

“We Give You But Your Own”

1 Chronicles 29.10–20

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 2 April 2006

One of the really wonderful parts of the last few weeks has been hearing about great experiences you've had visiting each other as part of our *Live the Faith: Build the Future* campaign. (One visitor told me this week that he kept hearing two messages: 1) that people are really pleased with what's happening at Plymouth and 2) that they'd like to sing more familiar hymns. That's always a tough one, because not all of us grew up with the Pilgrim Hymnal!)

You probably know the story of the widow's mite, which is told in both Mark's and Luke's gospel. Here is Luke's version: “He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.’”

We didn't have an exact repeat of this story at Plymouth, but there were stories of people who really dug deep and gave sacrificially. Bishop Fulton Sheen said something like “Generosity is not measured so much by how much one has given, as by what is left after the gift is made.” And I was deeply moved by folks giving beyond just their abundance.

I was moved by one of our earliest pledges, which came from a high school student. I was amazed by the surprise gift of the organ. I was touched deeply by the commitments of our leadership gifts team, who shared their pledges with one another. I was also moved by the tremendous gifts of time we have received from a wide range of people who have worked together on this campaign. The dedication and talent of this team is incredible! Saying thank you is woefully inadequate, but I am truly grateful to each of you who helped this campaign succeed.



Back to our story: David is entirely aware that in all those talents of gold and silver we heard about last week, he isn't presenting them so much as a gift to God, as he is returning them to their source. He remarks, “all that is in the heavens and on earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O lord, and you are exalted above all...For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. (Sound familiar? “We give you but your own, what e'er the gift may be...”) “All this abundance we have provided for building you a house comes from your hand and is all your own.”

From what I've observed, many of us around Plymouth are beginning to understand and internalize that message: that whatever we have derives from God. And those things are entrusted to us – temporarily – as stewards of God's abundance.

So, if we're simply giving back to God what was already his, does that mean that we're not really generous? Hardly! Even in David's day, the offerings were made by *free will*, not by mandate. (Given that April 15 is right around the corner, imagine if the federal government had to raise money this way! Here is your 1040, and you can just include a freewill offering on line 36. It could really simplify things!)



I spent some time reflecting this week on the process that led us to where we are today, because this campaign marks the start of a new era in Plymouth's history. We've come a long way since our congregation was gathered in 1903. And we've made some amazing leaps since this building was completed in 1959 and even since the North Wing was added in 1980.

When I arrived at Plymouth in the summer of 2002, the search committee told me that we needed to make significant renovations and upgrades to our facilities. They also told me that stewardship and evangelism needed to be priorities for our congregation.

I took those challenges and said that Plymouth needed a strategic plan. With the help of a great committee headed by Daryl Knoblock and assisted by Alice Mann, a renowned consultant who literally wrote the book on strategic planning in churches, we produced a strategic plan that was presented to the congregation over two years ago. What we heard from the congregation was that our vision was roughly to double our membership from 450 to 900. (And in the past two years, we've come 20 percent of the way.)

The strategic plan give us the programmatic roadmap that undergirded the facilities Master Planning process. Our Long-Range Planning Committee, again with Daryl Knoblock and then Marge Norskog at the helm, led this important step that helped us envision what our physical plant would look like when built-out.

We knew it would take money and a large measure of faith, so the Church Council commissioned the Capital Campaign Exploratory Committee, which was chaired by Betty Weber. They helped outline what funding would be required to help the congregation's vision come into reality. And last October we voted overwhelmingly to move forward with the campaign. In the meantime we started a planned giving program and an endowment – both firsts for Plymouth.

Larry McCulloch not only headed the planned giving effort, he agreed to lead our *Live the Faith: Build the Future* campaign. It's taken the work of around 100 of us as visitors, pray-ers, publicizers, event planner, and administrators to get us to this day. It's incredible!

Part of me is reminded of that Grateful Dead lyric, "What a long, strange trip it's been." And part of me just stands in awe. I'm in awe of you as a congregation, and I'm in awe of what God is doing with us in this place. I have seen us come so far in just a few years, and I don't see any signs of that slowing down (which is good...because the construction and renovation projects will present their own challenges).

As we celebrate, let us acknowledge that this was done not by our hands alone. The spirit of discernment has been a vital part of each phase of the process that has put us here today.

More than once...a lot more than once...I heard people say, "We can't raise a million dollars. Plymouth doesn't have that kind of money." And I heard people after the Hats off to Magic event, "I can't believe we've raised \$1.2 million."

Well...believe it. I'll let Larry tell you later just how much you all raised.

We have put our trust not in the stock market, not in a self-help guru, and not *just* in each other, but in God. We're doing this for the right reasons. We are living the faith, and together, we are now building the future.

Will you pray with me? God of greatest abundance and compassion, we are here today to celebrate the great things you are doing here at Plymouth. Remind us that the cosmos is yours, and all that is in it. Remind us that what we have is yours alone, and that you have entrusted it to us as temporary stewards. Remind us to live in faith, not in fear...to stand on the past as we build the future. Amen.