

**St. Matthew's Episcopal Church-Warson Woods**  
**Annual Meeting Address**  
**Sunday, February 14, 2010**

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let me start out by telling you how glad I am to be your Rector. I have enjoyed working with all of you and have come to love all of you deeply. We are all different, but we come together with a common focus and goal. That focus is Jesus Christ and the goal is to share the Gospel with those who do not know the Good News of God in Christ.

We do this not just in distant lands, but right here in our neighborhood. There is an old adage, "Bloom where you are planted" and that is what God has called us to do. The needs of the world are right here in Warson Woods, Missouri, right here in St. Louis County. In many lifetimes we could not address all of them and we aren't supposed to. We are called, however, to open our eyes and hearts and hands and to see and respond to the needs around us.

But how do we do this? How do we live into our calling as Christians and at the same time work on developing our potential and capacity to give even more than we think we can give and do even more than we ever could imagine? Finding the answer or answers to that question is what our journey together is all about.

Two and half years ago we began a visioning process. This process is on-going; visioning for any organization should never stop. The saying, "Without a vision the people perish" is true. To have a vision is to have hope. Having no vision speaks to having no hope, no future. It also speaks to something else, something if unleashed can change the world, or if denied can kill the healthiest organization, church, and even humanity. I want to talk to you today about imagination.

Throughout the Old Testament we hear the stories of people that risked their present by imagining a different future. If Abraham hadn't imagined a new start he never would have left Haran. If Moses couldn't imagine a future other than being under Egyptian oppression he would never have left Egypt. Throughout the exiles hope was kept alive by the prophets who called Israel

to account for its sins, but also spoke to Israel about God's mercy and love and God's wish that their future would be different.

In the New Testament, do you think Peter and Andrew, James and John and all the others would have given up their livelihood, their friends and family if all that Jesus was promising was the same old, same old? Would Paul have risked the shipwrecks and prison sentences, the physical difficulty of going around the known world to proclaim what had been revealed to him if he thought the message he carried wouldn't make a difference?

No, I don't think so. It was because they imagined another possibility, the possibility that Jesus really was the Messiah and that a new life awaited them, that they could brave the unknown and start a journey that changed not only their lives, but also the lives of all humanity throughout all time.

Last week's gospel reading was about the calling of the disciples and the miraculous catch of fish. I told you that to concentrate on the catch was perhaps to put the focus in the wrong place. Even given their frustration at having caught nothing the night before, even given their exhaustion of having been on the lake the entire night, they let the nets down once more at the behest of Jesus. What happened next was beyond their imagining. When we trust God, that is what happens, we are filled with awe and wonder and the belief that God can and will use us, little old us, to make a difference in the world.

Healthy congregations take stock of their inward life and work to always strengthen it, but they do so with an outward focus. Their inward journey as a community of faith is always done in the knowledge that the journey prepares them for work outside the walls of the community. Ministry is the most demanding thing I know. We cannot do it from a position of personal and communal emptiness or disbelief. When we delve ever deeper into God's word we learn of new ways of being and doing. New imaginations are sparked by interacting with those who have gone before us.

It is with this in mind that the next year's educational offering will be about learning what fed the church; what nurtured her people through difficult and uncertain times, what practices became the core disciplines for helping to proclaim the gospel. It is never too late to join us. I have found the time we spend together in the Adult Forum Sunday mornings to be a time of deep sharing, caring and growing.

It is in that sharing, caring and growing that we find ourselves transformed. The gospel was never given to us so that we could stay like we are. The gospel was written so that we might not be conformed to this world, but transformed, changed. Today's Old Testament reading was of Moses being changed by his encounter with God. The Gospel this morning tells the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Even Jesus changed. We can never be the same person we were after we have had an encounter with God.

It is this transformation that we need to be concerned with, not our average Sunday attendance, not the number of pledging units or the amount pledged, as important as they are. What is more important and measures our success more truly is whether we are letting the Gospel of Jesus Christ change our lives and our hearts, individually and corporately.

When we allow the power of the gospel change us, when we fill ourselves so that God's word and will determines our words and deeds, what happens is that word and deed become integrated, one flows from the other and back again. Word and deed cannot be separated, they are a seamless garment where you can't tell where one thread ends and another begins.

When this integration happens mission is deeply engaged. "Mission is not primarily something we in the church do, it is who we are because it is who God is."<sup>1</sup>

It is mission that will help us turn outward when we become fearful and want to turn inward and minister only to ourselves. It is in being engaged in mission that we become vital to the community that we are called to serve.

Mission occurs on a large scale, such as the relief work we see in Haiti and the medical missions dioceses plan to Central and South America, and they happen on a small, but no less important scale; such as gathering food to help fill the shelves of Trinity Food Pantry and saving cans and pennies that are turned into a donation to Energy Care-St. Louis.

I have told you that we have been invited by the Bishop, along with five other congregations, to be a model congregation for mission. We have been asked to make becoming a missional congregation our focus and organizing principle of our life together. Our charge is that we engage our community

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dwight Zscheile, Annual Keynote Diocesan Address, November 21<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

and ministry in it more deeply, that we come together to see what worked, what didn't work, and then share our experiences with other congregations that may be a tad more timid in stepping out and risking for the gospel.

But taking risks is what it has been about since the beginning of time. God took the biggest risk in making us and letting us loose on the earth and giving us free-will. God loves us and took the very real chance that we wouldn't love God back. Taking a risk for the gospel is showing God, our community, and ourselves that we want to return a portion of that love first given to us.

The questions that these six model congregations will wrestle with in the next year are; What would it look like in the life of our congregation to live missionally? What are the possibilities and pitfalls that we might encounter? and What can we learn and share with others?

Each congregation was to choose a focus project. In entering into this process we were told that we could fail, but that we would not be permitted to quit. Stopping in the middle and deciding we don't want to do this anymore was and is not an option. Those are the only ground rules we have.

Several members of the congregation are a part of this project and have been excited about the meetings and the project. The project needs to be relevant to the context in which the congregation is located and it also needs to draw from one of the strengths of the congregation.

One thing that can be said for St. Matthew's is that we love food. We love to make it, we love to eat it and we love to give it away. It seemed natural for the project we chose to have something to do with food. And it does.

For over a year now there has been interest expressed in developing a community garden. We will be entering into a joint venture with Rohan Woods School to plant, harvest and sell the produce produced on our land with their help. All proceeds will go to the food pantries that serve this area. This year is a test year. We will start with four raised 4X8 beds of vegetables and herbs.

The principal at Rohan Woods, Kelley Horn, believes he can get the materials donated and as some of his parents run construction businesses,

believes they can build it. If this doesn't work out, Rick Kuhn, our general contractor for the renovations we've done has promised his help.

I am in charge of getting the manure for the beds or at least of finding someone who would love to give it to us. Nobody said the work of the gospel is glamorous!

It is hoped that teams from both the school and the church will work together in watering and weeding the beds. This is a learning opportunity for the children as well. From learning about how seeds germinate, to studying decomposition and soil changes, to the economics of running a weekly farmer's market, this project will be a part of every grades curriculum.

We are hoping that in the fall we can have a harvest dinner with the school, perhaps around St. Matthew's Day, which will feature our food. This year will be a lessons learned year. We will try and answer the questions of what we need to do differently, how we could be more efficient in time and effort, and the all important question of how well we did in keeping the squirrels and raccoons away.

Next year we are hoping to actually have a community farmer's market to sell the food.

This project accomplishes several objectives: it has an outward focus. Yes, we will enjoy the fruits of our labor, but more importantly we are helping to fill a need in our community. Hunger is more and more prevalent in our country. With money not going as far due to the economic climate and families losing jobs and relying more heavily on food pantries to stretch their dollars, families are having to rely more on processed foods which are not healthy and contribute to the epidemic of obesity and Type II diabetes the country is experiencing.

This project is collaborative. It brings us more directly into the life of Warson Woods. We are no longer the church you cannot see. We are the church with the community gardens. I use the plural because we have a community prayer garden that is open to others as well and I would love to finish it this year, if at all possible.

This project uses our greatest assets, our land and our people, in new ways in the service of others. It is intergenerational. As a congregation we may be

child poor, but there is nothing saying we can't invite all the children across the street to help us.

The project is big enough to entail some risk and small enough to be doable for the size of this congregation. Small efforts in serving the community are still efforts in serving and can literally make a world of difference. Mother Teresa once said that we cannot do great things, we can only do small things with great love. If we do that we will be doing enough.

This project can engage our imaginations in new ways. Who knows what will spring forth from the small seeds we plant, but I'll bet you a gourmet dinner that whatever it is it will be more than just vegetables and herbs.

I want to be very clear here, the purpose of this project is not to get more warm bodies in the pews or money in the coffer. Nothing could be farther from our intent. We do this for no other reason than to reconnect to our missional roots in being the church, of going deeper into our spiritual lives to connect our life of faith with our life of service. We do this so that, to quote Frederick Beuchner, "our great hunger and the world's great need meet."

I look forward to another year of living, loving, learning and serving alongside you as we are more and more transformed into the Body of Christ that God wants us to be. And it is to God that we give all praise and all glory.

Amen.