

FOUR PLYMOUTH FREEDOMS

Thank you, friends in Christ, for having Donna and me back to share in today's part of your extremely well-planned and appropriate celebration of Plymouth Church's first 150 years of service to God and people.

One month from today I will begin my 80th year. Those of you who are also now old-timers will especially appreciate the great joy I receive from your continuing growth and faithfulness. You truly have become one of the great progressive churches, not only in our denomination, but in our nation. To be able to boast this year of our first great-grandchild, and of you as our faith heirs is sweet indeed. Our cup does "runneth over"!

What was it like here in 1857?

Iowa had just been admitted to the Union in 1846, part of a compromise between the slaveholding South and the free North. Growth was accelerating, up from about 192,000 in 1850 to nearly 675,000 in 1860. The Encyclopedia Britannica says, "The years immediately prior to the Civil War were Iowa's frontier days, however, with lawlessness, vigilantes, and lynching accompanying the unsteady beginnings of a settled society."

Des Moines, in 1857, had 3500 residents. And in spite of the state capitol moving here from Iowa City that same year, it was a rugged place to live. Even sixteen years later, when At. L. Frisbie, the new pastor, went back East to fetch his new wife, he told her,

I'm afraid you won't like Des Moines. It's very rough and unfinished; the houses are small, and you never saw mud as you will see there! Our church building is small, dingy and shabby. It's all very unlike an Eastern city, but I think you'll like the people, and I'm proud of the women in my church.

Well it was on this first Sunday of December, 1857, that ten of those "likable" people—five men and five women—met in a small room above "Mr. Alien's Bank" at 4th and Court to adopt "Articles of Government", "Articles of Faith", and their "Covenant". Another man was present, and after the signing he too was accepted as a member. The membership increased by 10% the first day!

And out of that day, with many extreme trials and testings over a century and a half, developed a set of values and traditions that we, their benefactors, celebrate and rededicate ourselves to today. Among them I have chosen four that I think are particularly worthy of your appraisal and support. They are Four Freedoms.

First, Freedom of the Pulpit.

The sixth item under Articles of Government adopted on December 6, 1857 was Admission of Members. And under that was this:

All applicants for admission to this Church, will be required to give satisfactory evidence that they are neither in theory or practice Slaveholders.

When the second pastor, J. M. Chamberlain, arrived in 1859 he believed they really meant it and shortly delivered a "strong" sermon denouncing slavery as morally wrong. The historian of the time reported:

The uncompromising stand highly offended some of the "more important" people of the congregation. As one parishioner told his wife. "It's all over with Plymouth Church. He has killed it, and we might as well give up."

When the Civil War broke out, actually the stand of "that abolitionist church" became respected, and resulted in membership growth, plus the return of several of those "more important" people who had left.

Let me share with you a very precious memory from my ministry with you.

W. T. Dahl, who died in June, 2006, aged 97, was the founder of his store chain and a generous supporter--of Plymouth. My first pastoral visit with him was late in my first year. Right off he let me know, "I don't want my preacher messing in politics." I replied that if he meant trying to apply the Christian faith to public life, he was probably going to be unhappy with me. "But," I said, "I know how hard you have worked to apply your principle of providing stores that serve people. I pledge to you that I will be just as dedicated in my calling to apply the gospel for the good of all people. I hope that you will come to respect me, and I promise that I will always respect you."

Our annual visits, usually in his office, continued for 16 years. Usually he had to grouse about something; it was just his nature. After he acknowledged the need for more women in major leadership positions, it was "But I don't want them taking over!" The same after he finally acknowledged the rights of homosexuals: "But I don't want them taking over our church!"

It was about my 13th year when W. T. said, "I don't know whether you're changing, or I'm changing, but you're beginning to make more sense." At the conclusion of our final visit, on the Friday before my last Sunday, he said, "Well, I'm glad you're leaving. You've cost me too much money." Then, as I was in the doorway, "You were good for me. You made me think about what I didn't want to think." I didn't tell W. T. that I loved him, but I think he knew. And I think he loved me.

Second, Freedom of the Pew.

The second item under Articles of Government was Rights of the Church.

This Church claims the right of self government and holds itself amenable to no other ecclesiastical body except by its own consent.

This is an institutional expression of that classic Protestant "priesthood of all believers." No authority is recognized as being over the congregation of believers. No intermediary is required between the believer and God. And the corollary to that is that the believers have to commit themselves to extraordinary faithfulness and discipline to manage both their church and their lives. If ecclesiastical authorities are to be kept out both the boardroom and the bedroom, then faithful and enlightened self government are essential.

And with that kind of lay members Plymouth has always been blessed. It all started with two laymen, George Green of Detroit, and Samuel Stacy of Madison, WI meeting in 1855 on the train between Chicago and Rock Island. Both were 'catching the stage coach to Des Moines, with the purpose of inspecting it as a potential place to -move. Finding that they

both were members of Congregational Churches, they resolved if they and their families did move to Des Moines, they would see that a Congregational Church was started. Start it did; and with tens of thousands of Sams and Georges, and Kaes and Sandies moving it ahead in every generation.

Third, Freedom of Mind.

A. L. Frisbee was pastor from 1870-1899. Invited back to preach in 1905, he reflected on his ministry.

It was not my thought that my business in the pulpit would be to retail what those wise men, my professors, told me. Some things were approved; some hotly rejected, for it seemed to me that I had learned things better than some dogmas affirmed... I was not ready to accept an authority and to save a system or any doctrine which seemed to me contrary to common sense and natural justice.

Well, you can fill in a lot of blanks there, can't you, in this day of outrageous religious claims and behaviors, based on perversions of history and ignorance of science, that jar the conscience and boggle the mind. Freedom of Mind is what John Robinson, the Pilgrim's pastor had;

The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.

Freedom of Mind is what James Russell Lowell immortalized:

New occasions teach new duties, Time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still and onward, Who would keep abreast of truth.

Fourth, Freedom of Love (with God's kind of love).

And what is God's kind of love?

It is the Father of the Prodigal running down the lane freely, to welcome home his wastrel son. It is the Good Samaritan, freely ignoring all boundaries of class and clan and creed to help another in need.

It is the meaning of Salvation; being saved from the ravages of one's own self-absorption. It is the meaning of Redemption; being redeemed from a life of cynicism and despair.

It is what you are about to this day: through your Worship services, your Christian Education, your Music and Fine Arts, your Center for Spiritual Growth, your Fellowship organizations and events, your Stephen Ministry, your Support Groups, your Pastoral Counseling, your Community outreach, your World outreach. All of it is toward the purpose of freeing us **from** our self-absorption and the waste of our lives. It is all to free us for the joyous discovery that we are, or could be saved from that. We are, or could be, redeemed from that. It is so that we are, or could be, freed to be Savers and Redeemers, filled with God's kind of love—true lovers of each other, of all people, of all creation.

Do you know what I've learned about the church in 79 years? It is all about enabling all of us to experience God's kind of love. It's not about having a great institution with huge membership and awesome facilities. It's about being a community of seekers, Pilgrims, who help each other experience God's kind of love through their life in the church, and then want to share it in the world.

I think that's what A. L. Frisbie meant when he said,

The Christian life which promises anything good must be an outreaching to the world in a ministry of love.

I think that's what Stoddard Lane meant when he said,

**We agree to differ,
We resolve to love,
We unite to serve.**

The words carved in wood above our altar say, **Love Never Faileth**. Have you thought much about that? It can't mean human love never fails, because it does. We all, in some ways, have experienced that.

One Lenten season the Fine Arts Committee suspended a huge cross above the altar. But one of the unintended consequences was that it blocked out the middle word. So there it was, an accidental acknowledgment of our human condition. **Our Love Faileth.**

What a relief it was when Easter came that year and that cross was removed! You can go just so long with no hope. For the loss of hope is the loss of our passion for freedom. But Plymouth has always been a church of hope, that believes in Freedom of Pulpit, Freedom of Pew, Freedom of Mind, Freedom to Love (with God's kind of love).

May that spirit, that Holy Spirit, continue to guide and inspire you, in your generation, as in the past. God bless you all. Amen.

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