

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

April 17, 2016

**“Plymouth:
An Oasis for Seekers and
a Surprise for the Dones,
a Hope for the Teary-eyed”**

“... in Joppa there was a disciple whose name
was Tabitha ... She was devoted to good works and charity.”

Acts 9:36

Prelude

This is not a normal Sunday in the life of Plymouth Church. With what time I have I want to share some remarks about our Capital Campaign; speak to the question of why we are doing what we are doing; and then try to have a **crescendo conclusion** that will result in everyone being so inspired as to amend their capital pledge, moving decimal points, adding zeros, all for the joy of giving to some great cause that we can't resist supporting.

Something is bound to get shortchanged in this and I fear it is the lesson from Acts, which I regret. **“In Joppa there was a disciple whose name of was Tabitha ... She was devoted to good works and charity”** (Acts 9:6).

Tabitha, as well as the church in which she ministered, has much to teach us about being an Easter people and the wonder and reach and power of gospel, where there is engagement with the God with us for good. As a disclaimer of sorts: we will enter the lesson a bit, but not to the extent I would like.

We have been engaged in our
Capital Fund Campaign -
HERE, for Good! -
for the better part of five months,
dating back into November of last year.
That doesn't fully account for all the
planning that prefaced our solicitation
to raise \$2.5 million to address our need
for a new HVAC system and a repair/
replacement of the roof over our
sanctuary space.

We have spent well over two years getting
to this day - to see if we have desire and ability
to accomplish these things.

I am grateful - for the leadership of
Plymouth Church
that ushered us to this point in time.

I am grateful for those who have
invested themselves
into the thick of ministry,
which means extra meetings,
extra hours, extra-ordinary
levels of participation.

I am grateful for those in the
public eye of things,
those who have stood up to speak
and sing
and tell stories
and raise signs;
and for those who have labored
in no less a significant way
behind the scenes.

Who have worked on

- Correspondence
- printed materials
- publicity
- pre-decision parties
- lead gifts

And also those lurking in the shadows,
who will continue to labor, making sure

there is “**continuity**” between our pledge
and its completion.

I’m am grateful we have come to this day
largely unscathed,
and in decent, if not good, spirit.

A church cannot go through
what we have gone through –
with its considerable challenge –
without there being
some questioning of means to the end,
some decisions that don’t offend,
some communications that fail,
some conversations that get misinterpreted;
and some events that fall flat,
or rub the wrong way.

And think with me here –
we, as the church, could have said:
“We can’t do this, and we shouldn’t try.”
What we, as the church, did say was:
**“We don’t know how we will do this,
but let’s make the effort.
With the help of God,
let’s see what we will make of it
working together.”**

So – an observation.
You have acted in faith.
You prayed, deliberated, planned,
not fully knowing,
but trusting in a good outcome.
And for that I commend you.
And I thank you all –
those who have responded,
and those who will respond today,
to the plea for your generosity.

So I’m celebrating today.

Amazing Grace –
through many dangers, toils, and snares,
we have already come;
tomorrow will bring new challenge

and troubles enough.

Today - I'm happy.
I have no clue what the result will be,
what the pledges will ultimately tally,
but I'm happy that we have endured,
and that we can celebrate today
in a way quite unlike any other
Sunday in the storied life of Plymouth.

Few have gone before us, few will follow,
who will be so daring as to bite off
what is ours to chew.
So I'm savoring the moment, for
the moment it is.

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Now - an update. Breaking news.

The construction has begun.

The old boiler heating us through this season
has been turned off and soon will go the way of
all boilers destined for the salvage heap.

We have no hot water in the facility,
and we won't for the better part of two months.

Furniture is being moved,
schedules are being altered,
offices are soon to be relocated.

Trust me: the church is always
in some state of confusion -
you never fully know whose is
coming and going
on any given day or week.
And it only promises to become more so
over the months of this project.

So I appeal. Be patient. Be kind.
Fear not to call and double check about
room arrangement and space allotments.
Pray for all who will work on Plymouth Church,

and for all who work in and through Plymouth Church,
and for all who look to Plymouth Church
for help and hope to a better life.

There are minor inconveniences that lie ahead,
and maybe even major headaches.
But the end will be a huge upgrade into
a more efficient building,
a more comfortable and
environmentally responsible facility.

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This morning's sermon -
Plymouth Church:
An Oasis for Seekers,
a Surprise for the Dones,
A Hope for the Teary-Eyed.

Permit a comment or so upon
these three things.

In the background the question looms:
why?

Why invest, why be committed
to such a costly endeavor?

Churches are always seemingly popping up,
hither and yonder. Couldn't a Plymouth Church
just pop up somewhere considerably less expense?

In all candor, I don't know.

What I do know is that
we are as a congregation determined
to be **HERE, for Good.**
And that good is definable, at least in part,
(1) as an oasis,
(2) as a surprise,
(3) and as a hope.
An Oasis for seekers.
A Surprise for the Dones.
A Hope for the Teary Eyed.

An explanation - for each of these.

**PLYMOUTH CHURCH:
AN OASIS FOR SEEKERS**

We adhere to a tradition of spiritual inquiry.
To live in a fullness of life, we need environments,
we need communities, to engage God, and each
other, with the great and compelling questions of life.

Howard Thurman once said,
**“the preacher is never under obligation to
preach a great sermon ...**

(which is some consolation to me),
**but he is always under obligation
to wrestle with a great idea”**

(which spares us suffering from
triviality and complacency).
Plymouth is not the only place,
but this is a place that serves as an
oasis for those who are eager seek, eager to
serve, eager to wrestle with the compelling
issues of faith and life.

P.T. Forsyth once said:
**“there is no reality with wrestling ...
If you are not called to wrestle it is only
because the wrestling is being done for you.
Somewhere it must be done, and we just
do more than just watch it.”**

We don't just show up to be “sunning” ourselves
in God's grace. If we are not “wrestling,” as Jacob
wrestled with God, we are not living to the fullest
extent of our design.

I first encountered the writings of Daniel Boorstin
so many years ago in college. He spent a lifetime
pondering the American experience, digesting and
interpreting our history; served 12 years as head
of the Library of Congress (1975-1987). He composed
a book in his 80's, called *The Seekers* in which he said:

**“Caught between two eternities-
the vanished past and the unknown future –
we never cease to seek our bearings
and our sense of direction ... we are all Seekers.
We all want to know why.
Man is the asking animal ...
it is the seeking ... that makes and keeps us human.”**

Boorstin mentioned a curious corollary.
It is the **‘finding’** that can separate us and
make us forget our humanity
(*The Seekers* (1998), in a “Personal Note to the Reader”).

Jesus is quoted in Matthew’s gospel as saying:
“Ask, and it shall be given you;
seek, and ye shall find;
knock, and it shall be opened unto you”
(Matthew 7:7).

He recognized there is a seeker gene implanted
in our souls; he encouraged us to be seekers
of wisdom and truth, to be initiators;
not to curb our curiosity, but to build upon
what insights and discoveries that come
our way - for our good and the good of
our world.

So - we aren’t just HERE, for Good.
We are here as an **oasis** for Christian seekers,
who do not rest content in time,
until they rest in the peace that is
God’s promise when time is exhausted.

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A SURPRISE FOR THE DONES

Many churches find it hard to sustain a
“seeker-friendly” environment. We should
never presume that past Plymouth experience
is a guarantee of future performance.
It should be part of our prayer life - **Dear God,
defend and protect our capacity to serve together**

as seekers of truth.

To the degree that we persevere, and carry forward our seeker-friendly zoning status, we can be a surprise for the DONES of the world.

Are you familiar with this traceable demographic that exists among Christians? It was new to me when I first encountered it just a while ago.

I was familiar with NONES, but they are not to be confused with DONES. NONES are people who don't clearly identify with a religious tradition, and they don't affiliate. They are quite ambivalent about religious types; they show reserve in making any kind of institutional commitment; and they possess no urge, no gnawing of conscience, to do so. They are relatively comfortable in being NONES.

DONES though, are quite different. They are a people once heavily invested, totally involved, in the working of institutional religion. They didn't just show up. They were movers and shakers. They were leaders and teachers. They were (note the past tense) givers of time, talent, and treasure. If the doors were open, they were there (or here).

But they walked away;
took a leave of absence.
And social science researchers
(primarily evangelicals in faith orientation)
have begun to ask: why?

Number one reason: **“they felt judged.”**
And the judgments, both explicit and implicit,
proved unshakeable; you couldn't escape the cloud,
shake the dust, of a message that conveyed:
you simply don't quite measure up.

Number two reason for being a DONE:
Church bureaucracy; too many hurdles
curb spontaneity, quash innovation;
too many roadblocks that let light shine
as long as it is under a bushel.

Now pause with me here. I'm wondering about Tabitha in our morning lesson. Was she a DONE? Had she given so much, and possibly gotten so little, that she died? And in death, did she then attain a level of respect, and receive adulation, for what was denied in life?

Not sure. But we do know that while she was down, she was not counted out. She was dead, but through the agency of Peter and the Holy Spirit, she was able to **"get up,"** and carry on in her ministry that served to link so many to the Jesus life.

As she was surprised by life,
after having been DONE,
so also do I hope that we might serve as
a people who surprise DONES
in our time.

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A HOPE FOR THE TEARY EYED

A quick and final thought.

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Latin American "liberation" theologian, once offered the following instruction to the church:

**"Woe to those whom the Lord finds
dry-eyed
because they could not bring themselves
to solidarity with the poor and suffering
of this world"**

(a comment upon considering Job in light of the Isaiah passage, "The Lord will wipe away tears from all faces ..." [Isaiah 25:8] Gustavo Gutierrez [b. 1928-]; *On Job - God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* [1985] p. 103).

I mention this because one of our challenges we dare not avoid is to be a place and a people that identifies with the poor and suffering of this world, to weep with those who weep, to stand with those who stand alone.

Woe to us if ever we work to reduce our life together, to being a dry-eyed people. We want to work, pray, sing, serve so as to

bring hope to the world.

So - you must be wondering -
what has any of this to do with
a boiler and roof.

These are essential - are they not -
that we might do what we can to
foster an environment that facilitates
the life God would have us share together.
So give what you can - and do so -
knowing that you are contributing to a Plymouth
Church that is committed to being
an oasis, a surprise, a hope
 singularly unique and committed
to having this space faithfully serve the needs and
aspiration of the next generation.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*