

To go and make disciples of all people.

This kind of growth, though—spiritual growth—is much more difficult to achieve than simple numerical growth, because spiritual growth requires us to *change*, not only *together*, as a congregation, but also and more importantly, as *individuals*. Because that’s where growth and change has to start—with each one of us, individually. This is the essence of transformation by the Holy Spirit—it starts here—in our hearts—and works its way out and up. Because transformation isn’t a goal or an objective or a policy-transformation is a change of heart that comes about by listening to what God has to say to us—

And then doing it.

As I said, though, and as you know, growth and change are not easy. As the people from St. John’s Westminster told us Tuesday night, there were many times when they were tempted to just give up on their journey and go back to Egypt—back to the way things were. Because even though the way things were wasn’t optimal back then, they were at least *familiar*.

But St. John’s Westminster *wouldn’t* turn back because, as they said, to turn back to what they were would mean, in essence, choosing death.

And they didn’t want death. They wanted *life*.

And so do we. Don’t we? Don’t *we*, here at Trinity, want *life*, too? Don’t *we* want to grow spiritually? Don’t *we* want to grow closer to God, to know Jesus Christ, to feel the presence of the Holy Spirit each and every minute of our lives?

Don’t *we* want that for *us*?

I can tell you one thing—*God* does. God wants that for us, which is why God has given us the people and the challenge and the gifts we need to make this happen. God has given us what we need to choose *life*.

Now it’s up to us to take it.

Are you up for the challenge? Are you ready to grow? Are you ready to *change*? Are you ready to move forward into parts unknown, into the life together to which God has called us?

I can assure you that if you are ready, so am I. And so is your Session. We will pray to God, and we will listen to God, and we will do our best to do whatever it is that God is asking us to do.

But we cannot do it alone. To grow together, as the Body of Christ, we need your help. We need your commitment to grow. We need your commitment to follow Jesus Christ and change in whatever ways the Holy Spirit asks you to change.

We need you to reach up to God with an open heart. We need you to reach out to others with open hands. We need you to be willing to do things differently.

Because that’s what it means to grow. That’s what it means to change.

That’s what it means to choose *life*.

In his report to the presbytery Tuesday night, our general presbyter, The Rev. James DiEgidio, ended his remarks with the following quote from Ernest Thompson:

“One of the tragedies for an individual or a church is to start living in the past as though there was nothing more to learn. If the church does not keep its mind open to new truth it loses its hold upon the mind of the rising generation. Too many people feel that the church is moving away from them, when in fact they have ceased to move on with God. It is sad to see so many deeply devout Christians who are unnecessarily pained and have ceased to find joy in their Christian life when they ought to rejoice that the church is enlarging its vision and responding to the Lord who is constantly calling us into new forms and fields.”

Jim then concluded with some thoughts of his own:

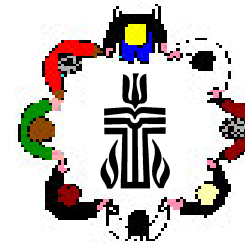
“God is the Lord of the future. Let us pray not for refuge, but for a faith great enough for the time in which we live.”

May Jim’s prayer be the prayer of all of us today—*Let us pray not for refuge ... but for a faith great enough for the time in which we live.*

Let us pray, in other words, for *life*. Amen.

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“Choosing Life”
Sermon by
Rev. Nancy Lynch

Trinity Sunday
May 18, 2008



Matthew 28:16-20

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 28:16-20

Last Tuesday night I attended the Presbytery of Cincinnati meeting down at Carmel Presbyterian Church in Avondale. (For those of you unfamiliar with what a presbytery meeting is, it's a local meeting of the Presbyterian churches in the area.)

I expected Tuesday's presbytery meeting to be like most presbytery meetings I've attended in my life; that is, very businesslike, very long, and—at times—a little boring. But, as usual, I went anyway, because even though a presbytery meeting may not be as exciting as, say, riding a roller coaster or going on vacation, I truly do believe that God speaks to us and in us and through us at presbytery meetings, and I want to hear what God has to say.

So I went, and as it happens, God had a *lot* to say Tuesday night, both to me and, by extension, to *you*, so I thought I'd share with you this morning some of what I heard.

The meeting started out with a great worship service, which was followed by a time of fellowship, which was also great, not only because it allowed us time to connect with one another, but because it also involved white chocolate macadamia nut cookies that were still warm from the oven.

So after we worshiped and ate and talked to one another, we got down to business, the first order of which was this: The presentation of a case study by one of the churches in our presbytery.

The case study was something new, something our presbytery was trying out for the first time. The idea was to present a situation in which the Holy Spirit was calling a congregation to transform itself, to *change* in some way, so that we could maybe learn something we could take back and use in *our* congregations.

The church presenting the case study was St. John's Westminster Union Church, a church on the West side of Cincinnati that came about from the merging of two separate churches six years ago—St. John's United Church of Christ, and Westminster Presbyterian Church. There were several reasons as to why they merged, but ultimately the main reason they came together was because they felt that they'd be better able, *together*, to fulfill the Great Commission—to go forth and make disciples of all people—than either one of them could do on their own.

They talked about some of the challenges they encountered along the way, the most important of which was creating a new identity for themselves—an identity that didn't reflect the identities of the churches they *were*, but instead celebrated the *new* church that they were becoming.

They talked about how important it was to be *intentional* about this process—that it was essential to not just assume that this new identity would, somehow, just happen on its own.

And, last but not least, they talked about very important it was for people to talk openly and honestly about how they felt about all of this—how important it was for people to talk about the grief they felt over the loss of their old church identity, or how fearful they were that this new church would never come together in the way they hoped it would, or how anxious they felt over all this change, because even *good* change, as we all know, can be hard.

And as I sat there at the presbytery meeting and listened to their case study, it occurred to me—the challenges that Trinity is facing *today* are not unlike the challenges St. John's Westminster faced six years ago in terms of merging two congregations.

Only the “congregations” we're “merging” aren't denominational, like St. John's Westminster. The congregations we're merging are cultural, from two very different parts of the world—the United States and Africa.

One of the reports passed out at the presbytery meeting Tuesday night was an Excel spreadsheet that listed the membership gains and losses of all of the churches in the Presbytery of Cincinnati for 2007.

I am happy to report to you that Trinity's net gain last year of 27 members is the second highest of any church in the entire Presbytery of Cincinnati. The only church that posted more new members last year than Trinity was Sycamore, with 69—but when you consider that Sycamore's membership stands at over 1000 members, while Trinity's is only 170, you can see that percentage-wise, *Trinity was the fastest-growing church of all 85 churches in the Presbytery of Cincinnati in 2007*. And there is no other church in our presbytery that even comes close to the diversity we've achieved here at Trinity, thanks to our many new members from Ghana and Cameroon.

You all are to be commended for this, because it's your faithfulness and your openness to the Spirit that has made our growth possible. You've lived our new mission statement—you've “reached up to God,” and you've “reached out to others,” and in so doing you grew our church.

But (you just *knew* there'd be a “but,” didn't you?)... *but*, as St. John's Westminster discovered, and as I think *we're* discovering, growing a church doesn't just mean adding new bodies in worship. Growing a church, instead, means growing together *spiritually*, as the Body of Christ that is Trinity. It means making room for our new members, not only so they can learn from us, but also, and importantly, *so that we can learn from them*.

One of the things I found interesting about St. John's Westminster's presentation was that the congregation initially thought, after they merged, that they'd reached the Promised Land. Like Israel in the wilderness, released from slavery, they thought that the fact that they were released from bondage—the fact that they'd solved one problem with their merger—meant that there were, in essence, no more problems to be solved.

They soon found, however, that not only had they not reached the Promised Land with their merger—they had, instead, just crossed the Red Sea. In other words, the merger was not the *end* of their journey together, but only the beginning.

In a similar way, I think there's a natural tendency on the part of many of us to assume that achieving our growth and diversity goals means that *we've* arrived in the Promised Land—that the new faces we see in our congregation every week are evidence that we're no longer traveling to the Promised Land, but that we have, instead, “arrived.”

However, just as St. John's Westminster realized that their merger did not represent *their* arrival at the “Promised Land,” but was, instead, just the beginning of their journey, so, too, do I think we need to realize that the growth *we've* experienced is not our “Promised Land,” either—that our growth is not the *end* of our journey together, but instead is just the beginning.

So the challenge we have before us, today, is the same challenge St. John's Westminster faced six years ago. In fact, it's the same challenge *any* church faces that wants to grow—to *discern* just how it is that God wants us to grow; to *figure out* just what it is that God wants us to learn from one another; to *learn* just what it is that God wants us to learn so that we can, *together*, as the evolving church that is Trinity, fulfill the Great Commission that Jesus gave us—