

Sermon 1-20-19
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W. Hempstead, NY

A Mission Congregation

I've been very busy this week with the renovations. In order to fit the air conditioning unit in the loft on the right side of the sanctuary, those tall wooden candleholder poles for the ends of the pews that were used as Christmas decorations for the Christmas Eve candlelight service had to come down out of their storage place up there.

Here on the chancel floor, I examined them piled up. Clearly they were someone's bright idea expertly crafted by the men of Trinity long ago – I'm guessing in the 1940's or 50's. Each one even had a little round metal slug the size of a penny with a number on it. If you look at the ends of the pews you'll see identical metal slugs with numbers. That's so it would be known where each pole was meant to go. I remember seeing little number slugs like that on other things when I was a kid. So that's why I'm guessing the 40's or 50's.

Trinity's original congregation of the 1920's, 30's and 40's was composed mostly of craftsmen. Indeed they built this church building themselves. And their kids, the World War II generation, came home from the military with many skills. Therefore, making those candle holders would have been a cinch for the men here. No doubt the whole congregation rejoiced on the Christmas Eve they were first used.

But, I had to make a decision. We're now out of room to store them in that loft. Right now they're in the back of my van waiting to be taken to the dump. There are easier ways to light this sanctuary with candles on Christmas Eve.

In making that decision, I had a significant revelation. Imagine for a minute that we're a small group of dedicated Christians determined to plant a new congregation. We've got a significant amount of seed money to do just that. We've just purchased the 92-year-old sanctuary of a failed congregation. Right now, we're cleaning the effects of the former congregation out of the building. Right now we're investing money in all the changes the building should have had over the years but didn't. When we're done, there will be adequate office, meeting, Sunday school and social space downstairs. Thus, the next step is this group of dedicated people evangelizing the people who will become part of the new congregation. That's the revelation I had.

Now, like the people who planted the original Trinity in 1926, we're planting a new congregation. But, our circumstances are not as favorable as theirs. In 1926 the post World War I economy was booming. It was the roaring 20's. A number of families originally associated with Trinity Lutheran Church in Brooklyn had prospered enough to move to the suburbs and build new homes here in West Hempstead, and also South Hempstead. At that time the area was mostly rural farm fields and woods.

It so happens that Trinity in Brooklyn was founded by Norwegian immigrants and their offspring. In those years most Lutheran churches were ethnic. Epiphany Lutheran in Hempstead was German. Trinity Lutheran in West Hempstead was Norwegian.

There were enough people here from Trinity Brooklyn that at the urging of some local lay leaders the former Norwegian Lutheran Church in America sent a pastor to organize two new congregations, one in South Hempstead and one in West Hempstead. That's how the original Trinity was founded in May of 1926, almost 93 years ago.

It was relatively easy for Pastor Crouch to organize Trinity. All he had to do was visit the families from Trinity Brooklyn who had built here and enlist their support for the new congregation.

Ninety-three years later there are definite ethnic communities in this area, but none of them are Norwegian. None are of Lutheran background that I know of. Most people in West Hempstead and surrounding area are Roman Catholic or members of a non-Christian religion. Protestants have moved off Long Island and most local Protestant churches have suffered severe decline. However, as exemplified by The Life Lutheran Church in Westbury, new churches can be planted. It just has to be expected that there will be a lot of people of Roman Catholic background in any new congregation planted on Long Island.

Another thing Pastor Crouch did not have to deal with is the present cultural situation. In an 1892 ruling, the United States Supreme Court described the U.S. as a Christian nation. This means that the country's laws and culture were distinctly Christian. Therefore, from the country's founding up until about fifty years ago, Christians had the home field advantage in all aspects of the country's life. Therefore, Pastor Crouch had the home field advantage in establishing the original Trinity.

But, in a speech made about 2008, former President Obama announced to the world that the United States is no longer a Christian nation. He had his own agenda for doing so. Regardless, his statement certainly reflects present trends. Those who at the turn of the twentieth century set out to give the United States a predominantly pagan culture have largely succeeded through their successors. As a result Christians have lost home field advantage in every way – socially, politically, educationally and now even economically. Consider the legal persecution Christian bakers have endured who on principle have refused to make wedding cakes for gay couples. There is now a palpable cultural hostility to Christianity.

While this is something new to Christianity in the United States, it's nothing new in the history of Christianity throughout the world. Jesus explained it this way in John 15:18-19, "18 'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.'"

Having to live in a world that hates you is not a fun thing. The only reason to do so is Jesus Himself. The only reason is that Jesus, the Son of God, is so ultimately real and valuable that you can't let Him go. He is your Creator and your destiny.

The reason why it's no longer possible to play at church any more is the hostility mounting in the culture. We have to be the real church. Indeed, Jesus predicted in

the parable of the sower that only those with deep roots in Him would be able to endure persecution. Only those who know they do not ultimately belong to this world can make it out of this world in the safe keeping of Jesus.

Jesus told us in Matthew 16:18 that the gates of hell will never prevail against His church. In the end, Jesus wins. That's been the joy of Christians even in the most desperate of times.

Now, did you notice in John 15:19 that Jesus said, "I have chosen you out of the world?" If Jesus chose the disciples then, He's still doing the same now. That's why we're here. And there are plenty of others out there that He's choosing. Our task is to go trawling for them. Jesus told us so when He said in Matthew 13:47, "Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish." We're going to cast Jesus' net into our local sea of humanity.

How to do this? The people of the world use words to cast a net. Politicians and other leaders do it all the time to gather a following. That's because human beings are designed by their Creator to respond to words, especially persuasive words. Therefore, it's by words that the followers of Jesus Christ cast His net into the sea of humanity. Indeed, it was by words that the pagan Roman Empire and then the pagan tribes of Europe were converted. This is because God's Word has power like no other Word. It conveys true reality – the reality of what life on this visible earth is really all about, and the reality of the things that can't yet be seen, but are assuredly coming.

Now, in political campaigns, one of the ways to win is to speak of all the things your opponent has done or is doing that people might find unsavory. But it's unknown how the public will respond to any particular item of attack. Therefore, there's a principle known as throwing things at the wall. Whatever sticks to the wall, is the charge against your opponent you now make the centerpiece of your campaign. In other words, whatever charge seems to get people talking and agreeing that the opponent is a bad person, that's the charge you use – whatever charge will "stick" to the opponent.

In terms of casting Jesus' net of words upon the lake of the Metropolitan area, we do not yet know what words will stick – what words will get people thinking and talking. So, if we advertise one way and nothing comes of it, we'll simply advertise another way until something does come of it. We'll throw things at the wall until something sticks. That's how I'm approaching the situation for now.

Of course, I would like the first words we try in advertising to work immediately. It will save time, effort and money. But, we don't yet know what words will work among the general public to draw them to a conservative, bible-believing and teaching Lutheran church.

Right now, my gut reaction is to speak to disaffected Roman Catholics. In the Christian spectrum, the doctrine of the justification of our lives before God by the grace provided by God Himself through faith in Jesus Christ is a major dividing line. Unfortunately, it's a wall running down the middle of Christ's church. Salvation is by the grace Jesus Christ has won for us, and only what He has won for us. Our own good works cannot add a thing to what Christ, the Son of the living God, has done. In fact, our good works are so imperfect that they can only take away from what Jesus has done for us perfectly.

Therefore, based upon what Scripture actually teaches, we believe and confess that Rome is on the wrong side of that dividing line. They believe human good works must be mixed with the work of Jesus Christ in order for salvation to occur.

Now, standing on the correct side of the justification dividing line, Lutherans are among the closest neighbors of Rome. We use the Lutheran rite of the historic mass – a rite purified of Rome’s unbiblical traditions. As far as we’re concerned, the bible teaches only two sacraments – Holy Baptism and Holy Communion – as opposed to Rome’s seven sacraments. But we are sacramental. We believe and teach that God’s grace efficaciously comes to us through Word and Sacrament.

Thus, for Roman Catholics discouraged by the recent events in that church we are an alternative worth investigating. I pray that we can be a lifeline for such people into the true grace of God in Jesus Christ.

There are many more things I would speak to you concerning all this, but because there is the threat of bad weather in the coming hours I’ll save some for next Sunday so we can finish early today.

In closing, I pray that you are as excited as I am about the paths the Lord is putting before us. May His Kingdom come to us and His will be done by us as certainly as it is in heaven. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.