Sunday, January 16, 1972
INTRODUCTION TO OUR MUTUAL MINISTRY

Life is full of new beginnings. Our recent move to Lincoln marks a new beginning for the life of this congregation, and for the life of my family and myself.

Just a few weeks ago, I said goodbye to a staff that I had come to respect and love and to neighbors and friends who had been an integral part of our lives. Today our whole family looks forward with you to years of worship, labor, and fun together.

This morning as I look out upon this congregation, I recognize only a face here and there. Most of us are still strangers to each other. You look at me and you wonder, just what kind of person is he? I look at you and wonder the same thing. We can no doubt expect a great many surprises as we get to know each other better. Some good surprises and some not always so good. But that's what makes them surprises.

A Word about my predecessors

Before we go further, some words need to be said about my predecessors in this job and those who have filled in so ably during the interim period when you were without a senior minister.

I was not personally acquainted with your senior ministers prior to Ford Forsyth, but I had come to know Ford quite well. I also came to appreciate and love Dr. and Mrs. Cleveland during the brief time that he served as interim. And of course, the rest of the staff all had much extra work to do during the past year especially.

All these persons, those whom I have come to know and those known only to you are responsible with you for what this congregation is today. Together you have planted and watered, and God has given the growth. All of you have your fond memories of past and present ministers. To some of you this church and this pulpit will not seem the same now that someone new has come and of course it won't be the same. To all of you I must say that I have not really come to take Ford Forsyth's place or Joe Cleveland's place or Tom Evans or Dick Morris. The places which these persons and others have in your lives and memories no one else can take. The love and respect you have for them is an enduring thing. My family and I have come to make our own places with you.

In filling the office of senior minister, I will have to walk in my own shoes, be myself, and serve God and man through my personality and talents.

Our Mutual Ministry

With these comments in mind, let's now look at some of the aspects of our mutual ministry.

In our scripture lesson just read, we heard the Apostle Paul's words to the Church in Corinth. He wrote — - "When I came to you, I declared the attested truth of God without display of fine words or wisdom. I resolved that while I was with you, I would think of nothing but Jesus Christ — Christ nailed to the cross. I came before you weak, as I was then, nervous and shaking with fear. The word I spoke, the gospel I proclaimed, did not sway you with subtle arguments; it carried conviction by spiritual power, so that your faith might be built not upon human wisdom, but upon the power of God.

“Although Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth, as he looked back on his ministry there, they also fit our situation as we look forward together.

I come to you today with the Apostle’s words in mind. I am here as he was to proclaim to you the good news of God.

To proclaim the good news of God and to help you do the same, it will be my business, along with the rest of the staff, to preach, to teach, to administer the sacraments, to oversee the work of the congregation, to minister to you and others in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, and to help you minister to each other.

I am here, not depending on my own power or wisdom, but relying on the power of God to work through us. As I mentioned to you in my sermon here last September, I come bringing my fives loaves and two fish, and I hope you will bring yours, and together we will have the faith and hope that God will multiply and make it more than sufficient for the job at hand. You remember in that story there were twelve baskets of leftovers.

And as was the case with the Apostle Paul, I come to you in weakness and shaking with fear. The weakness of which I speak is not bodily weakness or mental weakness, but the weakness which one feels when he takes stock of the magnitude of the job and the weakness compared to the power of God.

I have said in the title for this sermon that we have a mutual ministry together. This works in two ways. We have a ministry to each other, I to you and you to me, and we also have a ministry together to those outside the church. It has been said that the church exists for those who are not in it, and that is of course true, but we also have a ministry to each other. Let’s look at that first.

You can be sure that I will make mistakes. Also, you can be sure that as we work together, we won’t always agree. And sometimes I’ll step on your toes in what I do and not even know it. Sometimes I’ll break traditions and established patterns and not know it. Part of our mutual ministry to each other is that I’ll need very much your understanding and forgiveness as we work together. Since I am a different person, just as each person is different, we’ll be making changes from time to time, and I need your willingness and trust to work with me.

Most of all, as we share in this mutual ministry of one to the other, remember always that the minister is a human being, a sinner and one who needs, as we all do, constant forgiveness. You’ll be reminded of this soon enough. I only hope that I’ll not be like a minister colleague of mine who after he had been in a new parish for about six months had a person say to him one Sunday morning — "you know we never really knew what sin was until you came to be our minister.”

Thus, as Paul came to Corinth in weakness, I also come to you in that kind of weakness which we all have, the weakness which needs God’s love, the love of one to another, God’s forgiveness, the forgiveness of one to another and prayers one for the other. As you know, ministers are usually asked to pray at all kinds of occasions and for all kinds of things. I ask you this morning to continue to pray for the ministers and the staff of this congregation, even as we shall continue to pray for you.

We have a mutual ministry one to the other. This is part of the meaning of the “priesthood of all believers" — we are priests one to the other.

Along the same line, it needs to be said again and again, that I do not come to you as a person with all the answers. Actually, I have very few answers, and even though I will off suggestions as we go along, it is when we work together, we will seek and find the answers. And many times, they will be answers that none of us had in mind or expected. If one answer fails, we’ll pick up and try another. I believe very strongly in learning through failure as well as through success. Thomas Edison, after testing some 200 hundred materials without finding one that could be used for an incandescent light, said, “Don’t feel sorry for me, I now know 200 things that won’t work.”

Thus far, we have been talking about our mutual ministry of one to the other within the congregation. But we also have a mutual ministry together to the community around us, and with other Christians to the whole world. Sometimes congregations have made the mistake of only seeing themselves as a field in which the ministers and the other staff are to labor. Rather we should see the community and the world as a field in which we as staff and congregation labor together. Naturally, within this ministry, there is a division of labor, and that’s why a congregation employs a staff. We as a staff are here to lead, to nurture, to lead in worship and to minister with the skills and training we have. But the ministers and the staff are nothing apart from the congregation. I cannot bear your witness for you.

Today as we worship here and when we are gathered in small or large groups for other purposes, we can be thought of as the “church gathered.” But when we part one from the other as we leave this place, we are still the church. You are the church at where you work or play tomorrow. There we also bear our witness and carry out our respective ministries in our vocations.

While throughout this sermon I’ve been talking about our mutual ministry, we are still strangers to one another personally, yet in a deeper sense we are only strangers; on the surface, for if we share a life in Christ, we al-ready share a community of spirit like unto nothing else in the world. We are members of one human family and one household of faith. We are a part of a community which transcends all barriers of time and space. (9:30 service only)

To this end may God bless us then, that we may so live together in the bonds of hope and trust and allegiance to Christ our Lord that we may be instruments of his power. Let us love one another, serve one another, worship and labor and have fun together so that we may ever increase among men the love of God and neighbor. Amen. (11:00 service only)

And now as a symbol of our mutual ministry one to the other and to begin our new ministry together — instead of the usual ritual of friendship where the sign-up sheet is passed — let’s take a few minutes, stand up where you are, turn and greet the persons to the left and to the right of you and behind and in front of you — shake their hands and welcome them. Tell your name if the person you are greeting doesn’t know it. Amen.

Remain standing for the next hymn!