

[At 10:30 last week]

I promised a Holy Trinity history lesson about May 11, 1986.

Some of you know why that date is important for us,

but if you don't you can try to remember if you've ever noticed
a marble marker next to the baptismal font in the Nave.

But before the history lesson, let's talk about the future.

What kind of future does Holy Trinity have? Does we have a future?

I think we do, but it's not the sure thing we used to think it was.

There are more churches closing now than in decades past.

Scott Blvd. Baptist, Druid Hills UMC, and Briarcliff UMC

are the ones that come to mind for me,

but really churches all across the country and with all kinds of sizes,
theologies, and worship styles have closed in recent years.

On the other hand we have churches in this country

that have existed for centuries now and continue to thrive,

and it was a lot of fun when Emily and I were in England

to go visit churches first established in the 1100s.

So which will we be? What kind of future does Holy Trinity have?

Today we're celebrating all our ministries

and restarting our children and youth Sunday school programs.

After a summer of rest, are we ready to pick up our ministries

and proclaim and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ?



Now, if some days you're not sure of the answer to that question...
or if sometimes you find yourself wondering if God is real,
or if belonging to a church still has any relevance for your life...
if these are the kinds of questions you find yourself asking
these days...
then it might help to hear this little story from our history.



On May 11, 1986 this Nave and this Chapel were consecrated.
They were set apart. They were committed to be used only for
the worship and service of God for as long as they stand.

But that day of celebration didn't come out of the blue.
That profound moment started nearly 100 years earlier
when Holy Trinity mission was established.

To start with, there were only 9 families at Holy Trinity in this tiny city
of 1,000 people, but it was a time of optimism in the country
and all over the nation new churches were being planted.

For about 35 years Holy Trinity mission struggled and grew,
and it was led by women as much as men, in fact if not in title.

In 1928 we bought a new property and built a 3-story building on it,
with the worship space on the top floor. And no elevators.

But that was okay. That building was just the first step in the plan
because Decatur was growing and we were growing with it,
and our permanent worship space would only be a couple years later.

Then came the Depression.



Those next 20 years were hard. Lean.

Several times we thought we would default on our mortgage
and lose this property.

Plus the country was not just in an economic depression,
but a religious one.

Church attendance had plummeted from previous decades.

But after WWII the GI & Highway bills relocated the nation
and churches were growing and building again.

Holy Trinity grew in those years like never before.

In 1950 we had 340 children enrolled in Sunday School.

In 1951 we built a new worship space

and we planted 3 new parishes over the next decade.

It was the golden age of church life in America.



Now we know that era of church growth peaked in 1965
and began to recede.

At Holy Trinity the end of that era was marked in July of 1967
when the old 3-story building burned to the ground
& took the altar & the front of the new worship building with it.

Our leadership decided pretty quickly to rebuild on this property
and for 3 years they worshipped in the Chapel at First Methodist
while a new, bigger building was built.

What would we have built if we had known

that that era of church growth had just ended?

Would we still have built a modern interpretation of a cathedral?

Would we have doubled the size of our worship space?

Maybe not. We'll never know,
but what we do know is that through years of sacrifice
and hard work this building was built in 2 years,
and the first service was held in the Nave on Xmas Eve, 1970.

I didn't gone back to find the size of the mortgage
but I'm sure it was an amount those folks holding onto Holy Trinity
by their fingernails during the Depression would never have believed.

And amazingly - by the grace of God and through the leadership
of so many people here - you paid off the mortgage in just 16 years.

That matters because in our Church buildings aren't consecrated -
aren't set apart and given to God - until they are paid for,
and on May 11, 1986 Bishop Judson Child came
to Holy Trinity to consecrate this building.

A few months ago, Will found a cassette tape of the service
and then Estelle Hinde found me a copy of the bulletin and I have
spent hours recreating that day in my mind.
I want to try and paint a picture of it for you.



The first thing to know is that for the members this was not like
going to the grand opening of a restaurant.

This was the culmination of 20 years of hard work and sacrifice.
It was their building, they had paid for it,
so the first thing they did was burn the mortgage.
It was now free and clear and ready to be given away.

Bishop Child walked in and marked the sign of the cross on the threshold of the Nave with his staff - right where that marker is, I assume.

And then our leaders stood and they made solemn vows on behalf of the parish.



“I, Jack Ball (Jack was the senior warden), on behalf of the people of Holy Trinity Parish, do hereby declare that this building is to be devoted and given over to the worship and mission of Almighty God and that all uses not consistent with that worship and mission as God gives us grace and wisdom to understand them, are renounced for ever.”

“I, Charles Lewis (Charles was the junior warden), on behalf of the people of Holy Trinity Parish, affirm that this building shall always be used for preaching the faith as this Church has received it.”

“I, Francis Daunt (Francis was the rector), do now declare that this building shall always be used for the faithful dispensation of God’s Holy Word and Sacraments as this Church has received them.”

Worship. Mission. Preaching. Sacraments.

And anything not a part of those holy things
is renounced for ever in this building.

After they made their vows they each signed the letter of consecration.

I’m no lawyer but I can’t imagine any way that this document
would not be considered binding, because it reads like this:

“We do consecrate Holy Trinity Parish, separating it from all unhallowed and common uses and dedicating it to God’s service for reading and preaching His Holy word, for celebrating His Holy Sacraments, for offering to His Glorious Majesty the sacrifices of prayer and praise, and for the performance of all other holy offices. And we humbly pray Almighty God to accept this house at our hands and to bless it with his constant presence by the Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

And as soon as the bishop, the wardens, and the rector signed that letter,
everyone stood, and bells were rung in celebration,
and because y’all have always been classy this way,
the first thing you did was sing, “Christ is Made the Sure Foundation.”

Because, really, what else could you sing in a building
you had just built, paid for, and given away to God?



Now, let me try to connect that story, our story,
to our lesson this morning from Hebrews.

The chapter from Hebrews that we’re reading begins by saying that faith,
“...is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction
of things not seen.” You’ve surely heard that before.

But right after that beautiful opening to the chapter,
Paul goes on and on for 36 verses with dozens of examples
of men and women who dared and endured and accomplished
amazing things because of their hope, their faith, in God.

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua,
the people at the Red Sea, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, and more,
all faithfully risking and sometimes giving their lives
on the trust that God was with them no matter what.

There's a kind of deep and complicated theology embedded in this passage,
but I want us to focus this morning on the simpler part of it,
on the idea that the dreams and sacrifices of our forebears
are not fully realized until we carry those dreams forward.

Paul tells the churches they are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,
by all those ancestors who have trusted in God's promise,
and because those ancestors sacrificed so much to bring them this far,
they owe it to them to also be brave, to also be daring,
to also trust in God's promises, and to set aside
the weight of their fear and doubt and to run
with perseverance the race that is set before them.

And not only are they to look back to the past for inspiration,
but also to look up - up to Jesus,
the one Paul calls the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.



We are also the inheritors of both these amazing legacies.
We need to know what Paul is saying to the Hebrews,
but we also need to know our story as a parish.

We need to remember that this church, like every church,
has had hard seasons and easy ones and that our call
is not to worry about what season we're in
but to be faithful to God.

And like Paul spending 36 verses on Abel & Enoch & Rahab,
we need to know about, to remember, the faithfulness of
Jack Ball and Charles Lewis and Francis Daunt,
of Leslie Gaylord and Sue Hall and Sue Motz
of Rita Merk and Brenda Hattaway and Wallace Jones
of Pete & Sony Withers, & Van van Valkenbergh, and all the rest.

Because we, too, are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
and just as it was when Paul was writing, the work, the sacrifices,
the sufferings, the gifts, of those who came before us
are not made perfect until we take up
the inheritance they have given us
and carry it forward to those who follow us.

This may be a hard time to be a church,
and it may be harder before it gets easier.
But remember that there have been hard times before,
and that God will give us all we need.

So let us lay aside every weight that holds us down,
every insecurity that whispers despair,
every sin and fear that clings to us so closely,
and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before US,
not looking back to the race from an easier day
or looking ahead to a race that will come,
but looking to Jesus, the pioneer & perfecter of our faith,
who endured the cross, disregarded its shame,
and now sits at the right hand of God,
calling us ever forward.

Or to put it another way - rest time's over.
Amen.