

The 160<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Trinity  
Celebrated on the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels  
10:30 a.m. September 27, 2009  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora, IL  
The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

*In the name of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*  
Please be seated.

Good morning! Thank you for joining us this morning, as we celebrate 160 years of loving service to God and to our community! It's a joy to have you with us.

Our story begins, according to the first Parish Register, thus: "On the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1849 "Henry Safford," a missionary to several villages in this vicinity, called together the Episcopalians of Aurora interested in the organization of a church." Written in beautifully calligraphied hand, these words were written in 1857, after the founding of the first Trinity Church, Aurora, which stood on the corner of Lake and Spruce Streets, where Walgreens sits today. Growing up with the burgeoning city, this little start-up – only the second church founded in Aurora – soon outgrew its first home. The church moved to a rental space before settling on its new home at the corner of Lincoln Avenue and Benton Street, which after several years of construction was completed, and offered its first services on Trinity Sunday, in 1871, and has been in continual operation ever since.

That's the beginning of the church's story. I wonder how your story first intersected with Trinity's. Can you remember your first visit? What was your first impression of Trinity? Can you remember seeing the church for the very first time? From the outside, how did it strike you? When you walked inside, that first time, what did you see? What did you smell? What did you feel? If you're like me, your experience was no doubt colored by where you were in your life, why you were there, and what you hoped to find.

Almost four years ago, I drove up the hill on Benton Street to discover Trinity with my good friend Aimee Delevett. It was a cold winter day, and I remember I parked on Benton outside the church office entry. Aimee and I, coming to the end of our time as Lilly curates, were on an undercover tour of potential churches that might soon become available to us to look at. After touring the outside, noting the signs for the Amnesty Center and the Soup Kitchen, Linda Barber opened the door off the parking lot, and asked us, "What do you want?" It took less than a minute for Linda to break our cover, at which point, she was pleased to offer us a tour. In the Parish Hall, we learned more about the mission of the church, as she told us how (at that time) about 100 people are fed a hot lunch every Thursday at the Sandwich Board. Then she took us down the cloister and into the church.

I think how you enter a church is important. Which door you come in prepares you differently for what you find, both in setting up the expectations, but also in just exactly what you see when you first enter the space. The view from this doorway, for instance, is quite different from the view from that door. We walked in, Linda leading the way, reverencing in front of the altar, where we stopped, as I have with other people so many times since, at the transept, the crossing place at the center of our cross-shaped church.

What did I experience? The rich red carpet. The stone. The light coming through the windows. The beauty of the choir and altar area. The intimacy and immediacy of a smaller church. The feel of the carpet under my feet, the touch of the smooth pews well worn with time. It was winter and all the windows were closed, and there was a holy hush in this place, as if we were all holding our breath, so as not to disturb the holy peace we encountered. Most of all, I was hit by the smell: have you ever noticed that it smells decidedly different inside the church than it does either outside or in the cloister? It caught me by surprise. It smells, I think of decades of incense and prayer. Perhaps of elbow grease and cleaning supplies, too. Certainly of real wax candles and burnt wicks. Of hymnals and prayer books. It knocked me out. I wasn't expecting it all. I felt at home.

Claiming my position as clergy, I race up to the altar. Then I saw the Sanctus bells and froze. I whispered to Aimee, "look, they use Sanctus bells. I don't know to use them." She whispered back. "It's okay. They do. You don't have to know." And, so, obstacle overcome, I was home. Part of me responded rather like Jacob after waking from his dream of angels ascending and descending that famous ladder: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

What was your experience?

So often, how we enter a place will define our relationship with the place, even in ways we don't consciously recognize. I just realized I still park in the very same place I parked when I visited with Aimee. First impressions, first impressions, first impressions! How and where (in your life story) did you – or are you now – entering Trinity? How and where did you – or are you now – entering Trinity's story? The two are mystically intertwined, and push and pull on each other, whether you are a lifelong member of the church, or just visiting today.

Unlike the men and women written about in the parish register, we rarely think of ourselves today as pioneers. We don't often think about ourselves as church builders. But, in fact, that's exactly what we are. For the church is not bricks and mortar, carpets and stained glass windows, but people. You may have already heard my favorite definition for the word "church:" it's what's left when the building burns down. While I have no desire for anything unpleasant to happen to Trinity, I think this is a useful image. And what gives this place – this awesome place – (to paraphrase Genesis) its specialness, but the holy activities that have taken place here through the decades by the women and men of the church – the biggies – the Baptisms, weddings, and funerals, and the more common, and no less important activities – the hymns sung, the prayers prayed, the blessing and the Holy Communion broken and shared week in and week out. What makes Trinity special for me is not just the building, but the people and their work, their seeking and finding God, in worship, in one another, and in service to the larger community. It makes you want to take your feet off, because so clearly we are standing on holy ground here. And in all of this "doing church" we are building up the church.

This morning we witness God's hand at work in the world about us, giving the growth of the church, as we welcome Grace, Karen, Taylor, Christine, and Mary into the church, as they are Baptized in a few minutes. Baptism is full initiation into the Body of Christ, and so they become full members of the church, living stones in its structure. We will welcome these five ladies – three generations of a family – into the Household of God. "The Household of God,"

think about that rich imagery. They are now home, too. Full members of the Body of Christ, with all rights and responsibilities. Each of them entered Trinity before, now they will enter anew, in a new relationship to the church. We are their's and they are ours, now.

Trinity, the established and still ever changing community of the faithful, has offered powerful worship and fellowship worthy to stand the test of time. For 160 years now Trinity has offered hope and companionship and a spiritual home to wanderers like myself and perhaps you, too. As William Bouverie Pusey noted in his Trinity Sunday sermon of 160 years ago that I dared repeat on Friday night at our period service, heaven opens for us when we lift our hearts up to the Lord and join with the heavenly chorus singing "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of power and might, Heaven and earth of full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest." And at Communion, we are offered a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits us, when we join the Saints in light. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Trinity, the community of the faithful, has ever endeavored throughout its long history to serve the community. Trinity has grown up in, alongside, and with the City of Aurora. We have shared in its good times and its tough times. Trinity has been a steady source of moral and physical support for those in need, with a particular heart for the stranger (the alien in biblical and legal terms) and the hungry (physically and spiritually). It has striven to shine God's love to a broken and needy community beyond our Sunday morning congregations.

As such, we have been continually recognized by the national church (and one of the first in the Diocese to be so recognized) since 1987 as a Jubilee Center for Ministry. This is the highest honor the denomination bestows upon a church for its mission in the world. Perhaps Trinity's signature ministry, the Sandwich Board is approaching its own milestone anniversary. Lent 2010 (it sounds far away, but its actually less than 6 months away) Lent 2010 will mark 25 years that Trinity has offered communion and a hot lunch to hungry people. I figure that's 125,000 meals served. 125,000 meals. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Likewise, Linda has been working to count all of the folks who have been assisted by Trinity Amnesty Center through the years it has been helping with immigration matters. She had poo-pooed me when I suggested to Bishop Lee that more than a thousand people had become citizens through the help of Amnesty. Now, it looks as if that number may actually have been accurate. Amnesty has certainly helped thousands with a host of immigration issues. Usually outside of those who work with Amnesty, we don't know the people who are helped. Like the Thursday crowd at Sandwich Board, few join us on Sunday mornings, for English is rarely their first language nor is our service reflective of their home culture. Usually that's the case. However, I'm delighted to announce, that Amnesty's most recent success has been to help our own Grace Amoagabin, originally from Ghana, through the immigration quagmire. Grace, of course, easily passed her citizenship test, and will be sworn in as an American citizen on October 9<sup>th</sup> in Joliet. We're looking to get a group to go and support her. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Our particular community's story is 160 years old. How long we have been a part of it, well, that's different for each one of us. When we came in, and how we made it our home.

We are, however, regardless of our background, and even the story of why we came this morning, we are all of us part of Trinity's story today. It's a great story. We're so glad you're here to be a part of it. May each of us find our place, the right place for us, in the ongoing story.

Where are we going? Well, looking another 160 years ahead (the year 2169) is way too far for me to make any realistic projections. But today, as we celebrate, we are blossoming in new, delightful, and entertaining ways. And, if we are faithful, through hospitality, worship, fellowship, and service, we move one day at a time to be (more and more) that bridge between earth and heaven: the mysterious, mystical, extraordinary thing we call the Body of Christ.

*May others, generations from now, be inspired to say once more of Trinity: "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Amen.*