



“Where Do We Go from Here?”

Matthew 16:13-20; Acts 2:41-47

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May 2, 2010

Fourth Sunday after Easter
Plymouth Church Anniversary Sunday

In the first week of May 1847, a small group of people met at the home of Henry Bowen to form a new church in what we now know as Brooklyn Heights. Brooklyn’s population was 60,000 at the time, but growing rapidly.

America in 1847 was in the midst of the Mexican War in which the United States annexed what are now the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Both U. S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln believed that the war of aggression with the purpose of adding territory to the United States was both unjust and immoral. The dark and growing shadow of slavery hung over the young nation, threatening its very existence.

Plymouth Church was born into that world. By June 1847, the congregation formally incorporated with twenty-one members. They’d already purchased a church building from the Presbyterians and they called a rising young minister from Indianapolis, Henry Ward Beecher, to be their first minister.

The rest, as they say, is history. The congregation creatively adapted to its environment and succeeded beyond anyone’s imagination. Plymouth Church became the most famous American church in the 19th century and Rev. Beecher became the most famous man in America. Plymouth was a church that changed the world. When Mr. Beecher spoke, the White House listened – and the newspapers printed what he said.

For a century, Plymouth enjoyed being an important part of what is called the Protestant Establishment. The Protestant majority set the moral tone of the nation and served as the conscience of America. The old mainline Protestant churches influenced politics and government and enjoyed enormous social capital. To belong to a mainline Protestant church was good for business and good for the community. The Protestant Establishment was chaplain to the culture.

A century after Plymouth’s founding, in 1947, New York theologian Reinhold Niebuhr graced the cover of *Time* magazine. He was probably the last public theologian, a Protestant thinker whose ideas shaped public policy and foreign affairs.

To use some famous words, “Well, Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.” The world changed, the culture shifted, and the old Protestant establishment collapsed. Old mainline churches and denominations have little influence in public affairs, little voice in the public square, and very little social capital. The mainline churches were sent to the sidelines, where we’re still trying to adjust.

We live in a radically different world than the founders of this congregation. Brooklyn is now a borough of three and a half million souls, an ethnic mosaic that boggles the mind. Old Brooklyn churches are changing or dying. Today, in our neighborhood, the

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Heights, fewer than 1,000 people will attend worship. That's a third of the number who attended this church in its heyday more than a century ago. Brooklyn Heights has fewer churches than a century ago along with three synagogues and a mosque. Our founders would be dumbfounded.

Our neighborhoods, like most of America, operate out of a secular mindset. The makers of popular culture have little time or patience with religion and can scarcely imagine a life of faith.

Our world is, they tell us, postmodern. The culture is deeply suspicious of the modern world created by the Enlightenment. We live in a post-Christian world, a world beyond and above religion. And Christianity is now described as post-denominational. Old brand loyalty is gone. Not many people care about the old denominations anymore.

People these days value spiritual experience over religious explanation. That's not good news for many churches. Preachers and teachers in our Reformed Tradition have been explaining everything for 450 years. Sometimes we've explained them out of existence!

Contemporary people tend to value spirituality, not religious institutional forms. We prefer community, a sense of belonging, not formal structures.

And all that in a world and culture deeply divided and often angry. The old structures and institutions, religious and otherwise, don't seem to work well anymore.

The world needs an alternative, a Christian alternative. If the Christian gospel is true, and we've staked our futures on it, the need of the hour is for colonies of Christian faith planted across the culture where the Christian good news is believed and made a living experience by real people who create genuine spirituality and authentic community.

The new Plymouth Church is such a community. We're off to a good start on our journey of spirituality and community. We are, in fact, creating a new urban church, an alternative reality that gives meaning to this postmodern, post Christian, post denominational world. We are becoming a place where you can experience a relationship with God that is transforming. We are learning to love God with all our being and our neighbors as ourselves in a place of faith, hope and love.

But, having made a good start, where do we go from here?

One thing is certain: the foundation for a new urban church is the same foundation as the old Plymouth of 1847. The Gospel Lesson makes that clear.

For three years Jesus had prepared his disciples for life when he was gone. Toward the end, he asked them the question of all questions: "Who am I?" Peter answered correctly, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

"Correct," Jesus answered, "and upon this rock – your confession and you disciples – I will build my church and the gates of hell cannot touch it." Here we are 2,000 years later, heirs of that early church and of the founders of this congregation. And, standing at the center of the church through it all, is Jesus Christ, who promised that whenever and wherever we gather in his name, he is with us.

The magisterial presence of Christ is the inner dynamic of a Christian congregation. He is the one who empowers, shapes lives, and inspires our life together. We do not gather in memory of a grand idea; we gather in the presence of the Lord. And he makes all the difference in the world.

The new urban church has a center and foundation. We offer seekers spirituality, but it is spirituality with specific content and form. We are followers of Christ. We are a community of faith but not just any community of faith. Christ calls us, gathers us, and empowers us. We are disciples in the making.

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Acts 2 offers a glimpse of that dynamic spirituality in action. The disciples were undergoing radical transformation, and they proclaimed that same good news was available to all. Thousands responded, and a church was born.

And not just any church. Its members experienced a radical moral shift. The apostles taught them what Jesus taught, a new way of seeing yourself and the world. In Jesus' way of seeing, the welfare of others is more important than our own. Suddenly, according to the story, they began sharing everything with each other. They ate together, visited with each other, gave generously to each other so no one was without food, clothes or a home. Some even sold property to make sure everyone had something.

It was more than altruism. It was more radical. St. Paul put it this way, "The love of Christ compels me...." It's a new vision of ourselves and all reality.

That said, we have to make sure we remember what business we're in. For nearly a century, a British student movement called SCM thrived and shaped generations of young Christians. In the 1970s, SCM closed its doors and ceased to exist. Someone wisely put a sign on the door of the building, "Gone out of business because we didn't know what business we were in."

In its simplest terms, we are in the people business. Jesus' mission was transforming men, women and children from what we are to what we can be and ought to be. That is our mission. Put another way, our business is helping people become followers of Jesus Christ. That requires a decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ, a decision which is transforming. We are transformed and, as a consequence, the world is transformed.

Henry Ward Beecher was often called a preacher of the gospel and an anti-slavery advocate. He said that description was incorrect. He was an advocate of abolishing slavery BECAUSE he was a preacher of the gospel. Slavery was an obstacle to the kingdom of God on earth, and it had to go.

If human transformation, that is, helping people become followers of Jesus, is our business, how is business?

For 163 years, this church has been a place where lives change, and those changed lives, in turn, changed the world. How many thousand people have sat in these pews, wandered these halls and sat in our classrooms over that century and a half plus? And what difference did that make here and around the world?

I sometimes think being part of a congregation of Christians is a bit like being a stone in a stream. Like time, the neverending flow of water shapes stones, so worship, hymns, sermons, classes, fellowship, and social gatherings shape our souls and change the direction of our lives.

In fact, St. Peter suggests that being the church is to be the temple of the Holy Spirit. And we, the members, are living stones in that temple. Not just stones but living stones. Over time we rub against one another, sometimes in the wrong way; we jostle, settle and learn to fit together to serve a cause beyond ourselves.

And the consequence is change across the globe. Today we heard how our partnership with Brooklyn Kindergarten Society is giving hope to children who would have no hope. Last week we heard from the Christian environmental group, A Rocha, another of our partners. In partnership with churches in the Czech Republic, we are cleaning up wetlands and bearing witness to God's deep commitment to the creation. In a few weeks, Charles Sagay will visit us to tell how our partnership with the Mission School of Hope in Cameroon is giving hope, food and a future to some of the poorest of the poor. Through World Relief we are participating in relief and rebuilding in Haiti. All this is happening because we are learning to love God and our neighbors. That love is transforming.

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But there is so much more that could be done. Imagine for moment what we'd be like if the downstairs of this room was comfortably full every Sunday. Think of the people whose lives would change. Imagine this entire complex of buildings refitted to serve the needs of Plymouth and our city. Imagine people flowing in and out of the facility seven days a week. What a difference we could make. Imagine our finances so healthy, we'd have to figure out where to send the extra at the end of the year. Imagine children, teens and adults learning to live like Jesus taught we can live – and imagine the world that would create.

Well, we'd look a lot like Acts 2, wouldn't we?

Don't think it can't happen. When this building was built, Plymouth had 350 members. This building seats over 2,000. It was the largest church building in America in 1850. Critics back then said such a facility was arrogant and that it could never be filled.

Well, you know the rest of the story. For most of a century, 2,000 and more people crowded into this room and were changed by the experience. Then they left this sacred place to change their homes, offices, classrooms – and the world.

Come, O Christ!

Amen.

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