

This is a story of controversy, told in three parts. The first, a sort of origin story. The second, a tale of rebirth. And finally, the third, a story that may be at its beginning, right this very moment. A story that has yet to unfold.

These chapters follow a familiar outline; how we came into being, how we grew and changed over time, and a reflection on who we have become and where we are going.

The first is a legend we tell ourselves about the early formation of this church.

It starts with the founding of St. John's in 1814 as a church for German speaking immigrants in the newly formed white settlement of Cincinnati.

Sounding like the setup of a joke that a theology professor might tell, it was a mix of Lutherans, Calvinists, Evangelical Protestants, and Catholics, all worshipping together. In these early years, the congregation was led by the Rev. Ludwig Meyer, who served as minister from 1820 to 1835 at the congregations first location on Arch Street, downtown, near what is today Lytle Park.

At the time, the church was a small building in need of repairs and not able to accommodate the rapidly growing population of German immigrants fleeing economic hardship and difficult living conditions in Europe at the time.

According to the story, a somewhat familiar scene broke out. The congregation, in intense debate about the future of their building, could not agree on a course of action. While we don't know the specifics of what was discussed, we can imagine that debate may have focused on some familiar topics: can we afford to repair, do we really need to, how do we pay for it, where would we go if we moved?

Difficult questions for any congregation to navigate, but in this case, trying to find common ground amongst German immigrants from various regions, backgrounds,

and denominations, trying to negotiate theological and personal conflicts, all in the best interest of a religious home that they have carved out for themselves in a new country.

As it is told, at the peak of this debate, in a packed sanctuary, during a congregational meeting, the floor gave out from underneath them, landing the lot of them in the cellar below.

I'm sure many of us have heard this story many times before, and I have been warned that it may be more lore than history, but aren't most good stories? Notwithstanding the embellishments of this fable, I can't help but be drawn to the imagery. A congregation, at the height of anxiety, in the midst of change, has the bottom drop out from underneath it.

In this romanticized version of our past, we can imagine the congregants, tossed and tussled, brushing the fine dust from their clothes as they make sense of this chaos. Looking at each other, coming to the realization of a new-found consensus, arrived at suddenly, through communal experience. An outside force, divine providence perhaps, moving them to collective action.

The decision was made, the controversy over - for the moment. The congregation would move to a new location on Third Street, east of Broadway in 1824.

The second controversy I found while looking for some documents in a filing cabinet downstairs. Thumbing through years of history, neatly stored away amongst the extra wine glasses and craft supplies. I couldn't help but be drawn to a file folder with a simple but proactive one-word label, written in all caps: "Controversy"

Inside were several documents, among them a 1971 column from the Cincinnati Post: "Sex in Sunday School?" Along with it, a feature article from a 1972 issue of Cincinnati Magazine titled, "Church of Controversy". Subtitle: "St. John's Unitarian: Yoga, art, rock, creativity, religion."

The two articles together capture a time in our shared history when St. John's was seen by many, as the "headquarters for the Clifton counter-culture." as one disillusioned member states in the Cincinnati Magazine article.

That article traces the history of St. John's through our first controversy, and several others, culminating with a look at the state of the church under the leadership of the minister at the time, Rev. David Sammons. The article comments on the social activism and activity at the church mentioning that it was a source of constant activity. It describes offering meeting space to "Women's Lib, Gay Lib, the Weatherman, and sensitivity training."

The column from the Post, in a section titled, "A Layman's View" is less than charitable. It tells of the beginnings of an age appropriate sex education curriculum that was being developed by the then fledgling UUA, using St. John's as a test congregation.

Both articles, written by outsiders looking in, have an mild air of shock, disbelief, and a healthy dose of good old Cincinnati pearl-clutching. They seem to say "All this... *inside a church?*"

But when I read the articles, some fifty years later, I was struck by how forward thinking the description of the congregation was at that time. For a congregation of under 300 people to garner the attention of both publications in the span of less than a year was remarkable to me.

And yet, the optimism and energy that both accounts capture can't be divorced from the controversy. The Posts article describes the curriculum as "X rated". The Cincinnati Magazine spread quotes Rev. Sammons as he addresses declining giving and cancelled memberships.

It was a time of growth, exposure, trying new ideas, seeking boundaries, pushing them, testing them, and asking bold questions. Undoubtedly, this time was full of controversies beyond what was gathered in print and placed in a file. And certainly, in many cases these controversies led to disagreements, unhealthy conflict, and even real harm.

But some of those controversies were necessary. Some of them were past due. Some of those controversies, when we look back on them seem quaint to us now. That sex education, it laid the ground work for Our Whole Lives. Women's Lib, Gay Lib, these are no longer controversial fringe concepts but articles of our shared faith.

Which brings us to our third and final controversy. The controversy that has yet to occur.

I don't know what it will be, but I know it is coming.

It's not that I have some inside information that I'm not sharing with you, it's just a premonition. As I look back through our history, I see a movement of people who are restless. Immigrants, activists, rabble rousers, discontent with the status quo. The life of this congregation ebbs and flows in a rhythm that is in a tidal lock with the world around us, pushing back, when it pulls toward chaos, meaninglessness, and fear.

At the end of the 1950s, after our move from downtown, when the congregation's future seemed uncertain, the world shifted in a way that demanded our attention and existence. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, when the world was in turmoil and experiencing rapid cultural and technological changes, our congregation bloomed again. Offering a place to make sense of our ever more complicated lives.

Our congregation, a reflection of the wider world, reacts to the changes outside by finding conflict within. Like a floor that has given out from under us, a well-timed controversy is sent to wake us up, and call us forward.

What will the nature of this controversy be, it's hard to say? I'd put good money on a disagreement over when and how to pay for renovations to our building. Or maybe it will be conflict over church safety and the role of fire arms. It may be over something we've yet to even consider.

But it will come. As sure as spring follows winter it will come.

Like the change of seasons, controversy is an inevitable sign of change. Rarely is there a new idea worth championing that is at its inception not deemed controversial or even heretical. Change, by its very nature, is at odds with stasis. Change is a sign of growth, growth is a form of change. It is a reminder that we are still alive.

The disagreements that we have are proof that even after the dormant winter, there will be green growth. That even through the wax and wane of this congregation's life, there will come a time when we must again leave the comfort and protection of dormancy and push out our shoots, even though they may be vulnerable to the unpredictable swings of spring weather.

The controversy to come may be the one that leads to our rebirth, it may be the catalyst that leads to our evolution into what is next. It may ask us to rise to the demands of the ever-changing world we find ourselves in today.

And so, it is worth having controversy. It is worth leaning into discomfort, even as we are weary from the challenges of our past. It is worth forging ahead even though the road behind us has been rough and the way forward seems even more perilous.

We are a people of a faith unlike others. Through our covenant, we demand the search for new truths. We believe that we each walk a spiritual path that will lead us all forward.

This is not a faith unaccustomed to controversy. From their very beginnings the ideas of a united God and universal salvation had us thrown into prisons and cast out as laughing stocks.

But we didn't stop there. Never content with our current disputation we moved on to become a faith unafraid of new insight. A people welcoming of unsealed revelation, whether it is brought to us through the fruits of the scientific process, claimed from our own lived experiences, or as professed through the sacred story telling of others.

Controversy can lead to revelation and enlightenment. The birth of new ideas which can illuminate the mystery's once dark and mysterious to us.

However, conflict is not without costs. Especially in a world where there seems to be disagreement solely for the sake of having a disagreement. When we are overloaded with information and opinion and it is harder than ever to tell the two apart.

How do we distinguish revelation from hot air? How do we tell fact from fiction? How do we unravel the controversy when the truth is so elusive and those around us are demanding that we take a side?

It reminds me of a story I heard not too long ago. A young couple was hosting a family gathering shortly after the birth of their second daughter. Crowded around the infant, a debate broke out amongst the assembled aunts and uncles; grandmothers and grandfathers. Who did the baby look more like, the mother or the father? The baby's eyes were clearly from her mothers' side, but that hair was unmistakably her fathers. Her nose her mothers, her cheeks her fathers. And on this went, a loving volley of trait identification that I'm sure many of us have heard before. This continued for some time until the grownups were interrupted by the child's four years old sister. She took a good long look at the baby and declared with complete confidence, and not a little exasperation, "You guys, it looks like mommy **and** daddy."

It's a simple observation but one that cloaks a more essential truth.

Sometimes, It can be two things.

Like so many issues in this world, the framing of the adults' question was flawed. The question wasn't which parent the child most resembles, it was in what ways does she resemble them both. It was a flawed concept from the beginning.

I think of this lesson often, when I am confronted with an issue in which I have dug my heels in and hunkered down in my corner, certain of myself. I try to remember that life is not a choice of black versus white, but a search form some gradient in-between.

But without a solid foundation to which we can anchor our beliefs, don't we risk becoming subject to the whims of relativism? We can be reluctant to engage in discussion or debate because we fear giving credit to both sides. And there are those who will use this false equivalency to cloak their bad faith and malign intentions, making a mockery of our discourse, and leaving us looking like fools. Isn't it best just to stay out of it? It's too controversial!

Then I am reminded that the point of balance is not always to arrive plum in the middle of a disagreement. Like finding my weight on the scale after the holidays, you must inch along the continuum until you find the tipping point, where the sum of evidence leads you.

And while sliding the weight to one side is certainly easy, and an admittedly tempting activity this time of year, it provides you with no real insight into your mass. We must resist the easy self-satisfaction that comes when we convince ourselves that we weigh nothing at all.

It can be frustrating. Our human lives are not simple, and not easily measured on one precisely marked axis. We exist amongst a web of multifaceted, intersecting and diverging interdependent scales. It isn't the question of finding some shade of gray between black and white, but of looking at an unused pallet and deciding exactly which shade we should mix.

Controversies can be difficult to navigate. They can bring to the surface long held biases, grudges, and misconceptions. They can challenge deep seated notions about where we see our place in the world and what is fair and just.



We find ourselves returned to that place, where we are on the boundary of change. Tossed about on the waves of an uncertain world where traditional conceptualizations of truth and reality seem to be up for debate in our daily news cycle and individuals cocoon themselves in self crafted divergent realities. It is easy to stand idly on one side or to just get out of the way all together!

But that's not who we are. We are the church of controversy. It is woven in and out of our story again and again.

As we return to our three controversies, we can view them now, not as isolated events, but as part of an ongoing discussion. A never ending, raucous, scary, exhilarating search of understanding. And though we are privileged to view but a moment of this debate, we are reminded that this institution is not constrained by our biological limitations. And through the collective controversies of our past, we have shown that we can reinvent ourselves, that we can grow and change, so that we may serve the world in new and exciting ways.

And so, we will open our doors to difficult conversations. We will open ourselves to dialogue, learning, and revelation. We will invite strangers to join our community so that we can make meaning of the world together, for years and years to come.