

“Hearts in the Work”

So far as I can determine the recorded financial history of Plymouth Church pretty much begins with the ministry of J. M. Chamberlain, who came here fresh out of Andover Seminary in 1859, when the fledgling church was less than two years old and still had only eleven members. Chamberlain recounts that his first salary was to be \$800 per year, with \$500 of that coming from the congregation and \$300 from the Congregational Missionary Society back East—we were a mission outpost in those days. He declined the Missionary Society money, believing that he should subsist well enough on what the church provided. The congregation actually came through with \$440 that year—he wryly notes that \$60 somehow “left the city”. But \$440 proved more than ample, since his annual room rent for two rooms above Judge Rice’s bank was \$50, and the cost of forty weeks’ board at the “second best hotel in the city” (doesn’t *that* make you wonder?) was \$50 for forty weeks, or \$1.25 per week! That’s 21 meals for \$1.25... yum! So annual room and board amounted to \$100.

Chamberlain soon got the new church, and the whole city, stirred up with a community Thanksgiving sermon condemning slavery—evidently he saved his “A” material for large gatherings and special occasions. But despite the controversy, or more likely *because* of it, Plymouth Church began to grow in numbers and enthusiasm. In June of 1863 Chamberlain approached the congregation with a plan to double the seating capacity of their 25’ X 44’¹ foot wooden cathedral by expanding it eight feet on each side at the exorbitant cost of \$328. The church thought such a vision well beyond their means, and the pastor left for vacation with the matter unresolved.

But when he returned there was a movement underway, quite literally, to move the building from its initial site at 5th and Court on rented ground to a plot the church would purchase near an orchard at what would become 7th and Locust. They agreed also to enlarge the building, if the pastor would take charge of raising the money for the land and the expansion. He agreed, and it cost them dearly! Remember, this was the same guy who got the whole congregation out-singing the choir. They quickly raised \$700 for the new lot, and before they had finished in less than a year had contributed \$2,000 to the enterprise. They should have settled at \$328! Chamberlain remarks, “So strong are a feeble folk, when their hearts are in the work.” He saw to that right well, I imagine.

For many years Plymouth has had the image of being a congregation of movers and shakers, business leaders, professionals and influential folks who shape Des Moines. Certainly that was true even early on. But it also seems evident to me that Plymouth has never been a congregation that was carried financially by just a few wealthy individuals. There are such churches, to be sure, in which a handful of people contribute heavily and call the shots. But we seem to rely on a broader base of giving than most churches our size.

¹ These are Chamberlain’s numbers. Other accounts say the church was 26’X42’. Whatever!

I was talking with Alden Hebard about this some time ago, and he said something very astute—of course. He observed that Plymouth has always had a congregation that was very active in the community and engaged in a lot of things. When you glance over the donor lists for local colleges and charities, the symphony, public radio and television, a lot of Plymouth names jump off the page. We have tended to be people who spread their giving around, as opposed to having a lot of people who tithe to the church. That made some sense to me. And it may have been true for some time.

In 1876 we broke ground on a new church building across the street from the one of which Chamberlain wrote.² The new gothic edifice cost \$37,000 and was completed in 1877. This was six years into the twenty-eight year pastorate of A.L. Frisbie. Frisbie later commended the folks for paying off the project in a timely manner. But he was here a long time, and I haven't been able to tell for certain exactly how long it took.

In 1902 a new building went up at 8th and Pleasant, at a cost of \$115,000.³ The Reverend Francis J. Van Horn was here in those days, and between following a twenty-eight year legend in Frisbie and putting up a new building, he had a disappointingly short pastorate of less than four years. The fundraising brochure for that project declared the intention to subscribe it in full before construction was complete. But they didn't, and mention of the debt continues into accounts of the pastorate of Van Horn's successor, Frank Hodgdon.

Buildings and debt go together like Forest and Jenny and peas and carrots. But the next phase of our life very nearly saw Plymouth Church engulfed in a perfect financial storm. We built on the present site of 42nd and Ingersoll by beginning with the church school wing in 1925. The cornerstone for the sanctuary was laid in December of 1926, and the sanctuary was dedicated on November 20, 1927, just about eighty years ago. Total cost of the project was \$475,000. We received \$190,000 from the city for the 1902 building that was removed to build Keosauqua Way. A bunch of money was raised, but \$173,000 in debt was incurred.

That debt didn't seem unreasonable for a large and potentially growing congregation in 1927. But almost immediately upon the arrival of Stoddard Lane in October of 1929 the stock market crashed, foreshadowing what we now call the Great Depression.

Things got tighter and tighter. Staff was reduced. The director of religious education was let go and the work taken over without pay by Stella Lane, Stoddard's wife. In 1931 we could not meet our denominational obligation of \$6,500 for the mission Apportionment.⁴ A committee studied the matter and recommended it be reduced to \$4,500; and we couldn't pay even that. In 1937 the original indebtedness on the building

² The cornerstone from this building, by the way, is still with us. It is mounted in the Atrium in the east entrance to the 2003 addition.

³ Yes, we have the cornerstone from that one, too. It is just off the Tower Room outside the west transept of the sanctuary, where the stairway leads down to the Plymouth Nursery School. It reads "1901." The building was dedicated in 1902.

⁴ There is no such thing as an "Apportionment" in the United Church of Christ today, but that's what it was called in the 1930's.

was refinanced, lowering the interest rate from 5.5% to 3.5% and extending the payments out to 1947; and we could not honor even that reduced obligation. It was grim.

It didn't get better overnight. There's a 1941 letter in the archives from a Trustee to Stoddard Lane demanding that a Congregational Meeting be held to inform the membership about the dire condition of the finances, judged by the writer to be even worse than when the debt had had to be refinanced. In May of 1943 Stoddard Lane died. Things had still not definitively turned around.

When Fred Meek came in November of 1943, he brought with him a determination to envision life in all its dimensions after World War II: globally, in terms of a new relationship among nations; nationally, in terms of our economy and social conditions; and in the church, in terms of the debt. He helped set in motion a plan to eliminate the debt which finally saw the mortgage burned in 1951, during the pastorate of Charles Houser, more than a quarter century after construction was begun on this site.

We've undertaken three major building renovations since, most recently with the \$10 million project that has involved two capital campaigns. The thing of it is that finances have never been easy at Plymouth Church. But J.M. Chamberlain had it right all along: "So strong are a feeble folk, when their hearts are in the work."

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be, also." (Matthew 6:21) But the converse is true, as well: "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be, also." A long succession of faithful folk have had their hearts in the work of this place, present company very much included, and the finances have followed.

We have been at our best when our response to financial challenges has been tied to our sense of gratitude for all that God has done for us and through us. Like the author of Psalm 65, we feel joy in coming together as a people of God: "Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple." "We will be satisfied": those are powerful words in an age in which we're never supposed to be satisfied.

The psalmist sings of how God is revealed in the great majesties of nature, awe-inspiring scenes of mountains and oceans in which all the peoples of earth experience a sense of the holy. But in the third and final section of the psalm, the author goes on to describe God as an ongoing and intimate part of our lives, as essential to our well-being as water is to all living things. There is a series of lovely, almost sensual images of the nearness of God caressing the earth with rain: "You visit the earth and water it... you water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth." I love that picture of the sharp ridges of the plowed earth being smoothed with life-giving rain, providing a soft bed to nurture the growing seed. God is that near, that immediate, that constant to the psalmist.

And God is that near, that immediate, that constant to us, too, when we stop for a while and think about it. The psalmist says that in response to this loving visitation from God the earth bedecks itself: "... the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy." In response to the nearness of God, all creation gussies up as for a party. What a lovely image! What a sense of delight in life! What a cause for generous thanksgiving. That's what we're like when

we're at our best, joyously responding to God. "So strong are a feeble folk, when their hearts are in the work."

There's an opportunity before us right now to pause and to think about our blessings—the rich heritage that is ours in this place and the boundless promise and challenge that are before us. The Refounding meetings we are organizing today represent an opportunity for us to gather in groups similar in size to the first eleven who founded Plymouth Church in 1857. In these small groups we will do three things: share briefly our own stories of coming to Plymouth and what we cherish about this faith community; view a 22 minute DVD featuring Alden Hebard telling our Plymouth history; and identify in conversation the enduring essence of this place to suggest three or fewer new ministry initiatives that will help us become more deeply, truly and effectively the very special church we are called to be.

In Waveland Hall today there are signup lists for these Refounding meetings that will be held from November 3 through November 11. I'm asking you to go by there and to sign up to participate in a meeting: to invest 90 minutes of your life in deepening your involvement with our birthday and making this a better church. Some of these meetings will be in the church building. Some of them will be in people's homes. Some will be during the day, some in the evening, some on the weekend. We have more than thirty-five different times and places to choose from. But you have to actually go in there and sign up. Then at the big 150th Anniversary celebration on December 2 we will announce up to three new ministry initiatives that grew out of the meetings in which *you* participated, and you will feel so good about that!

That's how we can celebrate the past and move forward in faith all at the same time. That's how we can praise God like the meadows that "shout and sing together for joy."

"So strong are a feeble folk, when their hearts are in the work."

Amen

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