

Every community, every parish, every church has a story to tell. Whether rural or urban, old or new, self-described liberal or conservative or somewhere in between, only the most inert and truly dying congregation is without a rich tale by which it understands and represents itself. It is no secret to any of you, nor indeed is it long a secret to anyone new here such as myself, that Trinity possesses a full, long, venerable, complicated, multi-layered and still emerging narrative. By this I mean two things specifically: first, that the parish and its history are anything but simple and clear; and second, at least with my interim and observer eyes, there are aspects of this history that have been kept in the shadows, or which are rarely talked about, or which have been written away into the past and are rarely revisited. Neither of those dynamics are especially unusual, but that is the very point. For as exceptional and unique as Trinity is and feels itself to be, there is yet a whole element of life and ministry and challenge here which is inherent in every parish, near or far, and is not, therefore, in itself special. It just is.

In its most simplistic rendering, Trinity has always seen itself as being in the proverbial forefront; indeed, some might argue that Trinity created a forefront *before* the forefront even existed. Trinity prides itself on being in some kind of tension with the institutional hierarchs and stale dictums of an apparently old order. That essence of running mostly by its own rules, and striving against the felt limitations of an ancient system, and undertaking ministry in a way that defied the more constricted and stifling patterns of the past, is a piece and a manner which many here treasure. Again, it is no secret that Bishops of the past chafed mightily and in some cases furiously against this congregation, and vice versa. It is no secret that other parishes and other people grew weary of Trinity's notion, whether explicitly or implicitly conveyed, of being "special", immune, defiant, different, rogue, and unyielding. And it is also the case that what to some may seem clear and Godly can be just as surely felt by others to be self-righteous and even elitist, as paradoxical as that no doubt sounds. And so, referencing back to my opening premise,

one of the elemental questions I believe we need to ask is this: are we telling our story to others, genuinely and truthfully inviting others in, or are we only speaking to ourselves, literally preaching to the choir, solely repeating ourselves to those who already know and agree? This is not a pedantic or rhetorical question. Today's Collect, as you will have noted, is two-fold: first we are to "answer readily the call" – and Trinity has done that for many generations. But then, of equal if not greater import, we are to "proclaim to all people the Good News." The first order, answering a call, is hard enough, for it requires deep internal discernment, difficult and honest examination, and a careful measurement of who we are and who we are not. The second order is, in many ways, even more difficult, for the Spirit mandates that we engage the stranger, the perceived adversary, those who differ from us, viewpoints which we may not share, ideas which may be uncomfortable. And even deeper, that intense engagement raises perhaps the scariest challenge of all for this or any other community of faith: we might discover that we are not always right. We might find out that our way of doing things is no longer part of any vanguard or forefront at all. We might come to learn that the world around us has changed. We might, in a decidedly spiritual way, come to find that we are at a place of starting anew, not relinquishing the past but, essentially, becoming unstuck from it, for all the right reasons.

This dynamic of honoring the past while remaining fundamentally and intentionally open to the future is, in my view, at the heart of Trinity's present task and its underlying hope. It is where we find ourselves on this January morning. So as we imagine ourselves forward and into that very future, what are some of the central challenges and issues which confront us?

The most obvious dilemma, which while appearing simplistic is anything but, first requires that we make a clear and intentional choice: this parish, like any other, can opt to "survive" or "maintain" or in some manner live on its past glory, and in time it will die a mostly quiet death. Or it can choose to grow. A maintenance mode, which is very often adopted

passively and even unconsciously, posits that since things were once of a certain way, they will always be that way. This is an especially common dynamic amid congregations that have seen themselves as exceptional, different, and unique. Members fear the loss of what has been, even if that was long ago. They hold tightly to things that matter, but sometimes so tightly that these experiences and truths are never shared with others. A quiet but persistent anxiety then emerges which manifests itself in all kinds of ways, with symbols representing the far deeper and more difficult issues at hand. To take but three examples: the sign on the front lawn of the church, our most immediate and visible message to those passing by or curious about what goes on, is not correct or current in its information. Yet there it stands. What is it that inhibits making the very simple yet necessary changes to share the correct information to others, to those who are not “in the know”, to those whom we have not yet met? Second, why does a parish (and here again, Trinity is not especially unusual) take the time to create and display nametags, some semblance of identity and welcome, which almost no one then wears? If a core component of the parish mission is radical hospitality, what does this say about how such hospitality and welcome is or is not actually lived out, in a most mundane and sometimes awkward though necessary way? And to cite a third example, why are there no less than 8 different keys to various parts of this building, available to some and not to all, in some areas and not others? What does this tell us about our sense of “shared space”, of communal living, of a balkanized and fragmented campus we call home, but which is only home to some people, only in some places, only at some times, and only in some roles? If it seems like I am stretching a bit and making too much out of these tangible symbols, we would be wise to remember that we are a people who dared to hear God speaking to us from a burning bush and who saw water turned to wine at a wedding feast Cana. Small, even seemingly inert things have big meaning if you take the time to connect the dots and wait for them to reveal their truths.

And there are always a few, persistent dilemmas which I will note directly and quickly:

first, a business like approach to church matters and organization is not some sell-out to the running dogs of rapacious capitalism, it is simply good stewardship. I would not give money to any organization that was not transparent, striving for efficiency, open to new and better 'best practices' in all that it does. Second, keeping up with basic, modern matters such as a parish telephone system that permits voicemail to staff, and does not represent the style of the Carter era, is no longer optional, it is fundamental. Third, electrical and utility and insulation upgrades which reflect a deep, spiritual care of the earth and stewardship of this planet is no longer optional, it is essential. Fourth, resolution and clarity regarding staff roles, needs, accountability and viability can no longer be deferred and is not optional, it is elemental, in this and any other non-profit organization. And so on.

As opposed to a maintenance or satisfaction mode, a growth mode posits a different path. Let me be as clear here as I can: I am not speaking about numerical or quantitative growth, though that is sometimes a nice by-product. However, the idolatry of numbers has been an illness for many, many years within this denomination as it has faced decline and to me that pursuit of mere numbers has profoundly diverted us. When I speak of growth, when I urge and support and engender and pray for growth, it is, above all else, qualitative growth. The spiritual and personal and communal growth, first and foremost, of those who are already here, of those who already call Trinity home, of those who have already made their soulful investment and staked a claim. In the same way that money always follows mission, it is my observation and experience over the last 25 years that quantitative growth always follows qualitative growth, even and especially in the most transitional of times. Such growth does not presume or demand a negation of the past, but it does expect and support a movement towards something more,

deeper, newer, built upon the legacy of those who have gone before and preparing for a future which we can but dimly foretell.

Many years ago, in the largest parish I ever served, the Vestry spent some good and fruitful time discerning its next steps in spiritual growth, Christian formation, social activism and justice ministry. In the midst of one of our meetings, a deeply devoted and deeply committed member raised his hand to add his comments. He said, in both a loving and yet firm way, "I am completely supportive of the continued mission work and activism of this parish, I am completely supportive of the programs and ministries that focus us on social justice, but I am not interested in one more 'Jesus at Selma' program." His remarks were quite profound and what he meant was this: the deep and true and abiding and noble legacy of the church and of that parish must not, could not, would not ever be forgotten. But it wasn't 1965 anymore. It was 1998. And the world had changed, and the world was still changing. And now it is 2014. Building on the past, with a keen eye to the future, was essential. Coming down off the mountaintop was essential. Taking Moses to the mountain, and not the other way around, was and is essential, elemental, central. And that particular parish did so, and continues to do so, dedicating 25% of its annual budget to mission and outreach, operating since its inception by choice, intentionally, with no endowment of any kind, and being one of the largest, healthiest parishes in all Province I of the Episcopal Church to this day.

"Come, follow me", we hear today in the classic invitation from scripture and from history. And so we shall. Let us live out, and live into, the daily and authentic reality of that mission. We have much to offer the world; the world outside these doors has much to offer us. Let us open wide the portals of our hearts, share the breadth and beauty of our spirits, and animate the future with the truths of our past. Let's dance.

Amen.