

***“Let Go. Now!”***

***A homily by Stephen Martz for the people of  
St. Nicholas with the Holy Innocents***

***7 January 2007***

***Isaiah 43:1-7 + Psalm 29 + Acts 8:14-17 +  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22***

My son David was a climber as a toddler. He loved to climb anywhere he could get to – and he could get to lots of places the parents of a first-born did not imagine. One of my favorite pictures from those early years was of him kneeling on all fours on top of a file cabinet he had somehow managed to clamber onto.

I thought of this a few days ago when I read of a two year old boy in New York City who climbed out the window of his babysitter’s apartment and onto a landing four or five floors above the ground. He was hanging there by his two hands when he was spotted by two men below, who positioned themselves underneath just as he lost his grip. He bounced off the first man’s chest and fell safely into the arms of the second, averting sure death.

Just a few days earlier, another New Yorker had saved the life of a 20 year old student who had an epileptic seizure and fell into the path of an oncoming subway train. He was saved from certain death when the other man jumped onto the track and held him down as the train passed inches above them.

I don’t know anything about the religion of any of those involved, but I am quite sure God said to each of them, “You are my child; with you I am well pleased.”

Friends, today we begin a common journey toward that same end. No, not falling out of a building or under a subway car. We have pledged something not quite as scary: to live together as one bread and one body in one community.

There we will seek to help one another find the abundance of life Christ has promised, and to pattern our lives after his so that we, too, will hear God say, “You are my child, my children; with you I am well pleased.”

How will we do this? One very good blueprint is the Baptismal Covenant which we will recite together momentarily. Listen carefully to the five promises we make; they are a wonderful summary of the Christian life.

But first I’d like to speak in less lofty language about what we are doing. Forgive me if this sounds more like a State of the Parish address than a homily, and if I speak in the first person enough times to fail the most generous homiletics course -- and if I go on a bit too long.

It is important that we start this New Year and New Endeavor with clarity and common purpose. What we are going to do, beginning now, is build a new church. Simple as that. On one level, we are doing this by putting together two existing churches and making from them a new creation.

But we are doing much more than that. We have joined forces to create something far more dynamic than the mere sum of our parts. From Day One of this project I have said that we have a unique opportunity in this present moment to create a dynamic ministry the likes of which we’ve never even imagined in our Northwest Suburbs.

Given the long history of declining Episcopal presence in these suburbs, that's a bold claim. In making it, I've put myself – and you -- in front of the speeding subway train known as “the decline of mainstream religion in the West.” This train has been gathering speed for a long time, probably from even before there were trains.

I've convinced the Holy Innocents people death was not inevitable and to take a leap of faith into a new life, new building, and new marriage. I've convinced the St. Nicholas people to change the path of promise they had been walking to try something quite different. I've convinced our diocesan leaders that we *can* do it.

I've done all of this at a moment in my life when I wanted to be focusing less on the church and more on my analytic practice. Am I nuts? Time will tell.

I am, however, sincere and serious. We truly do have a great opportunity before us. You, me, our Diocese, new folks who will join us; together we are going to take advantage of this moment and build a new church.

Not just a church in which we spend a couple of pleasant hours on a Sunday morning, but a church that forms and transforms us.

I've given this a lot of thought, and I've got some ideas, but the truth is: we've all got to want it and do it. I can't will this or design it from on high. So the next three Sundays, I invite each of you to join me at our new 10 a.m. Education Hour for conversation about “Growing Our New Church.”

There are some givens. One is that it's going to take a good nine months, at least until September, to birth this baby -- or maybe it's going to take nine months just to get pregnant. You choose the metaphor.

During that time, expect things to be rough around the edges. Making a new congregation from two existing congregations -- and inviting new people to join us in a building too small for our needs -- guarantees rough edges.

But we also have begun to put some things into place. Starting next Sunday, we will have two liturgies -- at 9 and 11 -- and an increasingly strong Education Hour between them. The 9 a.m. liturgy will be more formal and mainstream, the 11 more informal and at times experimental.

The two liturgies are not for keeping "the Holy Innocents liturgy" and "the St. Nicholas liturgy." They reflect a conviction that we are alive at an in-between time of religious history. Christianity is changing; maybe it's even dying -- or being reborn.

No one can say for certain. But we do know that things are very, very different from 1959, when these churches were founded, and we can't begin to imagine how different they will be fifty years from now.

In this time of massive change, some of us, and some who will become one with us in the years ahead, will find meaning and comfort in traditional ways. Others of us, and others who will join us in the years ahead, are searching for God in new ways and need new forms and experiences.

No matter which way is more natural for you, there is a place for you in this church. With a new music director beginning in February, we will be able to provide a high level of music for both liturgies, and I know we will be nourished in warm, sacramental celebration that is our heritage from the apostles.

A second piece being put into place quickly is a strong emphasis on mission and outreach. Building on what both congregations have done, our mission will be sharply focused on the areas of children, hunger, and healing. The Second Family and vegetable garden programs begun at St. Nicholas will be expanded, as will the Supplemental Food Pantry that Holy Innocents operated.

Later this year, we will begin a monthly Healing Liturgy and some innovative adult education programs focused on the inner life. We will continue to be a place of radical hospitality, welcoming gay and lesbian people, who have contributed so richly to our common life, and extending a more deliberate welcome to interfaith families. Unless all are welcome, Jesus will not be present.

Finally, I want you to know that I had another meeting this week to prepare for the January 16 meeting of Bishop & Trustees. At that meeting, we will formally request that proceeds from the sale of the Holy Innocents property be made available to fund our growth.

I continue to expect that they will approve our plan, as the Congregations Commission already has. Two major requests are for funds to purchase a new organ, which we plan to have by Easter, and to build an addition to this building, which is absolutely essential.

So, if I can end where I began this homily, and where I began five months ago in my preaching to the people of the former Holy Innocents: *now* is the time to let go of those treasured things God has given us in the past so we can accept the new things God is giving us for the future.

*Now* is the time for new ideas, new strategies, new ministries; *now* the time to be bold and take risks.

Let go.

Believe.

Be faithful to the God who calls you by name,  
who is well pleased with you.

Be filled with the Spirit of your Baptism.

Above all, do not be afraid to fail or to fall. We will fail and we will fall, but those failings and fallings are not important. God will be with us and will catch us.

The only way we can truly fail is if we don't let go; if we clench our hands tightly and hold onto the railing of past blessings. Then we will have no hands free to accept those rich blessings God is giving us *now*.

So, together, let's let go.

Let's open our hands.

*Now!*