

“Safe at Home”

“Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Do you believe that? Those words of the Apostle Paul are inscribed on the plaque in our Memorial Garden. I spoke them to my friend Bob Bower as he died six years ago today. They are beautiful in Spanish: *Sea que vivamos, o que muramos, somos del Señor*. We belong to God. God is our source and our destination, our beginning and our ending. All of life is a journey home. I believe that with all my heart.

The psalmist shares a companion thought with us this morning: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” Our sitting and rising, our spoken words and silent thoughts; who we are when revealed in broad daylight or obscured in deepest shadow: God knows it all. There is no point in pious posturing. We can’t pretend. We who are so often a mystery to those who know us best, a mystery even to ourselves—we are known: the good, the bad and the ugly altogether. And we are loved.

There is a corollary to this assertion that I find both delightfully simple and painfully challenging. If we want to grow closer to God, we have to become more truly who we are. If we want to grow closer to God, we have to be more honest with ourselves; and to do *that*, we need other people. It’s as though we spend our lives running all over the place looking for God, when all along God is where we truly live, feet up by the fire, waiting for us to show up for an honest conversation. “O LORD, you have searched me and known me.” Let’s get real. It’s time to come home.

That’s why we’re here. Usually we say it a bit differently: that our purpose is to grow in love of God and neighbor. I think that’s pretty much the same thing. Let’s get real about who we are and why we’re here.

A year ago on this weekend we were doing something different. Last year we used the first weekend back sermon time to fill out the US Congregations Survey with those awkward and annoying little pens. Over 800 of us filled out surveys that weekend, and some of the Sunday folks told me I’ve never preached better than I did that day. (In my defense, it’s hard to improve on silence.)

So here we are a year later and we’ve learned some things about ourselves—not only what our opinions and preferences are but how we compare to all the other congregations in all the different places who have taken the same survey.

Here's the snapshot. We are outstanding in many respects. With regard to education, we are off the charts, with as high a percentage of folks with advanced degrees as the typical congregation has of college graduates. We are affluent compared to most other congregations. We're much bigger than most, with many more things going on.

But we're also below average in some significant respects. We rate our worship services highly; but we don't claim to experience God's presence in worship as much as other congregations do. When it comes to individual faith practices: frequency of attendance at worship, personal prayer, Bible study or other devotional reading, we rank well below average. Despite our affluence, our giving to the church is low. And we have a great deal of discomfort talking about our faith or inviting others to share in it. We agree to differ; but we prefer not to do so out loud. We value elements of the worship service that are well-executed; but worship rarely moves us deeply or changes our lives.

That's the overall picture that emerges: a lot of good stuff, but religious faith at the end of a ten-foot pole. We can readily articulate faith in terms of what we're *not*: we're not fundamentalists, we're not hierarchical, we're not bound by rigid doctrine. But it's harder to say what we are.

After the survey, more than 350 people participated in Listening Circles last fall—a great turnout. And there we learned some things that helped us flesh out this picture a bit. People reported that their most meaningful church experiences involved relationships: getting to know others by working alongside them or by participating in an activity or a class together. Those relationships become crucial at difficult times in our lives, and they mean a great deal.

On the flip side, a deep yearning surfaced when we asked folks what they would like to see enhanced at Plymouth. In a remarkable number of instances they referenced the Stepping Stones program and asked for more things like that. Stepping Stones focuses on eight key developmental events in the life of a child, ranging from birth through graduation from high school. It draws people together around a vital interest—their child's spiritual development—and it brings them into community with others on the same journey. They learn spiritual practices that they do at home: “every one, every night, every home” is the mantra. And the Stepping Stones participants, when they finish a particular stone, come before the congregation in one of our Saturday or Sunday services to make covenantal promises to do the disciplines they've learned; and they receive the church's blessing.

But Stepping Stones is episodic; and it's focused on families with children. Folks who've seen it, heard about it, gotten a taste of it want more.

What about something between the stones? What about something for adults? Those questions emerged from the Listening Circles.

So the survey results and the Listening Circle feedback and a whole lot of other data on the church and on the greater community were brought before a two-day leadership retreat last November. Out of that event and many more hours of work came the Strategic Plan for Plymouth Church. You have a bulletin insert on it. Please find that insert and look it over with me.

There are three aspects to this plan. The first is an affirmation of our CORE VALUES as a congregation. These are values that have found expression throughout the life of Plymouth Church, over more than 150 years. We begin there because the purpose of a strategic plan is not to make us into something we're not. Community engagement, excellence in worship, education in many forms, progressive theology and openness and inclusivity are hallmarks of Plymouth Church, and we're not walking away from any of that. The goal is to become more truly who we are.

But we have identified some areas in which we wish to grow in response to the self-portrait from the survey and the deep spiritual yearning expressed in the Listening Circles. So there are four strategic initiatives; and they are much more closely related to one another than they might at first appear. SMALL GROUPS will provide a setting in which those who choose to do so can grow closer to one another and to God. These will NOT be random gatherings of church folk wherever and whenever to do whatever. They will be carefully structured, intentional small groups facilitated by trained leaders. They will teach and engage in spiritual practices such as sharing, prayer and study. This Small Group Initiative will start small and quietly as a movement within the congregation. It will develop over a number of years. There is no packaged program that is right for Plymouth. We need to invent this. Angie will head it up. Boards and committees and classes and nine to dine groups still happen, but they are not a part of the Small Groups initiative.

STEWARDSHIP is a strategic initiative: not just to raise more money for the church, but because our relationship to things is a huge spiritual issue in all our lives. We need to help one another grapple with this, and to grow together.

Similarly, EVANGELISM as a strategic initiative is not aimed just at swelling the membership roles, but at helping all of us find a voice when it comes to talking about our faith. This initiative is not about knocking on doors or inflicting ourselves on others. It is about learning to talk about our faith in ways that are honest and natural, and learning to be inviting to others.

And finally the FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN initiative will enhance opportunities for families to worship and grow in faith together.

The common thread in all of these initiatives is a deep desire to become more truly the church God has called us to be. We seek to deepen our relationships with one another and with God; to draw closer to the God who has searched and known us, in whom we find our heart's delight and our truest homecoming.

This isn't just a pastime for a handful of elected church leaders. It is an invitation and a challenge to all of us to grow in faith.

Amen

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