in Jesus Christ. We are still hearing the same Scripture that sustained our faith ancestors. God's mission is still for the sake of the world: gathering and claiming, naming and sending. You are still loved by the Good Shepherd in order to love others with your words and deeds.

Today we look back and give thanks for those who first believed this promise and who first gathered to live this mission in the world. We look around and celebrate those who are here today who carry on the legacy of Holy Trinity and move into a new day. And we look ahead in wonder – who will come after us? How will God's mission be lived out into the future? How will the history of this congregation serve as a steppingstone into a future that God holds and not a millstone holding us back?

In his memoir, *The Diving Bell and The Butterfly*, Jean-Dominique Bauby tells the story of his life. Bauby was a young editor of a French magazine when he was in an auto accident that left him completely paralyzed, except for his left eye – he could blink. In the days and weeks after the accident, Bauby fell into a depression as he couldn't communicate, move, eat, or bathe.

Realizing he could blink, one of his therapists tried to get him to communicate by calling out the letters of the French alphabet in the order they were most used. Bauby would blink after the letter he wanted to use. He blinked for each letter to make up each word of every sentence. In this way, he realized he could communicate.

That is how he wrote his memoir – every letter, every word, every sentence. Over 200,000 blinks. One word usually took about 2 minutes to complete.

With this method of communication, Bauby was able to share with the world how he felt in his paralyzed state. He said he realized that he still had two important things – memory and imagination. He described the feeling as that of being trapped inside a heavy, metal diving bell – locked into himself, unable to move and yet having a mind that was as free as a butterfly. Having both blessed memory and holy imagination allowed him to live an abundant life.

Today as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of God's mission through Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, we have both memory and imagination. We remember God's gifts to those who first gathered here, God's sustenance for those who came after the original members, God's ongoing promise to you who are here now. And we have holy imagination to lead us into the future.

It is your blessed memory and holy imagination that has called you, in your own words, to: feed the hungry, house the homeless, accompany the lonely, encourage the hopeless, and advocate for the voiceless.

Your memory and imagination have called you to stand for and with those on the margins, those struggling in the face of hardship, just as your faith ancestors did here during times of depression, war, and scarcity - giving witness to a God of abundance and peace. For 100 years this congregation has declared that God's promise is true and love does triumph over any adversity.

With your memory and imagination, you seek ways to pass on the faith to new generations – teaching the same truths about a gracious God but in new ways; reaching out in joy and love to show children and youth that they are valued and loved in this place.

Being God's beloved people means that your memory and your holy imagination do not keep you in the past but call you forward into an unknown future – God's future. You give witness to the loving acts of Jesus Christ who called together that initial group of believers 100 years ago by continuing to proclaim that same God today.

Why church? Why this church? As we remember and give thanks today, we do so knowing why – because God in Christ Jesus has gathered you, claims you, and sends you into the world in order that you may love others – just as God claimed, gathered and sent the founders of this congregation. Just as God will continue to do long after us. Happy Anniversary Holy Trinity Lutheran Church! Amen.