Sunday, October 11, 1998
GOD'S GIFT OF MUSIC AND OUR GIFT
Psalm 95:1-2, 96:1-4

Before we talk about what this pipe organ will mean to our church and the community at large, I want to give you the background of how this miracle came to be.

There were many times during the past few years when I thought this day would never come. Here's why. Since 1981, we have been doing some kind of major construction work and building repairs in and around this church building.

Jack Levick and I began working on the organ project in 1980 in conjunction with the committee that was planning the 50th anniversary of the dedication of this building in 1981. That committee planned some major renovations in conjunction with the 50th-anniversary celebration. It included in its discussions some major work on, or replacing, the pipe organs, which were always needing repairs. That 50th-anniversary committee also began some preliminary discussions on how to redesign the chancel area so that architecturally it might be more in keeping with the original design of this building. But we needed more time to think it all through.

Then again, in 1986, we had a major fund drive for repairing and restoring the carillon, repainting and redecorating this main worship area, replacing the east courtyard retaining wall, and building in the new wall the Columbarium, redesigning and rebuilding the two church kitchens, and building and equipping our new television studio for extending our ministry. We also included in those plans the redesign of the chancel and some major renovations to the pipe organs. But we were not yet ready because we hadn't found the right pipe organ builder to work with.

Once more, in 1991, as our congregation kept growing in numbers of members and programs, we knew we desperately needed more space and that it was also necessary to make this building accessible to all people. To accomplish that, major renovations of the interior of the building were necessary, as well as a building addition. Our new building addition, along with the renovation of the existing building, was completed and dedicated on January 16, 1994. Several years later, we expanded our off-street parking.

As we were making those plans, the discussions of replacing the organs and redesigning the chancel and balcony continued, but we knew that the funds were not available, and we still were not satisfied with the proposals we were receiving from various organ builders. And we didn't know how we could get the necessary funding.

As a result of visiting all kinds of churches in this country and in conversation with other organists who had worked with organ builders, Jack came back from a convention of the American Guild of Organists and said to me one day—"I've found the ideal organ builder for First-Plymouth Church: the Schoenstein Organ Company in San Francisco." We then began serious conversations with Jack Bethards, president and major owner of the company, and we knew we had the right company and the right man.

But where would some of the major funding come from? We had just finished our building addition and were still paying for that. Members of this congregation had been very generous

in their support of all the many building projects in the last 20 years, as well as in their support of the church operating budget.

I knew the Lied Foundation Trust had been generous in its support of projects for the good of communities in many parts of Nebraska and other states as well. A few months later, I had the opportunity to meet Christina Hixson personally, and she was able to visit one of our worship services when she was in Lincoln.

Knowing that she had been here, I wrote her a long letter in which I outlined our proposal for a magnificent pipe organ. However, I left out one important point in my letter — the fact that the organ would be not only for the church but for the community at large.

Later, when I talked with Ms. Hixson on the phone about making an appointment to see her in her office in Las Vegas, she told me that she was not interested in providing funds for a pipe organ in our church. But when I explained it was also for the community at large and would be housed in our church, she became interested. I was able to demonstrate that this church, since its founding in 1866, has been a leader in providing programs for the community at large, and this has also been true for our music ministry.

Not long after, I was able to visit Ms. Hixson in her office in Las Vegas, and in that meeting, I gave her more detailed plans for using the organ to serve the community at large. I also pointed out that our church is seen on television each week by an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people and that the Lied Organ would be an inspiration for those individuals as well. Some months later, as our conversations progressed, Ms. Hixson, along with Jack and me, visited the Schoenstein organ factory in San Francisco. At the same time, Ruth Amen, a longtime faithful member of our congregation, indicated her willingness to make a major financial contribution so that the balcony portion of the Lied Organ would be given in honor and memory of her parents. With these two major contributions and many others from members and friends, our miracle was on the way to becoming a reality. Today we are here to celebrate and dedicate that miracle.

Why then is this organ so important for this church and the community at large?

First of all, because the pipe organ is the most magnificent of all musical instruments, and music is a significant and universal ingredient in the worship of God. It is, of course, possible to worship God without music of any kind. Any spoken or unspoken prayer to God or any thought of God is worship.

It is nonetheless a fact to remember that the experience of the church in all ages has been that when people worship, music is heard. Music can enlist the strongest and deepest emotions in ways that words alone cannot. We use music not only in worship but in all of life’s celebrations of joy and to comfort us in our sorrows.

The Old and New Testaments in the Bible are filled with injunctions for the use of music of all kinds in our praise of God. Music is like prayer. Its purpose is not to change God but to change us. “Use music in your worship of God” is the constant invitation in the Bible.

Second, this pipe organ is a major artistic addition to the community at large. It will be used for concerts, recitals, and to teach children of all ages about music and about the history of the pipe organ. We are in the process of producing a video documentary of how this organ was built and installed. This video will be used over and over again.

With the help of our many donors, some who are church members and others who are not, this organ is a gift from First-Plymouth Church to the community at large, and it will have a positive impact on this community for years to come.

Third, this beautiful pipe organ is significant for this church and for the community at large because it is of the highest quality. To some, it is even extravagant. But that's okay. Here's why. When we contracted with Schoenstein to build this organ, we did not ask Jack Bethards to build the biggest organ that could be built. We said, "What's the best organ for this building, for us as a church, and for the community at large?" And that's what Schoenstein has given us. It is something magnificent, and like everything that's of the highest quality, it costs.

There's a wonderful story in the Bible that tells of a woman who came to Jesus with a very expensive bottle of ointment. That perfume was worth a year's wages or more for a normal working person. The woman asked Jesus' permission to anoint him with it. He said, "Okay." Some of the disciples, seeing what she had done, criticized her severely and, by implication, criticized Jesus for allowing it. They said, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" Jesus said, "Let her alone. She's done something beautiful for me. It will be remembered for years to come."

I firmly believe with the building and dedication of this organ, we are doing something beautiful for the many people who come to this church, those who see it on television, and for the community outside the church. It will bring inspiration and comfort to thousands of people for years to come. It's hard to put a price tag on that.

God has given to the creation and to us the gift of music, and with this pipe organ, we are passing on that gift to others. Amen.