Sunday, April 5, 1981
**KEEPING THE VISION ALIVE**
John 11:1-4,17,34-44

Fifty years ago, to this day, April 5, 1931, the title of the sermon was “A DREAM COME TRUE.” It was the day of dedication of this magnificent building, and the preacher was the Senior Minster of the church, Dr. Ben Wyland, who is with us this morning. Ever since the merger of First Congregational Church and Plymouth Congregational Church in 1923, the members of First-Plymouth Church had begun to dream of a new building for the com-bined membership. Dr. Wyland came to be pastor of this newly merged congregation in 1926, and almost immediately he began to give shape and substance to the vision. In 1927, he was corresponding with well-known architects around the country on behalf of the congregation. We still have all that correspondence in our archives and during the past several months I’ve had the privilege of reading it.

The vision that the congregation and minister had for the new church building was that it be a distinctive structure, one that would add beauty to the entire community. It was to be a building that would not just serve the members of the church but one which would be of benefit to the entire community, not a monument to the past or for the dead, but a building alive with activity and ministry.

Sometime in May of 1927, Dr. Robert W. McLaughlin, a congregational minister from Worcester, Mass., and a long-time friend of Dr. Wyland’s, was the guest preacher here in Lincoln, at First-Plymouth Church in the building at 17th and A. While he was here, Dr. Wyland told him of the dream and vision of a new church building. Dr. McLaughlin mentioned that he had a son who was working for the architectural firm of H. Van Buren Magonigle, in New York City. Mr. Magonigle in all of his 46 years of practice as an architect. had never designed a church but had been responsible for a number of unique and magnificent buildings around the country. At that time, he was designing the U.S. Embassy building in Tokyo, Japan.

Up to this point, the members of our church along with Dr. Wyland had been thinking in terms of a Gothic or Colonial church building and they had been in touch with architects who were well-known for this type of design. Thus Dr. Wyland wrote in one of his letters to Dr. McLaughlin on June 11, 1927, “My whole desire is that when we build it shall be the purest and finest type, whether in Gothic or Colonial, that we can secure, one that will live forever in the highest estimation of the best critics.”

Soon Dr. Wyland was corresponding with Robert W. McLaughlin, Jr. in New York City. In a letter dated June 14, 1927, to Robert McLaughlin Jr., Dr. Wyland wrote: “There are two types of architecture we are interested in, Gothic and Colonial. Your father was very anxious that we should put up a Colonial Church. He considered the Gothic had been overdone and poorly done likewise and that if a Colonial Church were put up, we could build a purer and finer type of church for less money that would meet the most critical taste.”

He went on to say: “Our church building should seat not more than one-thousand peop1e and we desire a parish house that will take care of a thousand young people. We desire a parish house to fit all young people’s activities and be able to stand on the same plane so far as efficiency is concerned with a college or public-school building. It should be equipped to carry on the social life of both the old and the young people.”

Excited by the possibilities, Mr. McLaughlin visited Lincoln, later in June 1927. As a result of this visit and conversations with Dr. Wyland and other leaders of the congregation, they began to move away from both the Gothic and Colonial designs.

On June 28, 1927, Dr. Wyland wrote to McLaughlin after his visit here: “I wish that some master architect in classic architecture would give us a church that would fit America and be called an American type of church architecture. If some person with vision and imagination could catch the emotional ideas behind a free church in a free land emphasizing liberality, liberty, intellectual power, democracy and faith in mankind, this type of church would fit exactly with enlarging conceptions of liberty in a western commonwealth. When you realize that St. Paul brought over into Christianity the Hellenic tradition, you have a more ancient and rich background for the classic than you have for the gothic. When you realize also that our congregational denomination with its emphasis upon education and liberty of conscience is closely allied with the Greek mind, you have further justification for our turning toward the classic.”

Dr. Wyland continued, “The colonial church at the present time is too severe. It is expressive of the simplicity and frugality of that people, but .t should be possible to have simplicity with greater beauty without it being florid and weak. We ought to have a new classic honoring intellectual power and freedom of conscience through which runs the religious note. It should not end in rationality but in reverence. It should recognize science and the place of the modern mind but should move on not to self-conceit, but rather to worship. If some architect could seize and honor the powers and victories of the human mind yet understand that these are not the end of existence but means to a greater existence and strike through it all a note of prophecy and faith in some far distant and greater c1imax, he wou1d be doing for the American Church what Christopher Wren once did for the church of his day.”

Here we see the vision of the building in formation. Magonigle’s firm began to sketch on paper what this vision would be like, and McLaughlin who did some of the first sketches was enthusiastic about the possibilities. He wrote on July 15, 1927. “I came back so full of enthusiasm for the country in which you are working. There is such a fine spacious quality for miles about that should be reflected in the architecture of the church.”

H. Van Buren Magonigle was equally enthusiastic. He wrote to Dr. Wyland, “I read your most inspiring letter of June 28, with the greatest interest and a mounting enthusiasm; you take, Sir a very human view of architecture and one very sympathetic to me. The problem with us architects always is to humanize architecture, to breathe a spirit into the mere brick and stone — another way of saying to make it or permit it to truly express the quality and aspirations and traditions of the people of its own time and place.”

Magonigle went on to say, “the typical colonial building, no more than the flower of the Middle Ages, the Gothic, does not express the richer, fuller life of our own moment in history.”

Magonigle had traveled extensively throughout Europe and had studied all kinds of architecture. He described his work as having a strong classic cast, but as being eclectic in design.

In in own words, “For some years now I have been developing a type of architecture which while it exhibits, I believe, strong evidence of classic ancestry, is nevertheless the child of all my experience in design — gothic, renaissance, Greek, even Assyrian and Egyptian, during a

professional life of 46 years. For I had begun to feel keenly that American architects were thoughtlessly drifting along the easiest paths, plagiarizing instead of designing."

Correspondence continued and in a letter of September 28, Dr. Wyland gave yet more substance to the vision. He quoted H.B. Alexander who had given the architect of the Nebraska Capitol Building a description of the area and geography.

"The reasoned propriety of the building to its place and purpose is the first principle of architectural excellence. The city of Lincoln lies fifty miles of the Missouri River, in a region where the undulating hills are beginning to die away into the level lands of the plateau. Naturally, it is a region of open prairie, broken by no eminence in any direction; the trees which invade the hollows and rise upon the slopes are of the orderly planting of man, groves and orchards, not forest. Every site in such a country is foursquare with the horizons; every suggestion is of freedom and space; there are no challenging pinnacles no inevitable approaches constraining the sense of form. The whole setting has the character of pure geometry, offering a simplicity of contour which is perhaps most effectively indicated by the words of an old Pawnee Indian native of the state; 'If you go on a high hill and look around, you will see the sky touching the earth on every side, and within this circular enclosure the people dwell.' A further feature of this area is that ·it is a land of immense and almost constant sunlight. Full three hundred days of the year the skies are bright and there is seldom a haze to blur visible outlines or obscure the clean penciled shadows. Here in the prairie country of our middle west, an architectural tradition is all to make."

Dr. Wyland described Lincoln to the architect: "The city is a university city and overshadowed by its educational institutions. It is not an industrial community. Our agricultural interests will always be paramount. The spirit of the people is that of a friendly people with a very large conception of liberty. It is a pioneer state with the characteristics of the pioneer everywhere. The marks of the wagon trains over the famous Oregon Trail can still be seen on the soil of our state. It would seem to me, knowing the bright, friendly, free character of this people, that a church with a dark gloomy interior would be two opposites that would not fit together. The old Gothic church with its suggestions of death and mysticism must give way before the brightness, the energy and vitality of these western people."

"The constrictions of formal religious worship such as you find in other churches of the east are not acceptable here. I think we are justified in saying that a building should fit a people and its spirit. On the other hand, there should be a note of distinction and greatness suggesting the universal character of religion and kinship with the people. Quite a number of Gothic churches are so heavy and suggest permanence so offensively that they give you the feeling of death rather than of vitality and aspiration."

"In our church there should be a beautiful, spacious and adequate chancel with two pulpits. The vestibules and corridors should be light, large, and open, giving people a chance to greet each other socially. The approaches to the church, the walks and driveways, should be wide with an easy grade and any long series of steps should be avoided for the sake of old people and children."

A few months later after MAGONIGLE appeared in Lincoln and met with the church leaders and presented some pre-liminary sketches, he was officially employed as the architect and· the vision was under way.

April 5, 1931, the building was dedicated. The week-long program of dedication events showed the congregation's close relationship to the entire community. Thus, from the beginning this church has been one which has had its doors open to all kinds of community activities and that tradition continues. The theme for the building fund drive and for the dedication was "BUILDING FOR THE CENTURIES." Our 50th anniversary theme continues that vision — "BUILDING ON 50."

The scripture reading this morning was about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. He called him forth from the tomb and gave him new life.

Church buildings, no matter what their architecture, can become like tombs or monuments to the past. They can become places of the dead. There are hundreds of church buildings which are merely monuments or tombs throughout this country and throughout the world. There are places where the vision of life and having it abundantly has not been kept alive but buried.

Those who dreamed and had a vision built this building. They had a vision of beauty, a vision of a building that would be a symbol for the whole community; a vision of a building that would serve not only its own membership but would be a place of meeting and prayer and discussion for everyone, and that it is. Week after week, I meet people in Lincoln who tell me, "First-Plymouth Church, I know that p1ace, I used to play basketball there as a youngster, or I was a member of your Boy Scout Troop, or I attend the concerts there, or community meetings."

I usually jokingly remind such people that we are still open and in business and that we are open on Sundays as well as the other six days of the week. Some gatherings or meetings may be controversial. That's understandable. There's a risk in being an open, free church. Jesus said, "Woe to you when all people speak well of you."

Keeping the vision alive is never easy. There are always forces which want to roll to stone across the opening of the church and close it off, make it a private place... but Jesus calls us to life. "Take away the stone," remove whatever blocks this place from being open to all people.

I have said in previous sermons, but it bears repeating--I want this church and this building to continue to be a place where all people of all kinds can find compassion, forgiveness, comfort and understanding for their weaknesses and mistakes. I want it to be a place where people are helped to see their power and worth as never before; where wounds are healed; a place of inspiration and encouragement, putting strength into people to go forth and to do the great things of which they are capable.

A church is not to be a place of hiding from the problems and issues of the world, but a place to gain strength and perspective. Jesus calls us as he called Lazarus — come forth! Live! And he calls us to unbind others and let them go, just as he told those standing around Lazarus--"Unbind him and let him go."

We will keep the vision alive, with God's help and this building and this congregation will continue to be a source of strength for this community. Amen.