Sunday, November 4, 1973
THE MINISTRY OF THINGS

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kit tens,
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens,
Brown paper packages wrapped up in strings,
These are a few of my favorite things.

Cream colored ponies and crisp apple strudels,
Doorbells and sleighbells and schnitzel with noodles,
Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings,
These are a few of my favorite things.

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes,
Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes,
Silver white winters that melt into springs,
These are a few of my favorite things.

When the dog bites, when the bee stings,
When I'm feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things,
And then I don't feel so bad.

This song from the Sound of Music is telling us that favorite things can minister to us, can take some of the terror out of life, and we know it's true.

There are things in this world that minister to us in such a way that our sadness seems not quite so sad, our loneliness seems not quite so lonely and our happiness much happier than they might otherwise be.

Yet sometimes we have been taught that there is something tainted about the material world. We've been told that we should think of ourselves as people who live above and beyond the physical realm. Thus, sometimes we like to make excuses for our acquisitions of worldly goods. We tell ourselves that we bought the new car because in the long run it will save us money. Or we bought the new house because it is a good investment. We seldom say, "I bought it because I wanted it, I can afford it, and I plan to enjoy it." Now maybe we shouldn't have bought some of the things we have, but it is hard for us to accept and enjoy a thing, in and of itself.

And yet, we surround ourselves with all sorts of things; gadgets, furniture, dishes, pots and pans, books and records, pictures, statues, tie clips, earrings, several pairs of shoes, boxes full of things, drawers full of things, whole garages and attics full of things, things we;9ay we are going to get rid of, things we always find a reason to keep, things which, if we admit it, have fastened them-selves to our lives so that if they got lost or stolen or broken or burned up, we would grieve for them, and our lives would not be the same without them.

Things are like that. They become part of us. Most hobbies that people have, have something to do with things, whether it be stamp collecting or some craft. In that sense too, things can minister to us. And of course, on the other hand, things can also become idolatrous. We can come to worship them too much. (walk to the table)

I have here this morning some of my favorite things --a golf club, my Bible, a football, this notebook, another book, and a dollar bill.

Connected to each of these things there is a story. Golf for me is a way of relaxation and recreation. Although I'm not very good at it as some of you can testify, it does me some good.

This old Bible is especially important to me. It was given to me as a gift by a woman in the first church I served some years ago. The person who gave it to me wrote a lovely inscription on the inside page. Thus, besides being a Bible and therefore a very important tool for my everyday work, and for my guidance, it is also filled with other meanings. Furthermore, I like the way it feels in my hands.

This of course is a football, but not just any football. Actually, it belongs to my son. I bought it for him not long after we moved to Nebraska. As you know better than I, a football is a very important thing in Nebraska.

This football, however, becomes a bond between my son and me. We sometimes play catch with it, and this helps to build our relationship. We watch football games together on T.V. Sometimes we go to football games together.

For many people attending football games is a kind of ministry to them. It's recreation, but not always relaxation. It's a change of pace.

This black notebook is another one of my favorite things. I like the way it feels in my hands. It is also an important tool in my work for it carries my sermon notes, the wedding service, funeral service, and other related materials for my ministry. It, too, has been with me a long time.

And then books of various kinds are my favorite things. Here's just one. I read one or more each week. They minister to me because they take me into a different world for a time. They cause me to think new thoughts and learn new things. They bring other worlds to me that I cannot visit in person. They tell beautiful stories. They rebuke my pet prejudices. I also just like the feeling of being surrounded by books of various kinds.

For many of us, money is a favorite thing, and I am no exception. Money has a certain power. It can buy me more things. It can help me travel to places. It buys my food and clothes. It can help others through me.

I'm sure that each one of us here has his or her own collection of favorite things. They can and do minister to you and to others in all kinds of ways. Our lives are lived in continual contact with the things of this world.

The way we use things, take care of things, has an effect on us. Consider how you are something of a different creature with a screwdriver in your hand than you are with a ball point pen in your hand. The things we make use of help to determine our values and purposes and tasks.

It has often been said that we live in a materialistic culture and perhaps we do, but there is a kind of Christian materialism. One theologian has said that Christianity is the most avowedly

materialist of all the great religions. Our faith never ignores the material; it never minimizes its importance.

The Bible teaches that material is basically good because God made .it. In the New Testament this concept reaches its greatest height in the proclamation and event — "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." God became material and lives among us.

The materialism of Christianity is also seen in the fact that our faith never minimizes the physical, the material 4. needs of our existence. Although Jesus said, "Man shall now live by bread alone," he also asked his disciples to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Furthermore, our Lord was not only concerned about the salvation of persons in a spiritual sense, but also at the same time very much concerned for the wellbeing of their bodies. Again and again, he assured men and women that God was concerned for their material needs, food, drink, clothes.

In fact, in one well-known passage, Jesus describes those serving the physical needs of people as being those who serve God in the highest sense. He said that those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the stranger and visited those who were sick and in prison, were actually doing those things to him. Jesus himself fed the hungry and healed the sick.

Also, throughout the gospels we find that Jesus did not spend much time complaining about materiality. He seems in fact to have enjoyed the material world. He was even called by his enemies a glutton and a winebibber.

At the same time, Jesus was very critical of those who misused material things, people who perverted things or treated things irreverently or irresponsibly.

We need to regain a sense of the proper use of things. That's what ecology in the best sense of the word is all about. That's what Christian stewardship is all about too. We are to honor and respect the things of the world and the things that we use.

In Japan, I am told, there is a kind of religious service for the retirement of old hats. Before the hat is completely worn out, while it still has some of its original shape and beauty, the hat is set aside and given its rest. At the service of retirement, thanks are given for the many years of service the hat has provided its wearer, and prayers are offered for its faithfulness in keeping the sun of the person's head and the rain out of the face. There is something very significant in this, something we in the wasteful west need to appreciate.

There is a close bond between persons and things, and there is something sacred about this bond. We give a gift, a thing to a person when we want to honor that person. And notice how our clothes, after a few wearing, and again for better or worse, take on the shape of our bodies. We depend upon down-to-earth physical things for life and breath and heal, for strength and faith and courage, for worship, prayer and song. With the proper use of things, we can raise our spirits and inspire our thoughts. If we junk up the world, we junk up our lives.

2. That means secondly that just to collect and buy things because we want them to add to our stature is the wrong use of things and then they do not minister to us as they should.

Perhaps the largest single trouble with the abundance of possessions is that so many of them are owned, not because of what they are, or because we really care for them or appreciate

them — but because we think they confer something on us. A person, for example, might purchase the best stereo set made, but not because he really enjoys music or appreciates the particular quality of sound that is reproduced or the techno1ogy and ski11 that went into the making of the set — but rather because he imagines that to own such a set confers some kind of status or culture on him. This is a shallow kind of caring.

We are to use the things of the world in a sacramental way, and then they can minister to us and others. To use things in a sacramental is to care for them and appreciate them, much like a young man who lovingly polishes, waxes and keeps his car, even thought, it be an old one, in tip-top condition. Or it is like the person who keeps the machinery he works with in the best of shape, the carpenter who keeps his tools sharp and sees that they don't rust.

3. Thirdly, things minister to us and to others when we share them and are not greedy about them. Just to hoard things for the sake of having them or to give me a feeling of security is again a misuse of the things themselves and it harms me for it shrinks my spirit. The happiest persons are always those who are sharing what they have with others.

We can often experience God through the proper use of things. The things of God are all the things of this world. How can we say we love God if we do not appreciate and care for the things of the world as well as the people of the world? Amen.