

**“TOTAL RECALL”**  
**July 5, 2009**  
**Anissa Bacon and Aaron James**

**Aaron:**

I first preached at Plymouth Church just over two years ago – a sermon on the Good Samaritan. One of the first things I said during that sermon was that I admitted that it was hard to preach here; it was going to be a challenge, not just because of the high standards or the fact that even though my eyes are really good I can't see some of you all the way in the back, but because I didn't know you yet. “And in a church this size, this busy, this active,” I said, “something tells me my two years might go by without getting to know some of you.”

And I was right, which is nice, but it also has the feeling of untapped potential. Anissa and I have only been here two years, give or take, which turns out to be just enough time to start to get settled in and start building relationships – just in time to leave. Speaking for both of us, I think, as much as we've immersed ourselves in the life of this place and really engaged in different areas, we're really just starting to scratch the surface.

But we knew it was coming: We came here, most of you know, as part of the Transition into Ministry Pastoral Residency Program, which is sponsored by the Lilly Endowment. We came here, each of us, having just finished seminary, newly ordained, to a place that would challenge us, help us grow, give us support and feedback, help us continue gaining experience in ways we couldn't have otherwise, and then give us the chance after two years to do a thorough search-and-call process that would lead us, hopefully, to a good fit with our next church.

And now we're on the flip side of that transition, the transition out. This summer marks the transitioning out for both of us, to new calls. And while we're going to separate places at separate times, it felt appropriate, for us at least, to have a final service together.

**Anissa:**

Aaron and I came here to Plymouth as people at the beginning of a new phase of our life journey. But make no mistake, this was not the beginning of our journeys with God or our journeys with God's people. And the same is true for you. The experience of participating in the Transition-into-Ministry program was also your journey into the deeper experience of being a part of the larger church, of the future of this denomination, into being a part of the future of all churches that call themselves United Churches of Christ. And now, as we come to the time of the first transition of ministers out of the program, that dream, that first part of the journey is finally becoming a reality.

As Aaron said, this is the last service that we will share here together, and so even as he goes and I stay a bit longer, the community we all built together is changing once again. This is a sad moment for us, but one that is also filled with promise and hope – because we, and by that I mean the whole church, have finished much of the work that we set out to do together in these two years time. We have grown to trust each other, we've shared our highs and lows – in short – we've lived and learned together – and these experience will help edify our journeys as we move on and your journey as you continue with two new Associate Ministers in your midst.

**Aaron:**

That makes it pretty real, doesn't it? Your two new Associate Ministers, Jeanette Brodersen and Stephanie Haskins, started here over a month ago. Which means their time here is about 4% over, give or take, in case anyone's counting. Jeanette and Stephanie are both incredibly gifted, intelligent, professional and kind people and ministers – you all have a lot to look forward to together.

But because our time here is overlapping with theirs', even for a short while, it's a time for us to see this place with fresh eyes again, to remember, even a little bit, what it was like to not know this place.

Personally, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to have a call in the Midwest, nearer to family. Professionally, it was a wonderful opportunity to begin my career in a place like this, with great colleagues, with a huge variety of activity and ministry to gain experience.

But it was also an opportunity to begin to grow into being a minister. I grew up going to church, but being a minister was a strange new thing that required a great deal of "growing into." And it still is and still does, but this feels like an incredible head start in the process.

**Anissa:**

Before I came to Plymouth I had worked in the church for over ten years. In some ways I knew exactly what I was getting into, in other ways I was confronted with things that I didn't even know that I needed to know! I came to you from a church community that had been supportive and faithful to me, but one that had broken. In fact, the church I served no longer exists as I knew it - it is a smaller, less welcoming version of itself. So I came to Plymouth a bit hurt and traumatized by the loss of that community in many ways. In fact, this was part of the reason I came to Plymouth – to be in a family of faith that differs, but doesn't splinter, that unites in faith to serve others. Here I learned another way of being in the church, a way to deal with our differences in love and a way to answer God's call that minimizes our ability to hurt each other. You have helped me heal from that hurt and for that I will always be thankful.

But being here has not always been easy for me. I've missed my own family and I've felt very distant from a culture (the culture of Northern New England) that I have mostly lived in. The way we do "church" in New England is very different from how we do it here – and I have loved learning about that. But, the Mid-West in ways is still a strange and mysterious place for me. Sometimes I have felt like a "stranger in a strange land." I'm afraid that I will never know the difference between a Barnstormer and a Buccaneer, or understand the fascination with putting food, any and every food, on a stick. But even my disorienting experiences have taught me something – they have taught me the true depth of friendship as people here have supported me through those hurts, they have taught me a way to be in service to God and others that honors my own needs, and they have taught me to be reliant and accountable to others in positive ways. The immense support I have received on my own spiritual journey, even when others did not fully understand it, will carry me well through the next stages of my life. As I now begin to leave this place, I leave as a better version of myself, for having been trusted and supported by you.

Now we find ourselves on a precipice – in that place in between – and I like to think of it as a “thin place”. A “thin place” is a Celtic term for a place where two worlds meet. We are in the place of the “has been” and the “not yet”. It is a place for reflection, it is a place for dreaming and it is a place for remembering who we are and whose we are. Because in this place, hopes turn into dreams come true.

Aaron and I came here, hoping to learn to be better ministers, hoping that this place would provide for us a foundation for our years of service to come. That hope is now just beginning to become a dream realized. We’ve learned what it means to share in the lives of people while you are serving them. We’ve learned how to share our own gifts and honor their depths. We’ve learned what it means to be a community of faith in the highs and lows of life – in economic downturns, elections, natural catastrophes, births, weddings and deaths. We’ve learned that God exists in all of them. And that a lot of love and a lot of humor go a long, long way.

**Aaron:**

That’s a fact. Count that as one of many things we came in here knowing but didn’t know how true it was. Much of my journey of faith has been like that; the deepening of truths I learned a long time ago but continue to rediscover. “Jesus loves me;” I could have told you that when I was five, but it’s differently and more deeply true today.

That’s a lot of what this time has been about for us. There was some un-learning to do, but mostly our experience has been confirming many things we knew:

Church needs to be a place of welcome. “No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” I am proud when we say this; I am even more proud when we practice this. We need to be intentional about hospitality.

**Anissa:**

This is a world that breeds in us a lot of fear. It is easy to get anxious about things like money and change, but there is another way that seeks security in God and faith and not things.

**Aaron:**

Serving someone else is probably the quickest and best way to get out of yourself and start to live differently.

**Anissa:**

It is important to cultivate lives of prayer that are supported and nourished in the community of faith. Prayer, worship and song support us in that journey.

**Aaron:**

People are seeking meaning and purpose. There is a restlessness in all of us that makes us very appropriately unsatisfied by what the world has to offer, and so we gather for the journey together, seeking God and finding God is seeking us.

**Anissa:**

The love of God gives us the strength to act in faith, not vice versa.

**Aaron:**

And first and last. We are all ministers of the gospel. It is not about us but we have an incredible opportunity and responsibility to shine God's light into the world.

**Anissa:**

As Aaron and I leave this place, I can't help but see the similarities between our life here and the sending out of the disciples that we find in our scripture reading today. I speak for both of us when I say that we feel sent out of this place by the Christ who called us here together. We are sent out, as two, and we bring with us not only the tangible gifts that come from living in a family of faith, but the intangible ones that are even more important. We bring with us a faith that has been nourished and expanded by you, the people that we have served God with in this place and time. We bring with us the skills that have been learned, the talents that have been improved, and the rough edges that have been smoothed out. We bring with us the gift of each other that will continue as we support each other in our ministries in the years to come – a relationship that you are responsible for because you brought us together. And we bring you with us in our hearts.

**Aaron:**

That's the wonderful and enduring insight of times of transition like these: things are changing, but only a small part of it is about ending. Most of it is about new beginnings, about our relationships taking new form. That's what we see in the commissioning of the disciples – it's a time for "re-call." A time to be reminded of what brought us all together and what sustained us during that time, and then a chance to be called again to those things in new ways, in new times and places.

Which is what Jesus warns the disciples about when he sends them out for ministry. They are heading out on the journey in faith – no food, no shelter, just relying on the hospitality of others, knowing that not everyone will receive them. But they called others to new life and worked to heal those who were suffering.

At least for me this is a time to remember why I wanted to be a minister in the first place. This is the work, broadly speaking, of doing good and healing. It's not the only place in the world it happens, but it's great to be in this specific role as we live into this call together. This is a way we can, together, participate in the transforming work of God in the world.

And today we are re-called to that life of loving service. And so are you. All the pieces are in place: We have worship: this strange and wonderful time to express our faith and encounter God. We have the faith practices: our opportunities to learn and grow and

serve. And we have the gospel message: God is love, revealed in Jesus Christ, who makes new life possible, whoever we are, wherever we are on life's journey.

**Anissa:**

We leave here for new ministries taking with us the best that the life of faith has to offer – the love of a people of God gathered in Christ's name. That love carries all of us forward as we all begin new ministries in this very moment. As we meet new communities and you stretch yourselves to include newcomers in your midst, we can remember that it is God that nourishes us in and through all these changes and makes the gifts of God for the people of God actually mean something in this strange and unusual world we live in.

This world is full of beauty and change, and so we celebrate that here today. We celebrate the time we spent together, the time that is to come and the God who calls us to live as God's people. It is time to mark this time of change, for us and for you, and to remember God's blessings in our ministry together.