



“Together Again”

Hebrews 10:23-25; Matthew 16:13-19

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

September 13, 2009

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Well, here we are! Again! It's Kickoff Sunday at Plymouth Church, our annual inauguration of the church year and celebration of our life together. It's an annual get-together after our summer travels, topped off by a picnic in the Beecher Garden.

I must say, it's good to see you all again. Every summer I worry you won't show up in the fall. Every year you return so you'd think I'd learn. But I still worry. And here we are!

A new church lies before us filled with opportunities and challenges. The opportunities are large. Each week we gather in this room for worship. Here, always mysteriously and sometimes powerfully, we encounter the living God. There is something unique, even transforming, when a community of faith gathers to meet God.

Every Sunday is also an opportunity for what is traditionally called Christian Education. We offer educational experiences for children and adults. And, each one of those classes bears the potential for spiritual formation.

Opportunities are scattered across the days of every week of the year. Bible studies, fellowship, committee meetings, prayer groups, and service opportunities in and out of these buildings fill our days and evenings.

We are working to make the seasons of the church year rich opportunities for growth and service. The Worship and Arts Committee meets this week to begin thinking about the Advent and Christmas season and how to make those days creative opportunities for fellowship, learning, and spiritual growth.

Other events are scattered across the church calendar: the Yankee Fair, occasional meals together, parties and other get-togethers - all are part of the rhythm of life at Plymouth. Each strengthens our relationships, deepens our faith, and bears the seeds of Christian outreach.

Our life together is vitally engaged in outreach to the world. If you haven't seen it, be sure to read the article on our outreach partners in the fall issue of our church newsletter or pick up the Christian Help brochure. Through ministry partners, what we do here touches lives both in Brooklyn and elsewhere in the world. To put it another way, our journey together is a small but significant part of God's mission to cover the earth with God's shalom.

It is a good time to be part of Plymouth Church. We are a growing and energetic congregation. God has entrusted us with the lives of more than 100 children – and their parents and siblings! All growth, especially a growing number of children, is a delightful opportunity. I am honored to be part of this chapter of Plymouth Church.

Plymouth Church
Sermon 13 September 09

This year is, at the same time, filled with challenges. All church life is accompanied by challenges. Growth and vitality bring additional challenges.

The most obvious challenge is, perhaps, economic. As you may know, for too long, Plymouth depended on borrowing from our endowment funds to meet the budget. We closed that gap significantly and then last year's recession hit, and with it budget constraints and another deficit. This year will be a financial challenge. The church leadership continues to monitor expenses and works hard to increase revenue. We're making progress, but it is a challenge.

During those same years, we experienced significant growth. We've doubled in size in four years. We keep attracting visitors and new members, but we also lose too many of them. Our wide front door is accompanied by many back doors. The challenge is to engage more people, old and new, heart deep in the life of the community.

There is more than one kind of church growth. Quantitative growth, adding numbers to the congregation, is one kind of growth. Qualitative growth is another kind of growth and is, perhaps, more important than numbers. Qualitative growth is, as the word suggests, internal, spiritual growth of members and the community. I am concerned that our spiritual growth match our numerical growth. The spiritual formation of Plymouth Church is a challenge that ranks high on my list of priorities.

Another kind of growth also needs to accompany numerical growth: organizational growth. Growing churches need a governance model that enhances growth. Governance must serve the growth and the mission of the church, not hold it back. We are at that point in our life together. Our governance model is an antique that well served a former generation but tends to keep things from getting done these days. We have to work hard to make the old system work for us not against us.

These many opportunities and challenges raise several important questions. I introduce several of those questions with a true story.

Several years ago in another church, our leadership team decided we needed some important information from the congregation. We devised two simple surveys and decided to shorten the worship service by 10 minutes two Sundays in a row to poll the congregation.

The first survey asked our members to list five things they thought we were doing well and five things they thought needed improvement. We were looking for common themes. Such information is very important information for church leaders.

The second week we asked the congregation to list five hopes and dreams for the church. Again we were looking for common themes. One answer got my attention. After listing four fine hopes and dreams, the fifth one said, "I hope I never have to fill out a survey in church again."

I haven't given a survey in church since then, but I do want to ask the question posed in the second survey. What are your hopes and dreams for Plymouth Church? If, indeed, we are a growing, vibrant church, what should be consequences of that growth and energy? What should Plymouth look like and act like five years from now, ten years in the future?

Have you ever imagined what this room would look like, sound like, feel like, if it were filled with say, 500 worshippers, or to dream big, 1,000 worshippers? I can tell you from experience that the faith, hope and love of large numbers of people singing, praying, and listening is contagious and powerful. If you haven't imagined such an experience, why not?

What would the Plymouth experience be like if we had the financial resources to meet our annual budget bills but had enough money to transform these buildings into an up-to-

Plymouth Church
Sermon 13 September 09

date and efficient facility that served us and our community seven days a week. What if we had enough money to create a pastoral staff designed to grow the congregation and reach out to the community in creative and powerful outreach? What if every Plymouth member was engaged in volunteer work either in the congregation or in the larger community – or both?

Have you ever imagined that kind of Plymouth Church? If not, why not?

What if all of us were deeply committed to our own spirituality and the spirituality of the congregation? What if we shared a large passion for God and God's creation? And what if we shared an equal passion for God's mission on earth – and did something about it? What if we were people of large purposes, big plans and vivid vision? Why not?

One thing I know is true: God tends to fill up the size of our expectations.

And what are your hopes and dreams for your spiritual life and your life in this community of faith? What if God had God's way with you? What parts of your life need some growth and development? What is the shape of your soul, your character? What do you suppose God wants to make of you?

Remember God fills up the size of our expectations. What is the size of your hopes and dreams? What if we were people of large purposes?

All this raises a second question. It is perhaps a larger question. It takes lots of time, energy and money to be the kind of church most of dream of. The more we grow the larger the resources necessary to sustain the life of our congregation. Is it worth it?

That is a good question. It's a question every church officer known to me asks from time to time. For what it's worth, ministers regularly ask that question too. Frankly, many church leaders and ministers decide it's not worth it and settle for what is, rather than what can be.

The question is made difficult by the dogged humanity of every congregation. I tell people it takes three times longer to get anything done in the church as it does in the real world (four times longer in New York!). That frustrates church leaders and church members. In fact few things in life are more frustrating than the reality of church life. It tends to make people either weary or cynical – or both. And we wonder if all the effort is worth it.

Alfred Loisy, a famous liberal Catholic theologian of the last century, famously said, "Jesus came preaching the kingdom and what arrived was the church." It's easy to stand on the cusp of a new church year filled with anticipation. It's another to keep up one's hopes and dreams come November or March.

The clash between our ideal – our hopes and dreams – and reality is a fact of life, including church life. Our morning texts offer helpful perspective and dynamic promise for our life together in 2009-2010 – or any year.

Jesus knew something about frustration with the slow pace of spiritual life. He came to establish the reign of God on earth, and his disciples never seemed to get what he was about and too often slowed him down.

For three long years he taught and trained the new community to take over after he left. And after three years, he asked the question on which the Christian gospel hangs, "Who am I?" he asked.

Peter "got it." "You are the Christ," he said. You are the one sent by God to plant God's kingdom in the soil of human experience. Peter knew that because he'd experienced the transforming power of God's kingdom in his own life. God invaded his life and changed everything.

Plymouth Church
Sermon 13 September 09

Jesus commended Peter and then added an astounding promise. “I will build my new community in the likes of you disciples. Because I am with you, nothing can ever destroy this new creation.”

There is much to be said about this text – and I will leave that to another time. At the least Jesus promised that an extraordinary dynamic would accompany his people everywhere in all time. To be the church of Christ is to experience transcendence. We are the intersection of time and eternity. This congregation, like all churches, possesses a divine dynamic to assist us and to transform our ordinary humanness into something beyond ourselves.

The good news I bring you this day is this: we are the promise of Christ. Each time we meet, Christ meets with us. That is the Easter promise.

Plymouth Church is not these wonderful buildings or our great history. We are more than our programs and ministries. We the people are the church. Whether gathered on Sunday or scattered through the week, we are the church and we are accompanied by the life of God.

If that is true, what do you expect of Plymouth Church? Such a touch of transcendence happens only when we purposefully enter into and embrace the community. Worship becomes a divine moment when we enter into the singing, hearing and fellowship. The church becomes transforming when we joyfully, eagerly, and diligently enter into its life and make it our own. It’s a matter of faith.

That makes all the effort worthwhile. So, the epistle writer adds an additional word. Hebrews was written to a congregation under the pressure of persecution. Some of the members had lost property because of their faith. Some did jail time, and many were asking if this faith was worth it after all. The letter is a long, involved, and often eloquent “Yes” to that question.

We enter in late in the argument. One consequence of congregational life is certain, the author declares. “Don’t stop meeting together. In fact, the worse things get, the more you should get together.” Whenever and however humanity dogs our life as a congregation, we show up to meet God and work things out.

The point of it all is simple: our spiritual formation. Since congregational life is the intersection of time and eternity, congregational life possesses transforming power, the capacity to make all of us what God intends us to be.

God is in the process of creating an extraordinary community right here in this place. We are people being shaped by God’s good news as it impacts us and one another. We are always shaped by the communities we give ourselves to. And we are shaped by texts – like these biblical texts – to which we attend.

That good news creates people in whom faith, hope and love are shaping a new kind of person and community. Here, in God’s presence and among our spiritual family, God is making our faith larger, our hope higher and our love deeper. In fact God is making us a people of faith, hope, and love.

So, let’s move boldly into a new church year with all its challenges and opportunities. And let’s enjoy life together – in spite of our dogged humanity! It’s worth it!

Amen.