Sunday, October 25, 1987
LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD
Matthew 22:34-46

One hundred years ago today, on October 25, 1887, Plymouth Congregational Church was officially organized in Lincoln, Nebraska, when a Constitution was voted on and adopted after the Sunday morning worship service. Plans for the beginning of this new congregation had begun some months earlier under the leadership of the Reverend Lewis Gregory, the fifth minister of First Congregational Church. The new city of Lincoln had been growing, and Reverend Gregory saw an opportunity to increase the influence of Congregationalism by establishing another church in southeast Lincoln. First Congregational Church had been organized in 1866 and had its location at 13th and L, the present site of the Cornhusker Hotel.

In the summer of 1887, a small frame church building, 24 by 40 feet, was built at 17th and A, and the first worship services were held on July 31, 1887. At the urging of Reverend Gregory, 36 members of First Congregational Church who were living in southeast Lincoln detached themselves from their home church to organize and join the new church.

The original name chosen for the new church was Second Congregational Church of Lincoln, but on February 2, 1888, this was changed to Plymouth Congregational Church of Lincoln.

The small frame building (24 X 40) served Plymouth Church as a place of worship for 14 months. A new frame building was erected in front of this original building at 17th and A, and the first worship services were held in the new building on December 1, 1888.

For the next 35 years, First Congregational Church and Plymouth Congregational Church both grew, although in different ways. Plymouth Church had more social activities, while First Church tended to be more formal. One of the early pastors of Plymouth Church was the Reverend John Doane, the son of Thomas Doane, builder of many of the Nebraska sections of the Burlington Railroad, and who was instrumental in getting the Burlington to donate a section of land to the college in Crete, Nebraska, which bears his name. Doane College opened its doors to students in September of 1872. John Doane served as pastor of Plymouth Church from 1893 to 1902. He had graduated from Harvard in 1880 and was a classmate of Theodore Roosevelt.

John Doane and his wife were instrumental in making music a vital part of the church's ministry. For example, the church newsletter called "Plymouth Notes," dated November 1895, carried this account of the musical activities: "Six musicals are being planned by the Plymouth Choir to be given during the season 1895-1896. The price of the season ticket will be 50 cents. The price for each musical will be ten cents or more. The music will be of high grade, and the standard already established will be maintained. The following talent has already been secured for the programs, and others will be added." And there followed a list of names.

During the pastorate of John Doane, a regular mid-week social gathering had also become a center of church life, spiritual development, and social opportunity.

John Doane resigned his pastorate at Plymouth Church in 1902, and for the next several years, the membership remained constant at 233. Then in 1905, under the leadership of the Reverend Charles Rogers, the church began to grow rather steadily, so that by 1911, the leaders of the congregation were convinced that a new and larger building was needed. On

January 18, 1915, a contract was let to Lincoln contractor Charles Olson for a new church building at a cost of $27,500. This contract covered only the cost of the basic building. Heating and lighting, plumbing, pews, altar, and art glass were expected to bring the total to about $33,500.

During the building of the new church, services were held for a time in a garage at 17th and Poplar. Later, at the invitation of Westminster Presbyterian Church, worship services were held at 4:15 P.M. Sundays in that church. Starting on October 31, 1915, regular morning services were held in the basement of the new church building.

Then in 1923, the two congregations joined together to form First-Plymouth Congregational Church. At the time of the merger, the membership of Plymouth Church was 548, and of First Congregational Church, 525. The first united worship service was held on December 2, 1923, in the Plymouth Church building at 17th and A.

The merger, which had been entered into freely and harmoniously, was soon followed by some dissension, which came to a climax in 1926. Part of the problem was that the members of First Church were generally more conservative and not as much inclined to social activities, whereas the attitude of the membership of Plymouth Church was more socially minded. They liked picnics and social gatherings, and generally called one another by their first names and enjoyed good fellowship.

Soon after the merger of the two congregations, plans were made to construct a new church building. Property was purchased at 20th and D Streets for $32,248. Plans were drawn, and construction of the present building began in 1930. This church building, in which we are now meeting, was dedicated on April 5, 1931. One hundred and three new members were received into the membership of the congregation on that Easter Sunday morning in 1931.

The building at 17th and A, which had been built in 1915, was sold to First Lutheran Church, which in turn sold it to the Berean Fundamentalist Church, which in turn sold it to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and that congregation is still using the building.

Today, we who are the present members of First-Plymouth Congregational Church are the inheritors of the faith and foresight of our forefathers and mothers. We are the recipients of the hope and vision of two congregations who became one.

As I read and study the history of both congregations and of the merged church, several important facts stand out.

From the very beginning, both congregations had people in them who were not only faithful Christians but also community leaders. And that is still the case, and gratefully so. Today, as in the past, you will find members of this congregation who are active in the life and leadership of this county, city, and state.
This, of course, is consistent not only with the history of this congregation but with the history of our denomination. We have always believed that the overall purpose of the church is the “increase among people of the love of God and neighbor.” And that in addition to our internal church life of worship, education, and prayer, activity in and through community leadership is another way of carrying out the commandment of Jesus to “love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

It is our belief that a church building and the congregation which occupies it are not to be places of hiding from the problems and issues of the day, but rather a place to gain strength and perspective. We are able to practice love because we know that we are loved by God and by others.

A second fact that stands out from reading and studying the history of Plymouth Church and First Congregational Church is that both congregations, and since 1923, the merged congregations have not been afraid of the future. The people who made up these congregations were willing and ready to use the tools of the present. We have been broadcasting our church services on the radio for more than 40 years, and now we are venturing into television as a way of extending our ministry. We were one of the first churches in the city to have a large gymnasium, and we have from the beginning been a leader in church music, and we still are. Reading the early history reminded me also of this church's leadership in Christian education, especially the Sunday morning church school, and we still are.

Thirdly, this congregation and its predecessors have from the beginning practiced an inclusive Christian faith. We have welcomed into this fellowship people of all kinds of religious backgrounds. We have welcomed individuals who are on a spiritual journey without demanding that they be in a certain place on their journey before they can join us, and we still do. We want this congregation to continue to be a place where all kinds of people can find compassion, forgiveness, comfort, and understanding for their weaknesses and mistakes. We want it to continue to be, as it has in the past, a place where people are helped to see their power and worth as children of God, where wounds are healed, and a place of inspiration and encouragement, putting strength into people so that they can go forth to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. Amen.