

## Growing Our Congregation

Rob Giesemann, Easter 6B, 2015

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An Episcopal priest was preaching in an old country church. The woman sitting in the front pew was struggling with her baby, who was crying – The baby wouldn't settle down, so the woman stood up to take her outside. The priest stopped his sermon and said, "*Why you don't have to take your baby out. She wasn't bothering me.*" To which the woman replied, "*You don't understand, Father. You're bothering her.*" Like they say, if the preacher isn't bothering somebody, he isn't doing his job.

Jesus said, "*I came not to bring peace, but a sword.*" And **yet**, elsewhere the angel announced to Shepherds abiding in their fields, "*Peace on earth, and goodwill.*" Which is it? Peace, or a sword?

Scripture is replete with words and concepts that pull one against the other in a cryptic tug-of-war. Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor, if he wanted to be saved. But Paul later contradicted Jesus: You can give everything to feed the poor, but if you don't have love – the act is wasted.

Paradox. Both Scripture **and** faith are replete with paradox. You can't systemize either, despite millennia of scholars trying to do exactly that. **But**, to borrow from physicist Niels Bohr,

*How wonderful that we have met with [ ] paradox. Now we [can] mak[e] some [real] progress.*

\*It is the night before Jesus died. And he wanted to give his disciples last minute instructions. This morning you heard a tiny piece of those instructions. Later, at the end of the instructions, Jesus adds, "*It is better for you that I leave.*" -- I thought about saying the same thing to you – it is better for you that I leave – but hearing myself say those words sounds disingenuous and self-serving. But Jesus meant it: you will receive the Holy Spirit only I'm gone. It is better for you that I leave – paradoxically.

But Jesus embodies God outside, but the Holy Spirit embodies God inside. You. Which is why Jesus' word, *Abide*, is imminently practical, and it is also commandment. Abide in my love. Love one another. Abide there. Make your home with God, and God with you... With love, and love with you. At night, go to sleep in that house, and in the morning wake up in that house.

But love as commandment, is nothing if not paradox. You can't make yourself love someone else. On the other hand, when you live inside God's love, the only thing you can do – is love. Love, you see, is a posture of the soul, not a moral

choice one makes. And that as much as any other reason is why your relationship with God matters. Existentially you live in God, day in and day out.

All this abiding was made possible because Jesus departed. It was better for Jesus to leave. But my departure is different. I cannot send you the Holy Spirit. The best I can do is mail you a letter or two.

So why might my leaving be good? Five years ago, you as a congregation made the conscious decision to grow this church. I didn't make it, you did. The decision was made before I arrived. Your vestry even adopted a detailed plan called, *Growing Our Congregation*.

Growing a congregation means changing fundamentally the nature of the congregation – Change becomes good, whereas typically, congregations eschew change. But a growing congregation must be a changing congregation, an evolving, a spirit-led congregation.

Your vestry sent people to other churches to spy on them – to discover *best practices*, practices you might adopt here. You implemented many of these best practices, then added your own innovations: Coffee Connections, Welcome Committee – you introduced yourselves to visitors, slid down the pews rather than aisle so you didn't block peoples' ways. You did everything you could to build this church – because you cared.

These days we have some cool stuff going on – Earth and Altar, new solar panels, a new roof and no debt. I didn't do those things – you did. And my opinion is that you called me as rector because I was willing to assist you in your venture. We did it – together – so it seems to me, the question for you is, *what next?*

God has called each of you – individually and corporately – to participate in this parish church. This work is fundamentally yours, in your abiding with God, not mine. Don't ever forget that – this is your work, by God's grace. And now – you have the opportunity for Act II.

Growing Our Congregation, II. I know it isn't really better that I leave – or maybe it is – But the point I'm making is fundamental: this is your church, and the legacy will be yours. I just thank you for letting me be a part of it. Like I said, it is the preacher's job to make you uncomfortable. Uncomfortable enough to act, and my prayer for you – each of you – is that, of course, you continue to abide, and grow in love - and in growing in love, you continue growing St. Stephen's.

Remember that Dr. Seuss book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!?* I can't wait to hear tales of the places you go. Make me proud.