

HOMILY JULY 29, 2007

Joe's wish list for Trinity.

1. I want Trinity to have a major parking problem
2. I want Trinity to have a shortage of orange chairs
3. I want Trinity to have an inordinately high electric bill and neighbors who complain about traffic and noise due to evening activities that go on each night of the week in our building
4. I want Trinity to have an urgent need to buy the blue house behind us to expand an overcrowded child care center
5. I want Trinity to have a fully occupied Mitchell House whose residents attend Sunday services and become active members at Trinity
6. I want Trinity to have a need to break down the back and side walls of the sanctuary to add more orange chairs
7. I want Trinity to have a scheduling problem for use of the church building by our faith community and the greater Charlottesville community during the week
8. I want Trinity to have the administrative headaches of caring for and feeding not only a full

time rector but an assistant rector as well (notice I said rector NOT vicar!)

9. I want Trinity to have the need to arrange for 10 buses to carry the entire congregation to Shrinemont or Roslyn for a parish retreat, or carry the entire congregation to Washington National Cathedral to hear the Presiding Bishop preach, or better yet to carry the entire congregation to the Diocesan Council Annual Meeting to march in together behind Trinity's banner to accept full parish status.

10. I want Trinity to have a fight with the city over getting a permit to hold worship services in Washington Park because so many people will be expected to attend.

11. I want Trinity to have a problem plugging people into committees and tasks because so many want to serve (we are beginning to see a little of that now!)

12. I want Trinity to have a problem scheduling our rector's public speaking engagements because every Episcopal church this side of the Mississippi wants our rector to come and tell them about how it is done at Trinity.

13. I want Trinity to have such a single minded focus on the Gospel that those who seek to label us liberal or conservative won't be able to. All they will be able to do is say that Trinity is a

church captivated by the beauty of the Gospel

14. I want Trinity to receive complaints from social services and Region 10 that they have had to cut staff due to Trinity's extensive community outreach programs

15. I want Trinity to witness an argument among the vestry as to whether or not we will allow news cameras in our sanctuary for local newspapers and TV news to cover the astounding life transforming work that goes on in this building

16. I want Trinity to have the headaches from the work it will take to plant churches in Belmont and the Westhaven areas.

17. I want Trinity to have complaints from our homebound members asking us to stop sending so many people from the congregation to visit them because they can't have any quiet time.

18. I want Trinity to find it difficult to call a priest because our congregation is so strong and so deeply engaged in the life of the church and so focused and committed to the Gospel and thus to its mission, that people interested in being our rector have a hard time figuring out how they can be of assistance to us

Can you think of any to add?

We can have all of these problems and more! We need people who will work, people who are committed, people who give time, talent and treasure. We need people who are diligent, who have sticktoitiveness, who won't let others down, who will attend innumerable committee meetings, who are willing to do any task that will further the church and its mission (including cleaning bathrooms and cooking for the Child Care Center children), people who will give of their treasure, people who will place Trinity near the top if not at the top of their priority list. And we have the beginnings of all that. We see it already starting. We see new energy in the vestry, and the congregation. We see people stepping up, volunteering, giving more money, giving more time, giving of themselves. We see people sacrificing, paying close attention to the work of the church, doing anything it takes to move the church forward. And that is wonderful and gratifying to see. We all can see that we have a tremendous opportunity to pick up the responsibilities and work of the church afresh and joyfully move together into the future. And in fact, in a great way, for the foreseeable future, this will happen. People will come, people will give, people will want to build up Trinity. We will see folks who used to worship here come back, and we will welcome them back. They and everyone will want to help, want to serve,

want to renew Trinity. Praise God!

BUT! BUT! ... all of that , the new enthusiasm, new energy, new relief, new work, new commitment, all of it will carry us and the mission of this church only so far. It will surely carry us until the new vicar is called. It will probably carry us maybe a year or so past that, but at some point, it will stop carrying us, and we will then see where we place our faith. The time now for Trinity is kind of like the few weeks after someone dies, people gather round the family to care for them, to feed them physically and emotionally, and they do it, for a time, but there will come a time when that special attention wains and the bereaved is left alone, and life settles back into a pattern, and then comes the test. Then the bereaved finds out what really sustains them or not.

What sustains Trinity? Is it our money, our commitment to Trinity and its history, our enthusiasm, our commitment to diversity, our commitment to do something about the most segregated hour of the week, our strength to grind through the challenges, our college educated minds that are built to solve problems, our blue collar work ethic? What will drive us into the hearts and lives of people who have all kinds of needs? What will strengthen us and cause us to

be fearless servants? Will it be our money? Will it be the assumption that the Diocese will not let Trinity fail financially? No! None of that will sustain Trinity! No combination of what I have described will sustain Trinity.

Praise God we are a Christian church! Only God and the good news of the Gospel will sustain us and carry this church into the future in a bold and vibrant way. If we want to be a strong church, and have the problems I hoped for at the beginning of this message, if we want to be relevant in the lives of those around us, if we deign to transform this city, we need to bring to the marketplace of ideas a product people cannot live without. The Gospel. The Gospel transforms lives. And people whose hearts are transformed by the Gospel do the work of God without ceasing, and without tiring. The Gospel causes us to be so relieved and moved by its promises and revelation, that we cannot help but make our primary desire to serve God by participating in His work of reconciliation in and renewal of the world. Our future with God is assured and with that knowledge we are free to give up our fears and live lives of service to others. Without it, we are taking on the work of God in our own strength. And our own strength will carry and sustain us for a while, but soon it will fail us, and we will have to stop. But with

the Gospel in our hearts and minds, we will not be weighed down by fears, pride, self justification, sorrow, hard feelings about the past, and we will be fit, in shape, and sustained for service to God. We need to tell others the Gospel so they too will live lives of perfect freedom. But before we can do that, and before we can expect to be a truly vibrant church, we need to be renewed, sustained, astounded, and transformed by the Gospel ourselves. We are told the Gospel each week in the holy eucharist prayers. It is a very simple but astounding story.

God created the heavens and the earth, and he created us for Himself. In the beginning we lived in perfect harmony with Him, but we turned from Him and as a result death entered His creation. Death brought disease, wars, hate, prejudice, fear, hunger etc. But God did not give up on us. He loved us, and would not let us go our own way. The bible tells the story of God pursuing us over the centuries and ultimately winning us back, through His actions, not ours. He moved heaven and earth to come to us in his son Jesus Christ. He conquered death through the work of Christ on the cross. He promises that He will return and when he does He will restore His creation to its full glory. He will raise us from the dead, He will renew His creation, all wrongs will be made right, all tragedies undone, and His kingdom will be reestablished on earth

in its full glory. In fact, He has established His kingdom on earth and we Christians, are heirs to that kingdom, and given responsibility to widen that kingdom and one day, we will come to live with Him in perfect harmony for eternity in resurrected bodies, in the earth made new. If you think the world is a beautiful place now, think what it will look like after He returns and death is cast out. Want to see the Alps before you die, don't worry about it if you don't, you will see them when He returns -- in their resurrected glory. Want to see a family member returned to life in good health, you will when the Lord returns. As Christians we know this is our hope, this is our promise. Praise be to God!

So, what is our response? If we let the Gospel sink in, melt our hearts, move us, we cannot help but respond in love. The Gospel frees us from worrying about what we will eat, or wear, or where we will live. We know where we are headed -- heaven on earth in perfect relationship with God for eternity. This knowledge alone is sufficient to free us from the bonds of fear that keep us focused on trying to justify ourselves through our work, our scholastic achievement, our good looks, our healthy bodies, our comfort, our good works, our money, our prejudices and the list goes on. If we are no longer occupied with those matters; if we are no

longer trying to justify ourselves, we are free to turn our attention to others, love them through our actions and hope for them that they too will grasp the Gospel and experience perfect freedom. While we are promised a great future, God is bringing about the renewal of his creation right now, through his church. Trinity is a part of that church. God wants to work through us to renew us, our families, our friends and neighbors, and our community. We can join Him in this work here and now. And I submit to you, we cannot help but join Him if our hearts are truly melted by the astounding good news of the Gospel. Jesus says his burden is light. It is true, and if we allow the Gospel to move us, I mean really move our hearts, melt our hearts, the work we are given to do will not seem like work at all, it will be a pleasure and a passion that will drive us, drive us right into the lives of those around us who need to be set free by the promise of the Gospel. We won't be able to help ourselves. We won't be able to resist it nor will we want to.

There was an interesting article in the New York Times in January. It was about Riverside Church in New York City. I imagine most of you are familiar with Riverside, and I believe the Fairchilds were members of that church when they lived in New York. The current

pastor has retired and the article was about his retirement and his controversial tenure. There are some in the church, according to the article, who were not happy with the pastor's emphasis on the Gospel and biblical preaching and his preaching style. The pastor is the son of a Pentecostal preacher from North Carolina. Some in the church were not happy with other things as well, but the article focused on the theological criticisms the pastor received during his tenure.

Apparently the pastor was challenged over the years for his emphasis on the Gospel at the expense, in the view of some, of emphasis on social justice work. The pastor commented about his sermons as follows:

“People thought they were getting Bible Belt values as well as my Bible Belt style. There were meetings questioning my commitment to social justice. I believe in people anchoring their faith to a more personal relationship with God. But there's plenty of room at the Riverside Church for people to feel uncomfortable. There was a time when the church was viewed in terms of its commentary on social events. I felt that having a biblical foundation actually strengthens that.”

The Riverside pastor appears to be saying, that the Gospel informs and drives our action.

And I wholeheartedly agree. We need to be a church upholding our social justice tradition by being grounded in the transforming message of the Gospel. We will be effective and influential on social justice matters beyond our wildest dreams, if we first allow ourselves to be captured

and transformed by the Gospel. We can do social justice, on our own steam and according to our own understanding, but it will be as an empty gong making noise compared to the glorious music that will be made as a result of our commitment to the Gospel. I want it all for Trinity. I want Gospel based transformed lives, AND bold social justice work that will together transform this city. And we should settle for nothing less than that.

In many ways Trinity has had a rough 10 years. In many ways we are at a low point. There will be a tendency by some, maybe most, to see Pastor Melana's leaving as heaven sent, for various reasons. Whatever your view, we can all agree that her departure is the dawn of a new era for Trinity. We have a tremendous opportunity. Trinity is at a fork in the road. Yes, let's be enthusiastic, let's be energetic, let's be committed, let's be diligent, let's be joyful. Let's commit our time, talent and treasure to Trinity and its mission. BUT, if we want to look back 10 years from now and see a large wake of transforming hope, joy and love cut through and washed over this city by Trinity, we need to be renewed afresh by the Gospel. Only the Gospel will see us into the future and into the lives of those in this community in a bold, vibrant, and sustained way. Only the Gospel will see us to full parish status.

Perhaps for some when I speak of the life transforming effect of the Gospel you wonder what I am talking about. In fact, if we have a majority of folks in this church who don't know quite what I mean, then we will know where we need to begin our work together. We would do well individually and as a community to daily remind ourselves of the Gospel story. Because I assure you, if we get the Gospel deep, I mean deep, into our hearts, nothing, absolutely nothing will keep us from realizing even our wildest dreams for Trinity.