

Today we kick off our fall pledge campaign.

These next 4 weeks you'll hear about the life and ministry of this place,
and you'll hear our case for your tithes and gifts
being entrusted to Holy Trinity,
both to fund our shared mission
and as a way to order your own financial life
in a way that is pleasing to God.

Our theme this year is "From Generation to Generation,"
meaning we want to take the inheritance we have received
from those who came before us,
and carry it into our future, to our children and their children,
and to the people who walk in here as strangers
and become beloved members of Christ's body in this place.

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But our lessons today are having an interesting conversation with
our pledge campaign.

The 3 lessons give us 2 warnings and a word of inspiration
to our pledge campaign.

Two warnings and a word of inspiration.

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Isaiah sings to the people of Israel a song about a vineyard - God's vineyard.
God cleared the land, built the vineyard, planted the vines,
then for protection planted hedges all around it.

But the grapes it produced were no good.

The people of Israel are the wild grapes of the vineyard.

God gave his people a command to be a light to the world.

To be this light he gave them a home, a vineyard.

He set them apart, and he protected them.

But the people would not follow God's command.

They would not be a light to the nations.

They treated one another and their neighbors

no differently than the rest of the world does.

So God said that if you are going to live like the rest of the world,

I will remove my walls of protection, my hedges, from the vineyard,

and let the world in to do what the world does.

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At Holy Trinity this parable should remind us

that what makes us special is not who we are but how we live.

Because the world we live in does not consider us special.

In fact, the world we live in has less and less respect

for either the word of God or the gathered people of God.

Christianity is in decline in the western hemisphere.

In the United States, in Georgia, and in Decatur.

One study I heard this week says that in the last 25-30 years

40 million Americans have left the church.¹

¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-carey-nieuwhof-leadership-podcast/id912753163?i=1000629493626>

So we face a choice, the same choice churches all over the country face,
the same choice the people of Israel faced 28 centuries ago.

We can live out our mission and our commitment to God
by making our lives a witness to the power and goodness of God,
or we can prepare for the hedges of Holy Trinity to be taken away,
for the walls of our church buildings to come down
and be replaced with something else.

We can work, pray, and give in order to open our hearts to God
and open our doors to our community,
or we can go the way of Scott Blvd. Baptist Church
and the Methodist Children's Home.

Scripture, tradition, and reason will not protect us.
132 years of history will not preserve us.
Only the active living out of our faith in the living God
will preserve what we have inherited.

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Jesus also tells a parable about a vineyard, and it is also a warning.
In this parable the people who tended the vineyard
began to think that they owned the vineyard.

Jesus is telling the leaders of Israel that positions of authority mean nothing
if the people in those positions are not faithful to God's commands,
telling them that God can raise up other leaders,
just like God can raise up other people
to be a light to the nations.

This parable should remind us all,
but especially our clergy and our vestry and our ministry leaders,
that God's work in the world is not dependent on us.

God's work will be done regardless, because God is God.

The real question is whether we at Holy Trinity
are still willing to be a part of God's work.

If we are, then we will show it once again, like we have for 132 years,
with our money, with our time, with our skills, our efforts,
our hearts and our hands.

If we are, the generations who have accumulated wealth
will share it with the generations who follow.

And others will discipline their spending & accumulation
in order to live and ordered & faithful life.

And people without young children will recommit
to the support of families with young children,
and the parents of young children will love and support
other children than their own.

If we are committed to God's work being done HERE and BY US,
this place will continue to hum with life & service & praise & joy,
and with all sorts and conditions of people entering its doors.

But if we are not, then that will be revealed, too.

If we are not, our ministries will dry up.

Our buildings will get prettier and prettier, for a while
and then emptier and emptier.

Our new calendar of sacred music will become a schedule of
precious concerts for a select few,
until eventually the music goes away
and this place is no longer a church but something else.

Something not set apart for the worship of God
and the ministries of God's people,
but for the pursuit of profit, or the entertainment of the rich.

If we are not willing to live out our faith,
this place will go away and God will raise up
other people for his work,
and they would probably be the very people
we never imagined as "a good fit" for this community.

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So 2 warnings this morning.
2 warnings about what can happen to this wonderful, faithful, beautiful,
precious church if we live in the past instead of being inspired by it,
if we forget our mission,
if we become a social club or a civic club
rather than the people of God gathered for service.

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Warnings are good. Warnings get your attention.
They make you sit up straight & see more clearly the choices you face.

But warnings can't take you all the way,
because you can't be scared into a loving relationship with God
or threatened into loving your neighbor as yourself.
For that you need inspiration. For that you need an example.

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This morning St. Paul writes to the church in Philippi.
Paul started that church but now he is writing to them from prison,
and he doesn't know if he will make it out.
He doesn't know if he will ever see them again.

But Paul isn't asking them for help. Paul is writing to encourage them.
Paul is writing to tell them that the real work of Christians,
the real work of discipleship, is simply this: to know Christ.

"I want to know Christ," Paul says.

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection
and the sharing of his sufferings."

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Friends, this is the real reason we pledge, the real reason we give.
This is why we build buildings and keep them in good shape
and hire clergy and staff and study scripture & theology.

This is why we start youth groups and make sack lunches
and go to Common Ground and visit the sick.

This is why we make estate gifts & special love offerings
& lead gifts to capital campaigns.

This is why we pray for the world before we pray for ourselves
and why we make beautiful music
and have Xmas parties and English Teas and barbecues.

It's why we baptize and it's why we bury our dead
and why we care for the ones who are left behind:
because we want to know Christ & the power of his resurrection
and the sharing of his sufferings.

Friends, if you want to know Christ, don't worry about the budget.
Don't worry about the buildings.
Don't worry about the church or the country or the future.

God is still God, and God will do what needs to be done
to carry out God's work in the world.

But if you want to know Christ, then give yourself to him -
your whole self, right here and right now.
Surrender your life to the one who surrendered his life for you.

If you want your children to know Christ,
want those who will come after us to know Christ,
then give him your heart and your mind,
your time and your love, your money and your abilities.

If you want to know Christ, then give yourself to him,
completely & without fear.

And then, my friends,
then...come to the banquet of this most heavenly food.

Amen.