

**“A House Where All Are Welcome”**

**I Chronicles 29.1–9 and Luke 12.48b**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 26 March 2006**

David was one rich dude. According to the reading from I Chronicles, he gave 3,000 talents of gold. For those of you who don't have your talent-to-pound algorithm handy, that's 112.5 tons of gold. The current price of gold is about \$550 an ounce. So, the legendary king gave the equivalent of \$2 billion in gold alone for the construction of the temple. And then he gives another \$2.8 billion in silver. *So, David wasn't just rich: he was generous.*

I like to think of this story as the ancient Israelite equivalent of a capital campaign, and David was there to provide those key leadership gifts to get the campaign rolling. Then he does what we're about to do: he turns to the folks who are around him and says, “Now, it's your turn!” “Who then will offer willingly, consecrating themselves today to the Lord?” *David isn't going to complete the capital campaign alone.* And how do the leaders respond? They “made their freewill offerings, as did also the leaders of the tribes, the commanders...and the officers over the king's work. They gave for the service of the house of God 5,000 talents of gold and 10,000 darics of gold 10,000 talents of silver,” or about \$7 billion. None of us does it alone, not even David.

I don't know if all those figures are precise. After all, that's a lot of metal: over 1,300 tons of gold and silver alone! (To put it in perspective that's about a third of the U.S. gold reserves in Fort Knox.) What I *do* know is that this story tells us the **inestimable abundance** God has provided.

If you've been around here for awhile, you've probably heard me talk about abundance. Now, before you say that *you don't have a couple talents of gold laying around the house*, think about this: you live in the wealthiest society the world has ever known, and many of us comprise a privileged cross-section of the wealthiest nation.

The key question is *How do we use the abundance that God has entrusted to us?* It may be difficult for us to hear the voice of Jesus saying, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

We've been given a lot of resources (even if we don't necessarily feel that way all the time), and it's up to us to discern how we put them to use.

In the Jewish tradition of the *Mishnah Torah*, there are eight degrees of giving of *tsedakah*. (*Tsedekh* is justice, and *tsedakah* is the act of charitable giving for justice.) Each level is higher than the last:

1. Those who give grudgingly, reluctantly, or with regret.
2. Those who give less than is fitting, but give graciously.
3. Those who give what is fitting, but only after being asked.
4. Those who give before being asked.
5. Those who give without knowing to whom, although the recipients know the identity of the donors.
6. Those who give without making their identity know to the recipients.
7. Those who give without know to whom, and neither do the recipients know from whom they will receive.
8. Those who help others by giving a gift or loan, or by making them business partners or finding them employment, thereby helping them dispense aid to others.

If we claim to be Open and Affirming, I think it's a pretty good thing to make our building accessible for persons with disabilities. And it's a pretty good thing to replace our roofs and make our facility more energy efficient. I also think it would be really cool if we could hold adult ed. forums without spilling out into coffee hour. Our evangelism committee wanted to meet this morning at 9:30, but we don't have any available space! So, they're gathering around a table in the fellowship hall. And it would be really cool if at least *half* of our 550 members could fit into a fellowship hall without violating the fire code. And then we have the choir who, like the Israelites, have been seeming to wander in the wilderness of our facility, moving from Sharon's office to the north wing hallway to the sanctuary and next summer to the East Room. When you have 40 choir members, it's time to give them their own space, don't you think? Maybe even a desk for our music staff and an appropriate place to store music, choir robes, and handbells?

Have you heard me talk about marble, onyx, or precious stones that will adorn Plymouth's walls? Have I said anything about lavish sanctuary seating? Have you heard me talk about becoming a mega-church?

Here something you may not expect me to say: *this campaign has very little to do with bricks and mortar*. It's not about how many dollars we raise. It's not even about growing an endowment for mission.

This campaign is about ensuring that there is ***a progressive Christian voice in northern Colorado***. With all due respect to my clergy colleagues, none of them challenged the fundamentalist claims you read about in the *Coloradoan*. How many not only provide but articulate an open welcome to GLBT folks? How many churches in Fort Collins protested the lopsided national budget that penalized the poor on behalf of the rich? If you don't think Plymouth's voice has been, is, and will continue to be essential in this community, guess again. We have a distinctive call.

This campaign is about ensuring that there is a place of Christian worship that proclaims, "***No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here.***" I am convinced that the need to worship is a basic human desire. And I also maintain that many unchurched Americans are worshipping something other than God.

***Do you think Plymouth is on the right path?*** We need to be a community that continues to be welcoming and growing. When Plymouth was gathered in 1903, Fort Collins's population was about 5,000. In 1959, when Plymouth moved into this building the population was just under 25,000. In 1980 when we added the North Wing, the city's population was 65,000. And today we are a small metropolis with almost twice as many inhabitants as we had in 1980.

In the next five years, the population of Larimer County is expected to grow by 20,000 people. Will our congregation welcome people or turn them away for lack of room? Will we be a congregation that focuses inward on ourselves and rests on our laurels, or will we be a community that looks for new ways to stretch ourselves and grow? Will we continue to be an incubator for community groups that call our facilities home? To put it another way, borrowing from Emerson, will we be the establishment or will we be the movement?

You and I don't know who is going to join Plymouth in the next 10 years. Our growth has certainly exceeded my expectations. All you need to do is look at some of the other UCC congregations in our area to see that *vitality is not a given*. We need to participate with God to make it happen, inviting in people who never knew a church like ours even exists.

***We are called to practice the eighth degree of tzedekah***, not knowing to whom we will give, and those recipients will not know us or our generosity. Just as we don't know all

of those who raised the roof and affixed these planks and arches, and very few of them remain to know us 45 years later. Those *Volgadeutsch* Congregationalists practiced even the eighth degree of tzedekah, creating a system and conditions that enable us to “dispense aid to others.”

Henry Adams once made a wonderful remark about education: “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” And I would say that to our forebears in the faith: *You can never tell where your influence stops.*

I think this campaign is a chance for us to touch the future. It is a chance for us to affect the spiritual lives of generations to come. This is your opportunity to touch eternity: ***You can never tell where your influence stops.***

Kat Townes, who was with us briefly last fall, started a Masters program in Spanish at CSU and then switched gears and heeded the call to ordained ministry. She is now at the UCC’s Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, and last week she sent this message in an email: “Plymouth was, in many ways, an inspiring vision for me of what church *could* be, and I just wanted to say thank you for sharing your prophetic and compassionate Christian voice with me during my short stay in Fort Collins.”

About a month ago, the Young UCC Adults (YUCCAs) led worship for us and they posed a question for us to consider, and then record on the construction paper bricks you see here this morning. I want to read you a few:

***Why are you here? What does Plymouth mean to you?***

- a chance to make a difference in the world
- Plymouth is our second home and family. Here we find God’s love passed from person to person.
- traditional, yet very progressive
- my child loves it here
- mind-stretching ideas and soul-stretching experiences
- building a relationship with God.
- allows me to think for myself
- because no matter where I go in life, I will have a home
- to praise God for all the blessings
- community of love
- to grow spiritually and act for peace and justice
- a special place to worship God – it is a shelter and a community that accepts all.
- it recharges me each week.
- to participate in a community committed to the unity of God’s love and mystery
- to find peace
- a living, faithful, progressive UCC congregation
- for feeling close to God
- the people, the spirit, the love
- community
- to remember all the gifts I have.

One card in particular caught my attention because it was jam-packed, and it looked as if it had been written by one of our young people:

- to celebrate that God made us
- to celebrate God
- to make me and everyone else happy
- because I love God

- because I feel safe
- because I feel welcomed
- I feel comforted
- because I am not afraid to talk about God at school
- I'm not scared anymore
- because I feel happy

To close, I would like to share a prayer that I came across last week, written by Rabbit Shawn Zevit:

“Dearest source of life  
You are in us a longing for each other  
You are in us a striving for Self  
“Build for me a sacred dwelling place  
And I will dwell among you,” the Torah states.  
And so the longing that is I  
And so the longing that is WE  
Come together in holy endeavor  
To create a life and a home  
Where the resources we are blessed with  
Great or small, temporary or ongoing  
Are directed and organized with an open heart  
That you may dwell in the space within and between us  
As we journey through these days  
May we bring you home  
In the flow of resources  
In our hearts and through our hands.”  
Amen.