Book 3

Sunday November 11, 1973

"TIME TO REJOICE"

There is a strange perversity in the rejoicings of Christians! From any seemingly sensible point of view, Christians are forever rejoicing or being asked to rejoice at inappropiate moments, when from all outward appearances there seems to be no cause for joy.

The New Testament writers command us to rejoice--even as they command us to love--in instances when it does not seem the natural thing to do. We are told to rejoice when we are persecuted, to rejoice at all times, under all circumstances, and Paul wrote to the Colossians that he was rejoicing in his sufferings for their sakes. In a similar way Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to bless those who persecute us.

So here we are in November 1973, when we face as a nation and world the most runaway inflation in history, when we in the United States are still in the midst of the Watergate scandals, when the situation in the Middle East is unsettled, when we face fuel and other shortages, more severe than we imagined, when there seems to be a lack of trust in government, when something seems to be ailing in our American spirit, when the stock market seems sluggish, and at the same time the title of the sermon is -- 'Time to Rejoice.'

Some of you may be thinking--"That preacher is out of his mind. He is telling us to rejoice when all of these problems face us and worse yet he's going to ask us in all of this to give more money for the ministry and work of the church when we all have less money to spend and all of these other problems surround us."

Yes, that's exactly what I'm going to do! I'm going to ask you to rejoice and at the same time to increase your pledge to the church if at all possible, and here's why!

1. First, it's time to rejoice because our faith gives us a new perspective on life. Christians can rejoice when from all outward appearances there is seemingly nothing to rejoice about. That's because as Christians our rejoicing and our loving stem from a new source, a new force and power in our lives that is not dependent on what goes on around us.

We all know of course that much rejoicing and love can be natural reactions to pleasant and happy occasions. Good things happen to us. We are united with old friends and family. We get a pay raise. We are surprised by some unexpected gift. Our children do well. Our grandchildren are the most beautiful children in the world. We can have many personal reasons for rejoicing in these times even though there are other things in the world around us that do not give us much reason.

In other words there is a kind of rejoicing that occurs when things are going our way and life is smooth and easy. It's not difficult to love those who love us.

But the New Testament is saying we Christians can also rejoice even when that situation changes, when our usual love and joy are ended. It is here where the gospel begins--where externally caused love and joy run out; when the world around us is not loving to us and does not smoothly greet us. At such a time, the gospel says to us--continue to love, love your enemies; continue to rejoice, bless those who persecute you. We are commanded to rejoice and love at precisely the time when such a spirit seems to make no sense at all.

This is the heart of our faith. We Christians are able to rejoice even in the most distressing of times because our faith is that in spite of external circumstances, God's will, God's power will triumph. As the New Testament puts it, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress or persecution?" We might translate today, "Shall inflation, or fuel shortages, or government scandals? No, in all of these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Love for our enemies and rejoicing in distress are part of the conquering of this world which we accomplish in and through Jesus Christ. To love those who are not lovable and to rejoice in the midst of a situation that is not joyful are part of the same action. To do this is to be like God. That's what he does.

Christians are not loving people just because others love us--or joyful people just because the world happens to make us happy. Rather we are loving people in spite of the hostility we encounter and we are joyful people in spite of the misery the world may provide.

We are called to become loving and joyful people, in ourselves, and not simply as a response. On this basis we are like God who loves his creation even when his human creatures do not respond to him in love, as at the cross. We are like God, whose joy pervades the universe even when his world presents countless occasions of sorrow.

So when we ask, "When is the time to rejoice?" The Gospel's answer is clear. All times are times to rejoice. In distressing times, the reality and strangeness of the Christian's joy will be a clearer witness to the world than joy would be in a glad season. There is indeed a perversity in the rejoicings of Christians.

2. Secondly, it's time to rejoice because hopefully in our time, the church is again gaining strength and momentum. And it's certainly needed!

One of the most perceptive books I've been reading in recent weeks is entitled, "WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?" It's written by Dr. Karl Menninger of the Menninger Foundation. In that book, Dr. Menninger makes one of the strongest cases for the increasing importance of the role of the church in our time that I have seen anywhere. Who can doubt the fact that we need moral and spiritual leadership in our time? And if the church isn't strong enough to give it, who's going to do it?

Menninger says at one point in his book, "It may well be that as adults we have been so captured by the cult of comfort ourselves that we are incapable of challenging our own young people with the great needs of a world that is bewildered, uprooted, beaten down, and more than half-starved."

Thus, J. Irwin Miller, chief Executive Officer of the Cummins Engine Co. recently said, "The church must speak with words and deeds. In times past this has meant leading the fight against childlabor, slavery and for prison reform, and for the rights of the poor, for complete racial equality, for the elimination of poverty and hunger. Sometimes the church is wrong. . .but there is no way it can play it safe and be true to the gospel."

We can rejoice in our heritage, but that kind of rejoicing also means doing what needs to be done in the present and in the future. My brothers and sisters, never has the church been more needed than in our time!

3. But just to talk about rejoicing and loving and the church being needed is not enough. A few weeks ago, the theme of the sermon was -- "THE PROBLEM OF BEING SPECIFIC," and in that sermon we noted that many of us Christians are all for love and rejoicing and justice and all kinds of things in general, but the problem is being specific about it.

This morning we are going to be a specific as one can get, for one very important way in our time in which we Christians share our love and joy is through the giving of money for the work of the church. Nothing could be more specific than that. Our rejoicing is empty and dead unless we give our money to back it up. In fact, to give is to live.

As you know in September, my wife and I spent two weeks in Palestine. There are two main bodies of water in that country. One is fresh and fish are in it; splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. The River Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine, and people build their houses near it, and birds their nests and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The River Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here is no splash of fish, no song of birds. Travelers choose another route unless on urgent business. The air hangs above its waters and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink. What makes the difference in these two bodies of water? Not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie, not the country.

This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it, another flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. It is named the DEAD SEA!

To give is to live. The central word in the Christian Faith is "give." God so loved the world that he gave. The very nature and manifestation of love and joy is to give. Jesus Christ said this and lived it. "He who seeks

to save his life will lose it, but he who gives his life away will find it."

Show me a giving person and I will show you a happy, rejoicing person. Show me a hoarding, miserly person and I will show you an unhappy person.

This principle applies to every area of our living. When a person tries to be a miser of his own health, he usually makes himself miserable. The persons who are forever talking about conserving their strength, who are constantly watching for symptoms and coddling their complaints become slaves to the thermometer and fugitives from germs, living below par and dying before their time. We develop our physical strength by expending it, by using it, otherwise our muscles will die.

In a similar way a cautious person who is afraid to give himself to others very far, lest he or she be taken in by them, will find the boundaries of his affection shrinking. Love, sympathy, appreciation, joy do not exhaust themselves by use. They are expanded. To give is to live.

It's time to rejoice! And it's time now to be even more specific about our rejoicing.

During the past several weeks all of you have received many kinds of information about the financial needs of First-Plymouth Church for 1974, and the ministries it supports here and around the world. This folder points out that our budget for 1974 is about $14,000 higher than in our present year. If we are to reach that goal, it's going to take increased giving from almost all of us. In fact, it's going to take sacrificial giving from many of us.

Each year as I speak to you about money, about what your pledge should be, I warn against "averaging." Although the over-all budget increase is a little more than 8%, many of us are going to have to increase our pledges by much more than 8%. The Bible teaches that we are to give proportionately.

In order to help you judge what proportion you are giving or should give, it sometimes helps to compare it with what you spend for other things. For example, if you smoke a pack of cigarettes a day, that probably amounts to about $4.00 a week or more. If you are giving $4.00 a week to

the church, then something is out of line in your priorities. If you can afford to spend that much on that habit, then you ought to be able to give at least twice that much for the work of the church.

Or how much do you spend for recreation, per week, per month? On what level is your giving to the church. How does it compare with the money you spend for other things? These are some of the specific hard questions we have to ask ourselves before we make out our pledge cards.

So don't take the easy way out and just pledge what you are presently giving in 1973. Whatever figure you had in mind when you came to church this morning as a pledge for 1974, I hope you will consider increasing.

It's time to rejoice! That's the end of the sermon!

Now as an act of dedication, commitment and rejoicing, we are going to make out our pledge cards for 1974. The ushers will distribute the pledge cards among you. You will find pencils in the card holders on the back of the pews.

You do not have to be a member of First-Plymouth to make a pledge.

For those listening on the radio, you too can help support the ministry of First-Plymouth, even if you are not a member. Send you pledge or contribution to First-Plymouth Church, 20th and D streets, Lincoln, Nebraska

You will notice on the pledge cards that you can pledge for "Our Mission in Lincoln," and for our "Christian World Mission" or benevolence.

You can pledge an amount per week, per month, or however you plan to give, and you can request offering envelopes if you desire. We encourage all young people to pledge.

In a short while, the ushers will pass the offering plates and you may drop your cards on the plates. (11:00 service only.)