Sunday, April 29, 1973
NOT WEARY IN WELL-DOING
Luke 12:48; Galatians 6:7-10

The other day a student of architecture and the arts came to this building and asked if he could take pictures and study the structure. He said that he had traveled throughout the country, and this was one of the most unique and beautiful church buildings he had seen. He was impressed by the setting, the overall plan, the usefulness of the building and its ability to inspire. He asked how the building came to be.

I explained to him, as I have to numerous other people, that the building is in history tied closely with the history of First-Plymouth Church people.

This morning let's look briefly at that bit of history of the congregation and the building as a context and background and as a preparation for our debt-retirement campaign.

The first united service of First Congregational Church and Plymouth Congregational Church was held on December 2, 1923. After this merger it became evident that the former Plymouth Church building would not be adequate, and a survey committee was appointed to report on whether it was advisable to purchase more ground and build on A Street next to the Plymouth Church building or to purchase new ground for a new location.

A decision was made to build at a new location and the present property where this building now stands at 20th and D was purchased for $32,248.

At a congregational meeting in February 1928, a building committee was elected, and the committee was by the congregation to present plans for a church building of such distinctive type and merit as would meet the approval of the church within an estimated cost of $500,000 with furnishings and equipment.

In March 1928, a special gifts committee was appointed and at the same meeting a resolution was passed that the new church should be built without mortgage and free from debt.

In February 1930, the congregation authorized the trustees to enter into contracts for the erection and equipping of the new building at a total cost not to exceed $450,000 and on Easter Sunday, April 20, 1930, the cornerstone was laid. A report has it that not only the members of First-Plymouth Church, but also a large number of the citizens of Lincoln, were caught up in the enthusiasm of the unique building under construction.

Frank C. Tomson, Chairman of the City Planning Committee said, "No building proposal could fit more intimately into the history and progress of Nebraska than the structure conceived for the First-Plymouth Congregational Church. The architectural design of the new church is singularly adapted to the region, to the location and to the purpose of the church organization. It is in perfect harmony with the type of architecture which has made the Nebraska Capitol known internationally."

The Carillon bells were unique as they still are and raising funds for them became a citywide project. The architect's dream was to use in the building what he called the native colors of Nebraska, old rose and tawney gold — one the color of the sunset sky and one the color of the harvest fields. No one will question that it was a dream fulfilled.

On Easter Sunday April 5, 1931, a year later, this new church building was dedicated. Every seat was filled a half hour before the formal ceremony began and the aisles and the lobby were crowded. One hundred three persons were received into church membership on that day.

The dedication ceremonies continued throughout the week with the finale on the second Sunday night when there was a recital on the new organ — the only straight four manual organ in the west.

The carillon was dedicated a little over a month later on May 30, 1931, and the Sunday Journal and Star reported that 25,000 people flocked to the vicinity of 20th and D to hear the concert played by Anton Brees of Lake Worth, Florida.

This was the climax of the new United Church which was to be followed by an anti-climax. The country was entering a depression and the church wh.ch had hoped to be debt free found itself to be in debt for a number of years.

Estimates for the final completion of the building had been low and there was some failure of pledges. In 1936, the debt was about $150,000. Fourteen years later, on October 15, 1950, there was a mortgage burning ceremony. The church was debt free.

In 1962, the congregation began to look toward an extensive remodeling and rebuilding program. After three years of study and planning the capital improvements committee pre-sented its plans to the annual meeting of January 1965, calling for an expenditure of $538,000. Of this amount, approximately $126,000 was already available and a building fund canvass was authorized to secure an additional $412,000. On February 28, 1965, canvassers called upon the membership and reported at the end of the day that $391,900 had been pledged with 160 calls still to be made. Subsequent pledges put the canvass over the top and brought the total to $422,708.

However, when the bids came in it was discovered that the new additions and the improvements in the original structure would cost $715,000 which included repayment of a bank loan of $120,850, used to purchase properc1es adjoining the church. Thus, at a special congregational meeting on April 18, 1966, the building committee was given the “go-head” and authorization to negotiate a $150,000 mortgage if necessary.

As a result of the extensive remodeling and additions, today we still have a debt of $108,000. For the past several years, the members of the congregation have talked about that original dream in 1930, to have the church debt-free, a dream that was realized for a time in 1950. Then at the annual meeting this past January, the congregation passed a resolution instructing the Board of Trustees to initiate a “debt-retirement campaign” to be held this spring for the purpose of paying off our present indebtedness. This is what we are now engaged in.

The “Fact Sheet” mailed to all of our members this past week gives in more detail the reasons for having the campaign at this time in our history. These reasons relate to our past history and to our future ministry.

The longer I live in Lincoln and work at First-Plymouth, the more am impressed with the vision and courage of those members of our congregation who dreamed dreams in the late 1920s and then put those dreams into reality in a building like this one. These were people of daring and risk.

We who are presently members of First-Plymouth and the community at large have been given this building and its ministry as part of our heritage. There are few great church buildings in this country and ours is one of them.

It has also been part of the heritage and history of this congregation to put this building to the use of the community at la.ge as well as to our own use for ministry, worship, education, and service.

For example, during World War II, when the Air Base in Lincoln was activated, First-Plymouth Congregational Church set up a program for servicemen considered one of the best in the nation. It was praised by the National Council of Churches and was visited by the pastor of a London Church. Between 150 and 200 servicemen came to the church each Sunday evening for worship followed by a recreational period.

I am continually amazed as j meet and talk with people of all ages through Lincoln, who tell me about this church building. They learned to play basketball here, or attended USO events, or boy scouts or girl scouts, or a League of Women Voter's meeting, or any one of a number of other vital community activities. This congregation and this building have been an integral part of this community since its beginning.

Today that tradition continues as this building continues to be a kind of community center, as well as a worship and education and center for all kinds of cultural events.

This building is an instrument of mission for this congregation and carries on a ministry which is vital. We don't often think of a building having a ministry, but this one does.

1. First of all, it has carried on from the beginning and continues to carry on an aesthetic ministry — a ministry of inspiration and beauty. The building with its courtyard and carillon tower and magnificent organs is a real work of art. It's more than just a building.

There's hardly a day goes by without people coming here to take a tour, to look and to admire and to be inspired by the building itself.

Part of this aesthetic ministry is its symbolic ministry. With its unique tower and majestic setting and courtyard, the building is a symbol of continuity and sacredness in the community. The building says to Lincoln, and to all who come to visit here, "we believe in the city and in this part of the city. We want to keep this city strong, vital, and healthy. Our doors are open to all of you." The inscription above the main front doors put it in Biblical language — "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." These are the words of Jesus, but this building also carries on that ministry in Jesus' name and give rest to weary people.

Furthermore, as your lives grow often more hectic in these days, places of sanctuary, inspiration and rest like this building become more and more important for all of us. As more and more lawn space is gobbled up by buildings and as the population density of this part of Lincoln is in• creased by apartments, the importance of this church building with its lovely courtyard increases.

2. Secondly, this building continues to carry on a very practical and useful ministry to people. It is a place where all kinds of community groups meet. It is a place where children from the neighborhood come to play. It's a kind of neutral ground, an open forum, a place where ideas

can be debated, political candidates can tell their views, boys and girls can exercise and be educated, babies and young children can be cared for, longer-living people can come for recreation and service, and where we can hear the word of God preached and be inspired by great music and art.

In other words, this building has in the past and continues to carry on a live, dynamic ministry. We who are presently members of First-Plymouth have been given responsibility of-seeing that this building and its ministry continue to live. And that's a large responsibility.

The Bible puts it this way — look again at the text — "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required." We in First-Plymouth have been given much and that requires much of us.

If this congregation and building are to continue to carry on the very vital ministry we have in the past, then we need very much to retire the present indebtedness so that we can begin to build a reserve fund for the maintenance of this place. We want this building to me more than a monument to the past. We want to have it continue to be a living building th.at is used and that requires continual expense for upkeep and repair. An important part of our stewardship is to see that it is kept in the best possible shape.

We already know of a number of things that will need to be done within the next year or two. And then there are the emergencies that come up. A few weeks ago, for example, one of the original boilers, now 43 years old, sprung a leak. It had to be welded and it looks now as if the entire floor of that boiler will need to be redone this summer.

Fellow members and friends of First-Plymouth, this congregation has a proud and great history. It has done well in the past — let us not grow weary in well-doing.

So today, we're asking our members and friends to make special pledges toward the complete retirement of our present indebtedness. Our goal is $100,000 to be pledged and paid over a two year period, beginning this May 1, 1973.

If we are to reach this goal, it will take pledges from all of us. I know it doesn't seem very exciting to be giving toward paying off something — we all like to give when we think we're going to get something new. But this is just as important. "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required." Amen.

Will the ushers now distribute the pledge cards among you? For those listening on the radio, write to the church for a pledge card or telephone the church, and we'll have a canvasser visit you in your home.

As you think about how much you are going to pledge, keep these thoughts in mind. Do I really want this congregation and building to continue carrying on its vital ministry? If so, how much am I willing to commit myself to it?

Look at the pledge card with me...