

*“And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14).*

You may have heard by now that the Triennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is taking place this week in Columbus, Ohio. Once every three years, lay and ordained leaders from across our church are elected by their synods and gather as the primary decision-making body of the church to discern God’s missional call for our denomination. This year’s theme is “Embody the Word.”

Fun fact: The name of our congregation literally means, “Embody the Word.” Another fun fact: Though there are a number of ELCA congregations with a variation of the word “incarnate” somewhere in their title, we are the only congregation in the ELCA with the name “Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word.”

So, embodying God’s word is nothing new to us. It’s what we do. It’s who we are here in Rochester. The upcoming Churchwide Assembly has got me thinking not only of our congregation’s name, but that of our denomination as well: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In that name we are affirming at least 4 things:

1. **We are Evangelical.** Literally we are people who bear good news. The news that in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection we are recipients of the hope of new life, called to share Christ’s resurrection love with all.
2. **We are Lutheran.** Though we have by no means cornered the market on “grace,” our heritage affirms that God comes to us, and not the other way around. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s love and salvation. Despite our being in bondage to sin, God comes to us in loving discontinuity with our sinful past, free and undeserved, binding us forever with God’s self.
3. **We are Church.** The word “church” comes from the Greek, “ecclesia” which literally means “called out assembly.” Throughout the Christian Testament, when God’s people gather together in prayer and meal, they gather in ecclesia. In other words, we are defined by community gathered and called together by God in the places where God has promised to be present.
4. **We are In America.** We’re not “of America.” Though adopted by the Roman Emperor Constantine to be a part of the Empire over 1,700 years ago, our church today recognizes the inherent flaw of that model. We are not empire power brokers. We are servants of the servant. Moreover, to be of the empire or of America, requires the church’s allegiance to someone or something other than God. Taking seriously God’s admonition against having allegiances to false gods, we know that we belong not to America, but to the Kingdom of God. None of this means that you can’t love America, but it does mean we love God first. As last Sunday’s hymn of the day put it so well,

“Sword and crown betray our trust. But thy pow’r, hour by hour, is my temple and my tow’r” (ELW #757).

Being “in America” means that we have something to say to the events that happen in our time and in our place. Not only are we compelled to feed the hungry and clothe the naked as Jesus did, but we are beckoned to call out the systems that cause hunger and poverty in the first place. Being “in America” means we have a voice to raise in the face of the sins of systemic poverty, racism, sexism, xenophobia, gun violence and exploitation. Being “in America” means we speak truth to power, holding those who govern accountable. Being “in America” means that when hate wants to rear its ugly head here in our city, we exclaim “not here, not now, not ever!”

So, I invite you this week to tune in by Livestream to our Churchwide Assembly when you can. And as you listen or watch the various plenary sessions and worship services, ask yourself how this Churchwide Assembly is living into our name. And while we’re at it, let’s ask ourselves here at Incarnate Word how we are living into that name as well.

Serving with you in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,  
Pastor Doug