

Text: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. . . . Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

As most of you know, our Associate Minister Jane Anne Ferguson was scheduled to preach today. However, both the Council and I believe that due to the letter that was sent to this congregation this past Thursday, it is important that the Senior Minister be in the pulpit as we together confront a deeply unexpected and challenging situation. The situation that First Plymouth faces is the same that mainline churches across Denver and the nation are facing. Had I doubted this, it was put to rest after my conversation four days ago with the clergy of most other large mainline churches in Denver. We are all facing significant, even massive pledging shortfalls as the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression lengthens. In our own case, pledging is down so substantially that I have made the executive decision to reduce a number of staff positions by ten to twenty hours a week. Moreover, I and the Council are recommending to the congregation for vote at the annual meeting the elimination of the position of Associate Minister. I can tell you without hesitation these are the most emotionally painful steps that I have ever made in my nearly thirty years of ordained ministry. I and members of the Council have wracked our brains and searched for viable solutions. Sheer responsibility to our roles, to the congregation and to the long term health of the church led us to recommend something none of us would have proposed otherwise. Yet we all know that extraordinary times require extraordinary steps. In fact, this past fall I and two members of the Stewardship Ministry attended a United Church of Christ conference designed to help churches face these tough economic times. The leaders of the conference warned us all how hard this time was going to be and what we might face. One of the points they made at this seminar was, and I quote, "Amidst a crisis, leadership has an obligation to consider actions which would otherwise be considered politically and logistically untenable."<sup>1</sup> First Plymouth's lay and executive leadership can confirm the hard truth of this statement.

What is bewildering is that things have been going so well. As I mentioned last Sunday, Frank and I and so many of you have repeatedly commented to each other how joyful, positive and Spirit-filled these past months have been. The lay-initiated and lay-led LOFT program which seeks to weave the habit of mission into our children's lives right from the start, the lay-initiated and lay-led New Spirit Groups of spiritual friendship, the Share the Plate initiative to help the hurting and needy and its startlingly fantastic beginning, our youth-led response to the tragedy in Haiti, the remarkable Arts @ Plymouth program, our growing witness to interfaith dialogue with Muslims and Jews, the decades' long witness to Denver Inner City Parish, Metro Care Ring, Kentucky Circle and Family Homestead, our increasing witness to the gay and lesbian communities: all of these are concrete examples of a healthy, loving, joyful and mission-focused church. All of these are examples of the strength and vitality of this congregation. We have come so far and remained so faithful; it is a joy to behold.

Yet we cannot hide from the fact that even in the midst of our current vitality we are reaping the results of sweeping cultural change and what is universally referred to as "mainline

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<sup>1</sup> Foundations of Fundraising: Cycle 3; United Church of Christ; October 8 - 10, 2009; Dallas, Texas

decline." We cannot hide from the fact that First Plymouth has followed the mainline pattern of lower membership, even as the witness of you who have remained has stayed strong and grown. During these past few years, as we have been successfully rebuilding, we have financially pulled every rabbit out of every hat to balance the budget. There are no more rabbits. There are no more hats. We have used all temporarily restricted funds generously left to us by members in generations past. We have squeezed every superfluous dollar out of the budget. We have reduced our energy and supplies consumption to the point where there is nothing left to reduce. We have nearly gutted our programming budgets. There is nothing left to cut except personnel. We can no longer staff the smaller church of today using the paradigm of the larger church of yesterday. Our reliance on previous generations has ended. With the exception of this building itself, what those in the past have left us is gone. Today and tomorrow are up to us.

We WILL see this difficulty through, I assure you, . . . and you are assuring me. The mission of this church is too rich, the Spirit in this church too active, joyful and playful, and the determination of this church too strong. We WILL see this through. But no one ever promised us it would be easy. Following Jesus never is.

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At that same conference that I referred to earlier, the presenters said that the number one take away for us should be, and again I quote, "Don't miss out on a good recession." Well, we certainly are in a recession! Our nation's, and the world's, economic difficulties will pass, we know this. That being said, it is not over yet. From local, state and federal budget crises, to failed businesses and 10% unemployment, most of us here have never experienced this. Sometimes we feel helpless in the face of it. We wonder what direction to take as citizens, neighbors, family members, friends.

But we do not wonder what direction to take as Christian community. Jesus has never left us in doubt about that. Listen to this morning's text: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. . . . Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." As I was pondering this text before I began to write this sermon, one of the central tenets of Christian ecclesiology hit me square in the face, viz., the Church is Jesus in the world; it is, we are, Jesus; we are the Body of Christ. Jesus created and co-missioned the Church to continue his work until it is done. The gathered body of Christ is Jesus's heart and hands and eyes and ears and love. First Plymouth is an incarnation of compassion and grace and service and caring. In a time of broken hearts and broken economies, in a time of confused lives and confused societies, in a time of growing despair and growing need, we are a church of growing Spirit and growing ministry to the hurting, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, upon US, because God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. God has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Yes, sometimes we may feel helpless in the face of what is occurring in the world today. Sometimes we may wonder what direction to take as citizens, neighbors, family members and friends. . . . And then we come to this beloved community and our wondering is resolved, for as disciples we know what direction to take. The Great Commission of Christ echoes across the centuries calling

us beyond helplessness to mission, calling us beyond confusion to clarity, calling us to a direction that is envisioned by God and guided by the Holy Spirit, all the while walking in the Way of Christ.

Churches exist for times like these. Now is why we live. The call to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to proclaim that the oppressed should go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, this is why we are. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. We are its fulfillment. We are Jesus in the world. We are called in mission to proclaim this Good News. Particularly in the midst of challenging fiscal news our mission remains. And so does our faithfulness.

Today we again have the opportunity, no, rather, the privilege and the blessing, of being the fulfillment of the Word. Again today we will collect the loose cash in our offering plate for Work Options for Women, helping un- and under-employed women get training in the culinary arts and find stable, secure jobs. Next week our offering was scheduled to go to our denominational program of Neighbors in Need. However, I will ask if we can do it for the neighbors in need in our own midst—literally in our own congregation—I am aware of more than one family who, due to unemployment in this economy, are in dire straights. We must support the needy and hurting inside our doors as well as those outside.

Today the Word will also be fulfilled in our hearing as we continue the blessed task of growing ever more deeply into a beloved community of disciples. This is our primary work—being disciples. You see, it is not only through the church's programs of ministry and mission that we serve as Jesus's hands and heart. Through spiritual formation we are individually remade into disciples, reshaped into the image of God who is love, and we bring our discipleship to our homes, to the streets, to our places of labor and leisure, and we act and function as disciples in every situation in our lives. Through the very quality of our breathing and behavior we each live the call to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to proclaim that the oppressed should go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor; this is why we exist. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing" because we are its fulfillment. We are Jesus in the world, not just as the corporate body of First Plymouth Church, but beyond our doors as individual disciples as well.

As a fire is meant for burning so a church is meant for mission. And our mission is our fire. Our mission, developed by you in solid congregational processes of long-range planning and considered deliberation are our expressions of how we walk the Jesus road. They are why we exist. They define who we are. As a fire is meant for burning so a church is meant for mission. And our mission is our fire. Let us say together:

The mission of First Plymouth Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, is:  
to worship God  
to nurture people on their Christian journey  
and to witness to God's love in word and deed.

Relying on the grace and power of God, known to us most fully in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, we aspire to be a community which is biblically based, intellectually open, theologically

progressive and inclusive of all people. Fostering an atmosphere of joy and celebration that welcomes all people, we commit to provide:

Varied and meaningful opportunities for worship and spiritual growth.

Engaging and interactive Christian education for all age groups.

A caring and compassionate ministry to members and friends of the church family.

Loving service to the wider community with a focus on human need, social justice, and stewardship of the earth.

And let all the people say, AMEN.

### PASTORAL PRAYER

God of the ages, you seek us out in the places of earthly power and in the ordinary setting of our homes, in our places of work and in our recreation. You invite us to enter into your presence where we will find wonder and miracle, joy and abundance. From your love, you give us this church to be men and women who have the ears to hear and the courage to speak your invitation and know that it is fulfilled in our hearing.

Beloved God, grant discernment to every being who knows you as the Holy One by any one of your myriad names. Grant that all those who have been chosen to be your prophets in this day will have the strength and compassion to hear your call, and the courage to become your living voice, incarnate in the people *for* your people, proclaiming your healing vision to the world. Amen.

### LETTER TO THE CONGREGATION FROM JANE ANNE FERGUSON

My Friends,

I am fine and I am well. I will be back in the office tomorrow. You are in my prayers as I know I am in yours. God will lead us through this situation with grace and dignity and love.

In the gospel of Luke Jesus sets forth the agenda for his ministry when he reads the from the book of Isaiah in a Sabbath service.

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to bring good news to the poor,  
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As followers of Christ created in the image of God this is *our* joyful agenda as well! Let us continue, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in as individuals and as a beloved community, to be faithful to Jesus' agenda!

Blessings, Love and Light,  
Jane Anne