

“God’s Pleasure”

A couple of generations ago Harry Emerson Fosdick, founding Minister of the Riverside Church in New York City and a weekly network radio presence on the NBC radio program, “The National Protestant Pulpit,” preached a sermon entitled, “The Ideas That Use Us.” Fosdick observed that ideas are the ultimate parasites. They have no life of their own. Either they find adherents in each new generation, or they die out. An idea with no one to carry it forward simply ceases to be.

Fosdick went on to say that each of us sustains particular ideas with his or her life. Each of us stands for something, represents something, shows forth something to the world. This might be intentional or unintentional. It might be something like “Honesty is the best policy” or “Do unto others before they do unto you.” It might be “Nothing can separate us from God’s love” or “All Christians are hypocrites.” But it will be something. We have no choice over whether our lives will represent *something*. But what will it be? What will our lives say to the world? What will be the ideas that use us? Therein lies the choice of a lifetime.

If this is true for individuals, it is equally true for institutions like churches. We are never more than one generation away from extinction. We carry forward and pass on the spirit of this place from one generation to the next. People rise up from out of nowhere to become central figures in our collective history. Their lives embody the key ideals and foundational principles that bring us together. *We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve.* Unless we let such ideas use us, unless our lives embody such principles, those principles will die out.

Unfortunately, but unavoidably, we tend to tell the story of churches like Plymouth in terms of ministers and buildings. This makes sense on one level. Ministers and buildings create a clear chronology and bring a sense of order to the story. But ministers come and go while the community of the church continues. And buildings are merely a tool for ministry; it is what happens in and through them that is the real story of faith passed on from generation to generation.

The psalmist reminds us that faith must always be made new: “Sing to the LORD a new song, [God’s] praise in the assembly of the faithful,” admonishes Psalm 149. This must happen in each generation: a new song, fresh and vibrant to proclaim the old, old story. We come to faith the same way we fall in love, convinced that this has never really happened to anybody before, and certainly not to our parents. We sing to the LORD a new song, and thus we renew the faith of our ancestors. We praise God’s name with dancing, with tambourine and lyre and drums and bass and synthesizer, we chant and shout and rap out our praise as the godly ideas that use us find voice in song.

And then there is this: “... for the LORD takes pleasure in [the] people; God adorns the humble with victory.” During the time of the Babylonian exile, when there no longer was a Jerusalem Temple to which the faithful went to offer sacrifices, the Jewish

people began to gather in groups to study their sacred texts and to pray and to sing praises to God. They began to write down the things that were important to pass on. And the religious life of the people passed from rulers and kings and priests to the people themselves. “For the LORD takes pleasure in the people; [God] adorns the humble with victory.”

The psalm goes on to describe the work of the people in terms of battle: “Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples...” In commenting on this text, Clint McCann of Eden Seminary suggests that a better reading for what God’s people do, rather than “execute judgment” is “establish justice.” And the battle metaphor, as unwelcome as it sometimes is, nevertheless is an apt description of what it is like to try to do God’s will and to advocate for justice. God’s pleasure is in people who do this: “This is glory for all [God’s] faithful ones. Praise the LORD!” God’s praise is carried forth from one generation to the next as faithful people talk the talk and walk the walk... and sing a new song.

It has always been this way. As today we celebrate All Saints’ Day and remember the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us, we recall that it is ordinary folk in whom the faith takes root and flourishes in a such a rich variety of ways. We rejoice in the pleasure God takes in the people, and we remember some of their stories. Oh, the stories! If only these walls could talk!

But of course they can; or at least they whisper to us. Over here in the East Transept is a magnificent window of Jesus ascending. It was moved here from the old 8th and Pleasant church in 1927. Beneath it is a plaque that says simply, “Mr. and Mrs. A.Y. Rawson, Dr. and Mrs. Charles Rawson.” My initial thought about this window was that the Rawsons simply gave the money for it. That is interesting enough in itself, I suppose. But then I came across a picture from a Sunday School class in 1890, during the ministry of A.L. Frisbie and in the building at 7th and Locust (there we go with preachers and buildings again!). The photograph features a group of adults and adolescents all decked out in strange costumes as the cast of a play entitled, “The Ruggles Family.” It was Mrs. A.Y. Rawson’s class. She is in the picture. So is Charles Rawson. And so is Frank Cramer, who would later become the founder and superintendent of the Sunbeam Rescue Mission—more on that interesting enterprise next week. I had read that Plymouth early on had a reputation for progressive teaching methods in working with children and youth. We still do, by the way. And the walls remind us that our ongoing story is about more than plaques and stained glass, as wonderful as these things are. It is also about teachers and students and Sunday School experiences that blossom into mission and give praise to God.

Over on the other side of the sanctuary are some more interesting artifacts. We walk by a plaque in memory of Harry G. Wallace, who chaired the building committee when this building was built and then tended it with TLC for a couple more decades. We talked about Harry Wallace and Roger T. Stetson a few weeks ago. On down the outside aisle is a cherished part of Plymouth lore in the form of a plaque that reads,

TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF

EMMA W. WHISENAND,

WHOSE GENEROUS BEQUEST

ASSISTED IN CLEARING PLYMOUTH'S MORTGAGE.

It's dated when the window was dedicated, 1952, the year after the mortgage was burned.

As we've learned it and taught it around here the Emma Whisenand story is a wonderful tale. But we're beginning to wonder about it a little bit. If the story we know isn't exactly true it sure would be nice if it were, and here is how it goes.

Once upon a time, during the dark days of the Depression Plymouth struggled terribly with the crushing burden of debt on the building. All very true. There came a day of reckoning when the creditors demanded a meeting with church officials to begin the process that would result in the church losing the building. Things looked bleak, because the leadership had tried numerous times to raise more money from the congregation, but with ever-diminishing results. Also all true. Then on the eve of the meeting with the creditors a letter arrived from an attorney in California. A woman named Emma Whisenand, a former Plymouth member, had died childless in Los Angeles, and had named Plymouth Church as a residual beneficiary in her will. The pastor took the letter to the meeting with the creditors, and with the promise of money coming in they agreed to delay taking action against the church.

It took a while—several months—for the will to be executed and the details to become known. During the interval things improved a bit, to the extent that we at least began making payments on the interest on the debt. And when the check for the bequest finally arrived, it contained \$200. But by this time the storm was over and the widow's mite—or the promise of the widow's mite—had saved the day.

This is a wonderful story, and it preaches magnificently about how every contribution matters and how a seemingly simple thing like remembering the church in your will can make a huge difference that has an impact across untold generations. That's a great point, by the way, and I encourage you to hold onto it. But there are a few problems with this account.

One of them is that Emma Whisenand didn't die until 1944, when finances had picked up enough that there was a plan being devised, under the leadership of Dr. Frederick Meek, to pay off the debt once and for all. And the plaque doesn't say that she saved the church exactly, just that she contributed to the retirement of the debt. And we now think that "generous" probably means something well beyond \$200, although \$200 or even \$2 can certainly be generous.

But the even more interesting thing is that there is a tribute to Emma Wellslager Whisenand in the archives, written by Lucy Lewis Schenk. Lucy recalls a much younger Emma Wellslager, who was her Sunday School teacher for several years—in those days teachers and classes advanced together. Emma Wellslager was born in 1864 and was active at Plymouth from a very early age. She was a graduate of Oberlin College, a fine Congregational School, and "...brought to her Sunday School class high ideals and

Christian faith.” Mrs. Schenk credits her Sunday School teacher with being of particular help as a guide through the adolescent years. She describes the delight the class took when Miss Wellslager was married in 1895 to Mr. Whisenand whom she describes as an “older person” (28?) and the President of the Central State Bank. Mr. Whisenand died in 1914. Emma moved to California in 1920, but she visited Des Moines frequently and never forgot her ties to Plymouth Church.

And so Mrs. Schenk writes of her, “The Wellslager family represent that long line of Congregational people who built up Plymouth and have given us the torch of liberal thought and world wide outlook now held by the church body.” “The torch of liberal thought and world wide outlook”: now there’s a precious legacy, no matter what the amount and timing of the Emma Whisenand bequest!

Not all the talking walls are in the room here. Whenever All Saints’ Day rolls around I think about Dr. James McMillan. Jim had a tremendous love for Plymouth Church, and a real feel for this business of passing the torch along from generation to generation. He was a major force behind the establishment of the Plymouth Foundation, which exists to support the work and ministry of Plymouth Church. At the time of his sudden death in April of 1995, Jim McMillan was the only president the Foundation Board had ever had. Just outside these doors on the way to coffee hour is a donor plaque that recalls Jim’s “vision and foresight,” his “enthusiasm and persistence,” his “leadership and generosity.” Jim’s estate gift to the Foundation had a huge impact in making it into the force for good that it has become in the life of Plymouth Church, and set an example for others of us to follow.

So it’s more than preachers and buildings. It is the people of God who give God pleasure by doing God’s work in so many different ways: as teachers and caregivers and advocates for justice; through generosity of time, talent, treasure and spirit. It’s about stories we know and stories we will never know. And it’s about the stories of faithfulness we have yet to live.

“For the LORD takes pleasure in the people.” All the people.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
(515) 255-3149

Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM

Fax: 515-255-8667

E-mail: druhe@plymouthchurch.com