



## *“I Forgot Something”*

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*(President, Plymouth Council)*

**August 9, 2009**

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

For some time now I've thought that every member of Plymouth Church should be capable of delivering a sermon. That doesn't mean that we all are great preachers like David Fisher or Al Bunis. (Doesn't Al get better every time you hear him preach?) In any case, when I say every member should be capable of delivering a sermon, it means that we all have at least one good sermon in us—a message that's worth a sermon and worth listening to by other members.

After all, we are not supposed to journey as solitary Christians. “Where two or three are gathered” (Matthew 18) Jesus promises to be in our midst. I believe that's true. When a group of us get together as we are doing in this morning's worship service, Jesus is in our midst. He is here with us right now. I can feel it. All we need to do is open ourselves to his presence.

I think there's another reason that Jesus didn't want us to go it alone. That's because, as individuals, we tend to forget things. Forgetting things is very human.

As a matter of fact, all of us have forgotten the majority of what's happened in our lives. Personally, I'm capable of forgetting things very quickly. I will read or hear something, realizing its importance at the time and then proceed to forget it almost immediately. One of the things I remember reading is that the human brain actually remembers everything, every second, that we have experienced in a lifetime. And that remembering specific things is merely a retrieval problem. Everything is in there; it's just getting it out that's the problem. Perhaps that's why a particular sound or smell or touch will trigger a specific memory from the past.

Perhaps that's why we are not supposed to be isolated Christians or isolated churches. When we read today's Bible passages or any of Paul's letters to the churches he had visited, you will note they are often filled with messages to help the church remember what they had learned. Paul recognized that people forget. Churches forget. I don't know about you, but I can listen to one of David's remarkable sermons and the minute I walk out the 75 Hicks Street door I forget what I've heard and learned. It's hard to take what I learn in here in church and transfer it to the rest of life. It's really hard.

In my view, the most perilous time for an individual or a church is when we forget “why we do this.” Our tendency is to remember “how things are done.” A fatal statement for a church member to say is “that's the way things are done here.” The answer to “why” we are here is fairly straightforward: to serve God, to serve Jesus Christ. The “how” we do things is meant to help trigger the “why.” When we concentrate **ONLY** on the “how” and forget the “why,” it's a recipe for trouble.

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So, what do we do to help each other remember? What do we do to help each other remember why we are here? I've been thinking about this for some time and have five suggestions:

1. First, and probably the most important, is to participate in church. At a minimum that means coming together to worship every week. I think of coming to worship like filling a car's gas tank with fuel. Personally, I need to come here to get filled each week. When I don't, I truly miss it.

For me, filling up once a week is not enough. I go to a men's prayer group every week. We don't have a men's group here at Plymouth, so I meet a group of friends at Grand Central Station every Wednesday morning at 7:00 for an hour. And I've been doing this every week for more than 11 years. We talk, read the Bible and say prayers, concluding with the Lord's Prayer. It's a different experience than coming to Plymouth to worship on Sunday. What I can tell you is that both are extraordinarily important to me.

I also think that Christianity is not a spectator sport, it's far more a contact sport. And, that a Sunday worship service is more spectator-oriented than contact-oriented. It's very possible to slip into a service, get fed by David and slip out.

When the first Christians met for services they were in people's homes and it included worship, dinner, wine and camaraderie. It also included surviving as a congregation that was being persecuted. Participation in church was far more than just gathering to worship.

While our circumstances are far different, survival of the church today demands more than just attending a worship service. It calls for participation on many fronts.

2. The second "remembering" suggestion flows out of the first. The second suggestion is that we support and love each other here at Plymouth Church. Now, please note I didn't say we need to LIKE each other. Words like loving, forgiving, supporting, caring are different than liking. Liking is a bonus if it happens, but it is not the essential ingredient and it is not what we are asked to do. We are asked to love each other. And, if you think about it, what better demonstration that we remember why we belong to Plymouth Church than to love each other. Without ever saying a word regarding "remembering," we tell each other by our actions what being a Christian is all about. When we listen, when we try understanding, when we help with no agenda other than pure caring, we say without words why we are here. What's interesting is that visitors can feel the love and caring without words being said either. It's already working because I've heard comments from visitors.
3. The third forgetting antidote is to learn more. Explore your faith. Explore our collective faith. This is difficult turf for many. There is never enough time for every demand in our lives. And it's often hard to know where to start. I was in that position here at Plymouth many years ago. I felt a yearning to know more. I didn't quite know how to put it into words. I did not know what to do and was intimidated by the thought of picking up a Bible. I asked our minister at the time what I could do to become more comfortable praying, reading the Bible, and participating in worship. His comment was to start by reading the book of Psalms and then read the gospel of John. He said both would be easy reading and a good start on connecting to what I was feeling. I followed his suggestion and the experience was transforming. As a matter of fact, I've never been the same.

I'm not saying my personal experience was the "way," certainly not the only way. There are many ways. What I'm suggesting is not to leave the exploration of your inner faith untouched, because it is a major part of why we forget. And, I have found when I forget or we (Plymouth) forget, we both get into trouble. It's that simple.

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I have been deeply involved in our adult education programs over many years and to be frank, we have yet to discover the mix of programs, events, small groups and other things we should be doing to help individuals and our entire community explore faith. We could use your help. Scott Moyers and Dena Shottenkirk are the new members to Adult Christian Education ministry and I know they would appreciate your ideas and more importantly, your participation. I also know that we are blessed to have in our presence one of the great teachers, theologians and ministers in the U.S. David Fisher is a remarkable resource that any member can and should access.

4. The fourth suggestion is to continue to lift our collective eyes and hearts outside Plymouth's walls. It's easy to look inward, especially when we are in a difficult period as we are right now financially. It's easy to say we need to take care of ourselves first. This past year we began a process here at Plymouth to help break the cycle of poverty locally, nationally and globally. We will be only a very small part of helping to make this happen around the world, but it is extremely important that we do our part. Plymouth is doing this with the Othmer and other endowments, but it is just the beginning. There is no better demonstration that we remember why we are a Christian church than to help those outside Plymouth.
5. The fifth suggestion is to be good stewards. Here I'm talking about our extraordinary physical plant. Plymouth has one of the most remarkable church plants in New York City. We have five buildings and three gardens. But, what's even more extraordinary is that significant portions that are unused or certainly under-used. The council has started the process of developing a master plan for our entire physical plant. Being good stewards, however, means deciding what we want happening in these spaces. The decisions we make as a congregation will have implications for future generations of members, just as the decisions made by previous members now have on us. Will the members of Plymouth decades from now thank us for our visionary, thoughtful, comprehensive decisions? Remembering why we are here becomes a crucial factor in making these decisions.

In conclusion, I think we've made real progress here at Plymouth. More than ever, as a congregation, we are recognizing the opportunities for people to participate in the life of the church. We are also working on loving and caring for each other, exploring our faith, helping those outside of Plymouth, and attempting to be good stewards of our resources.

All these are opportunities to be who we are: Congregationalists and Christians who help each other remember why we gather as Plymouth Church.

There are wonderful opportunities for each and every one of us to participate. Come and be a part.

Amen.

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