KIT: First, let me just say that no, you are not seeing things. And no, you did not pull a Marty McFly and drive your DeLorean time machine down Ingersoll Avenue this morning. They’re really back!

It’s an honor to welcome back old friends to Plymouth this weekend, some of whom are new friends to some of us. I have to admit I’ve been looking forward to this weekend like a bookworm preteen waiting desperately for the next Harry Potter book: Finally, the return of these characters in robes I’ve come to feel like I know so much about! What mischief and magic are they up to now?

This weekend we celebrate going-on ten years of Transition-into-Ministry here at Plymouth Church. Wow. People don’t usually round up their age, but if you include the years of prayerful planning and grant-writing, this congregation has been committed to calling and nurturing young first-call ministers for nearly a decade. That’s pretty remarkable.

The Transition-into-Ministry Program (or “TiM,” because who doesn’t love a cute acronym?) is a salaried 27-month residency program for recent seminary graduates. We arrive both fresh-faced and fully credentialed, sort of like Medical Residents, only swap out scrubs for stoles and prescriptions for prayers. And then we get to continue learning-by-doing in all arenas of church ministry—all while still occasionally getting mistaken for members of the Matins choir.
We are in a season of celebration here at Plymouth. But we come together not out of nostalgia or self-congratulation but to give thanks to God, and reflect on how we might make this program sustainable for the future... for those next generations of churches and leaders God is getting ready to work through. So maybe today is a bit of a Marty McFly moment after all—we look back as a church in order to look together into our future.

CORINNE: As the newest arrival of this group here at Plymouth Church, my first impressions are still quite fresh. I got here in June and was amazed by everything going on around here! I didn’t even know where to start. And then...September came. I quickly realized that I had been seeing the slow season at Plymouth, and I wondered, with all of these classes and committees and events, how anyone kept track of what went on around here.

But then I remembered. We say it at every worship service here: our mission as a church is to grow in love of God and neighbor. How beautifully simple. All these moving parts, all this activity, everything we do here is meant to point us toward the Greatest Commandment, as we hear Jesus say in our scripture for today. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus takes the entirety of the Law— and distills it into those two simple commandments.

I think it’s pretty crafty of Jesus to have done that, and it’s pretty crafty for us to claim it here as our mission as well. When we have a list of rules to follow, it’s easy to think we’ve done our job if we’ve checked all the boxes. But loving God and loving neighbor? We are always learning how to do these things more fully. And I find myself thinking about ministry that way as well. I have a practice of coming in on Monday morning and creating a list of tasks, things I need to get done during the week to feel like I’ve done my job around here. But I’ve found that the number of boxes I check off that list has no bearing on how much ministry I’ve done that week. Because ministry is helping others to grow in love of God and neighbor, and growing in love of God and neighbor myself. And a weekly checklist can’t quantify that. We’ll never get it perfect, but we become a community as we attempt to do these things together. The Greatest Commandment is aspirational. As we live into it, we are changed.

CAMERON: David has been heard saying that in 20 years of ministry here Plymouth has changed him at least as much as he’s changed Plymouth. I
presume that statement is true both because I’ve learned to trust David and because I know how much Plymouth changed me in only two years here.

When I came here I thought that ministry was something that the church was asking me to do myself. In my ignorance and inexperience, ministry was defined in my head as a multitude of discrete tasks. Ministry is visiting people. Ministry is preaching. Ministry is program development. I’m not sure how my conception of ministry changed, but I suppose that it gradually occurred to me that whenever I experienced real ministry happening there were always other people around. So ministry must not be so much about these things I have to do as these people I have to be with.

Week after week I stood in that lectern and proclaimed the purpose of our church, “to increase the love of God and neighbor.” Those words are a paraphrase of our text for today. Jesus tells us that the essence of our faith is this: to love God with all our hearts, souls, strength and mind; and to love our neighbors as ourselves. But it took many months of living with you to understand that our church and its ministry is all about the relationships that we’re sharing. Our ministry is about knowing the relationship that God already has with us and living that relationship out with other people. It’s okay that it took me a while to get it. It’s a tough lesson to learn, and we have our whole lifetimes to practice.

KIT: Plymouth is a “Teaching and Learning” Congregation. Education is one of our “core values.” The Lilly Foundation in Indianapolis must have noticed this, when they first wrote David a letter over a decade ago suggesting that we consider applying for a grant to start this TiM program. They saw in this place potential for growing young ministers, the potential to be a center for theological learning and the formation for future leaders at the beginning of their ministry.

Now there’s nothing as daunting as doing something for the very first time—I’ve often lamented having to be a beginner. It can be awkward, full of false starts and self-consciousness.

But when I think back to all those times I felt like a beginner…

The first baby I baptized—Okay, babies—they was twins!
The first time I was in the room for a death.
The first “by the power vested in me” wedding proclamation.
The first time I led a group of people to a country where travel is banned by the U.S. government. Okay, the only time so far.
These were all incredibly holy moments.
But there’s also a unique grace to being a beginner. It’s a holy position. It takes courage, but it is also empowering. Zen Buddhists call it “beginner’s mind.” It’s that sharpened pencils on the first day of school feeling. It’s that edge of the high dive moment. The clean slate, the blank page, scary but free, full of infinite chances. It’s not comfortable to be a beginner, but it’s fertile soil for growth.

To my continual frustration, this deeper learning and growing doesn’t happen all at once or in clean, measurable bursts. It happens slowly, often imperceptibly, like one of those time lapse videos from nature documentaries of flowers opening. Slow, patient, growth. Nothing short of a miracle. That’s the kind of growth God works through us in our communities.

**CAMERON:** We’ve said that Plymouth is a “teaching and learning church.” That’s true, but not so much in the way of didactic instruction. I learned ministry here not in a lecture hall or seminar classroom, but through the worship of God and my relationships with 3,200 faithful neighbors. I was learning all along the way, in board meetings and staff meetings; in visits to hospital rooms and bedsides; in Stepping Stones and service projects. The teaching and learning and growing that happens around here occurs when hearts are transformed by our relationships with God and each other.

Consider the most meaningful ministry that you’ve been part of here at Plymouth Church. I suspect each of we eight TiM ministers would report that the most meaningful ministry we’ve undertaken here had less do with the things we did than with the people we did them with. Anthony’s reckless abandon with the youth comes to mind. Stephanie and Jeannette’s leadership with the Stephen Ministers. This choir is as much a laboratory for living together as it is a place to learn how to sing. Less important was what David taught me, though he taught me a lot, than how David and I tried to love each other. So I don’t doubt that Plymouth has changed him because I know how the relationships I had here changed me. This place is something of a school; and God has a funny way of instruction.

**CORINNE:** What we have all learned here at Plymouth doesn’t just stay within these walls. We take what we have learned from all of you, and we move on after two years to another community. Aaron, Anissa, Stephanie, Jeanette, Anthony, and Cameron have all finished their tenures at Plymouth and are
ministering in churches across the country, and in time Kit and I will as well. When we leave this place, we get to bring all we’ve learned about growing in love of God and neighbor to a new group of people – who will in turn teach us as well. It’s a little like throwing a stone into a pond. We’re taken from our seminary cocoons and thrown out into the world, and the first place we all hit was Plymouth. All that we have learned here ripples out into all the places we go from here. It ripples out to Boston and Hudson and Canton. It ripples out to Dundee and Maquoketa and Grinnell. The love of this congregation touches hundreds of people with its ripples.

But we, these eight young robed ministers, are just the most visible stones thrown into the pond. In fact, all of us are stones. Everyone here leaves this building and goes out into the world, bringing a call to grow in love of God and neighbor. We are called to be students of the Greatest Commandment, and we are called to be teachers of it as well. What we practice inside the walls of this building ripples out into our schools and workplaces and neighborhoods and communities.

KIT: For the love that grows in this very room isn’t meant to stay here. It’s meant to be shared! And when we share the good news of God’s love for all people, we ALL find ourselves growing into our own callings, again and again, as if for the very first time. The poet T.S. Eliot put it this way:

“We shall not cease from our explorations
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

“Ripple Liturgy”

KIT: I’d like to invite you to grab the hand or touch the shoulder of someone standing directly next to you, so that two of you are connected. And know that by sharing worship with this person today, your lives have touched one another’s.
CORINNE: Now I would invite you to join hands across your rows. In sharing worship with everyone in your row this morning, you have shared God’s love with one another.

CAMERON: And now I’d like to invite you to join across the aisles and between rows, joining together as one worshiping body. God’s love ripples out from each of us to touch so many lives, and we stand together now as the body of Christ, united to grow in love.

ALL: Amen.