

Holy Trinity Sunday – June 7, 2009
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We call it our namesake day, Holy Trinity Sunday. For those of you who might not know, or might not remember, the name of this church is not Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, that's merely our AKA, also known as. No the proper name of this congregation is, The English Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity. That name is a much better name as it says so much more about our congregation than our shorter name does.

Our longer name says many things. First thing it says is that we have a long a distinguished history. It does this with the word, English. In 1879, when this congregation was founded, every Lutheran Church in Buffalo used German as their primary language of worship. Atonement, Resurrection, St. John's, Christ, all worshipped in German, following the sentiment of the day that said, English is for making money, German is for praying.

But our church ancestors said, "If this is where God has led us and this is where we call home, and English is the language, then we will earn our money AND pray in English." So this group of like minded and progressive thinking Americans, started a small worship group and asked a small French Eugonot congregation that met in a small church on the corner of Ellicott and Tupper Streets here in the city, the current site of the City Mission, if they could hold their worship services AFTER the worship services that congregation held. They said, "Yes."

Within a relatively short period of time, this radical group of Lutherans, soon grew to a size where they were significantly bigger than the French Protestant Church and so the small existing congregation agreed to merge with Holy Trinity and they worshipped together. Within twenty years, they outgrew not only that building, but the three other buildings they bought to house the Sunday School, the Men's Group, the Ladies Auxiliary and the myriad other groups that the congregation formed. They bought an apple orchard on the outskirts of town, and in 1904 dedicated this edifice to the glory of god with somewhere in the vicinity of 2500 members. History tells that story that their decision to follow the times and think outside the box as it were, was a good decision. That's what the word, English, in our name means.

The next word, evangelical, also tells us something about who we are. Unfortunately, the word evangelical today has been hijacked by the conservative right, the Moral Majority, Pat Robertson, James Dobson and the rest. To the average person on the street, it says, "Conservative right, pro-life, anti-gay, and a host of other nuances. That's a shame, because the word does not mean those things, rather, it simply means that we are the ones who have a story to tell, namely the story of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. To be an evangelical, is to be an evangelist, where evangel, as translated from its original language, means messenger. We are messengers of the gospel. Now that gospel presumably has something to say about how we live our lives, how we deal with issues such as abortion, gay and civil rights, marriage equality, capital punishment, torture, war, conservation, and so much more. And to a certain extent, how we deal with these issues must take into account, "What Would Jesus Do," and if we do, then we have to look at what Jesus actually did, and I think when you do that, the

radical Christian Right would quickly discover that they are much more exclusive a club than Jesus would have had, or joined, or approved of.

The next word, “Lutheran,” speaks to the obvious. We are Lutheran; we follow the teachings and inclinations of our founder, Martin Luther. That says that we are the oldest group of those who trace their history back to the Protestant Movement of the Reformation in the early 16th century. We were the first to break away from the Roman tradition of that day, but on the other hand, we are also the closest to that tradition. Those in the congregation today who are former Roman Catholics, you know better than we cradle Lutherans, that that which separates us from the Roman tradition pales in comparison to what we have in common, not the least of which is our liturgy, our scripture, and our spirituality.

The history of the whole Church is our history and we celebrate it and hold fast to it, for it is a precious gift from God.

But that word “Lutheran” also tells us that we are unique in the world of religious communities. We hold fast to the principles that set us apart in the first place and which today, still present a convincing argument for how a religious fellowship should do business. We believe that God is in charge, that we are his children and servants of his kingdom. God offers us the gift of His grace, which when appropriated by faith, assure us of our salvation, which is nothing less than the guarantee that God’s love will never be far from us or abandon us, even in death. As witness to that fact, we have the example of Jesus and the gospel of his life, death and resurrection.

The word Church is in our name. In our title, in our formal corporate name, in the name registered with the State of New York as a nonprofit 501C corporation, it is spelled with a capital “C” not a lower case “c.” If it were spelled with a lower case “c” it would mean that this a church, as in church building, as in it looks like a church, as in it has stained glass windows, an organ, pews facing one direction, a lectern or pulpit up front from which a boring lecture is offered. But ours is spelled with a capital “C” which means it is an abbreviation. The Big C Church means, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church that confesses him as Lord of our life, as Son of Man, Son of God, Saviour and Redeemer. If we added all of that, it wouldn’t fit on the check. But make no mistake, that’s who we are, we’re not just a building that looks like a church, we are part of His Church, Big C.

And finally, of the Holy Trinity. As I said in the beginning, today is our namesake day, Holy Trinity Sunday. Originally set as an official day in the Church year by Pope John 22nd in 1334, the day finds its origins much before that as the church is known to have celebrated the day as a feast day 300 years earlier. The Church struggled with the concept of the Trinity from its earliest days, and our Creeds, the Nicene, the Apostles, and the Athanasian Creed all speak to the concept of the Trinity. The Apostles and Nicene merely give a nod to it, while the Athanasian Creed, focuses almost entirely, if not obnoxiously redundantly on it, which is why it remains Pastor Buerk’s least favorite. He lobbies so hard against it, that they took it out of the hymnal this time around, and without even looking at him this morning, I can see that he’s smiling.

We are the English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jesus Christ that celebrates God not only as Father and therefore Creator and Sustainer, but also as Son, Redeemer, Saviour, Teacher, Prophet, and as Holy Spirit, as Advocate, Counselor, Motivator, Revelation, Interpreter, and as that mysterious entity that somehow draws us to God. This, perhaps more than anything else, is

what this place is all about. Everything we do, everything we say, everything we support, in its best intention, is done to draw you to God. If it doesn't, then we need to come full circle once again to the first word in our name. Those who founded this Church, wanted to make sure that nothing got in the way of bringing people closer to God. They thought, and history has shown rightly so, that by not speaking the language of the day and of the country in which they were living, that people would not be drawn to this place and to the God that we encounter herein, so it follows that we should always be on the watch to see if anything we are doing or are not doing is keeping people from being drawn to the God we lift up as all those things that we have come to know as God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We are the English Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, and we have just recently celebrated the 130th anniversary of our founding. For this and so much more we say, thanks be to God, to whom be the glory now and forever. Amen.

Amen.