Sunday, January 16, 1977
SOME THINGS TO REMEMBER (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
John 13:3-5,12-15, 14:27, 15:1-8

This year in my annual report to the congregation, instead of dealing with statistics and specific programs, I want to have us look at some things we need to remember as a church of Jesus Christ. Thus, this morning I report to you as Pastor and Teacher of the congregation and not so much as administrator and chief executive officer, although these roles can never be completely separated.

In the first part of this report, I want to remind you and myself of some things to remember as warnings or temptations, and then in the second part I will mention some things to remember which will sustain us in our life as a congregation and as individuals.

I. In a book soon to be published entitled, “Systemantics,” the author writes about the behavior of institutions and organizations such as churches, businesses, hospitals, universities, colleges and government agencies. The author’s purpose is to attempt to uncover some of the causes of organizational ineptitude and systems malfunction.

He begins with the assumption that all over the world, in the great metropolitan centers as well as in the remotest rural backwater, in sophisticated electronics laboratories and in dingy clerical offices, we all struggle with a basic problem. Things often don’t work very well. In fact, they have never always worked very well.

Most of us are familiar with “Murphy’s Law” which states-- “If anything can go wrong, it will.” Or as school children often put it, “Jelly bread always falls jelly-side down.”

In fact, it often seems that some of our best efforts to do good, don’t improve things very much — sometimes we even make matters worse, or they come out even in spite of all of our efforts. Recently, I was reading about the gigantic, Aswan Dam, built at an enormous expense to improve the lot of the Egyptian Peasant. The dam is said to have caused the Nile River now to deposit its fertilizing sediment in Lake Nasser, where it is unavailable. So Egyptian fields must now be artificially fertilized. Fertilizer plants have been built to meet the new demand. The plants require enormous amounts of electricity. So, a lot of the dam’s electrical output goes to supply the increased need for electricity that was created by the building of the dam.

Or take a problem in our own society. It used to be in the not so distant past that thrift was a virtue. We were taught to save, conserve, and consume only what was necessary. But now we are also taught that we need to be consumers, not only because we need the items to survive, but so that the economy will thrive. Government officials and others worry about how to encourage people to spend more money on consumer goods. Monetary institutions encourage people both to save and to borrow. If all of us suddenly became very thrifty people and put our money into savings accounts and bought only what was necessary, then we are told, higher and higher rates of unemployment would occur and probably economic recession. We live in the midst of contradictions and paradoxes.

1. So the first thing we need to remember as we look at the work. of our church is that the church like other institu-tions is subject to having things go wrong. Sometimes we too, in our efforts to improve things, only make matters worse. As Christians we know there are destructive, demonic forces loose in our world and within us. In traditional language we call it

the devil; in the mythic language behind the Bible, it is chaos. In more contemporary experience it is the driving force of greed and fear and manipulation.

2. A second thing to remember as we look at the work of the church is that like other systems and institutions, the church does not always do what it says it is doing as its primary business. We say that our overall purpose as a church is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor and to increase health and harmony in all the creation. But sometimes in our life together we find ourselves decreasing among people the love of God and neighbor.

Furthermore, a lot of time the church is busy, and I am busy worrying about institutional survival, balanced budgets, church attendance, reputation, a leaking roof, high utility bills, number of new members and other such matters. I'm not saying that these have no importance, but that we need at all times to keep such issues in the proper perspective and to remember that they are not the reason for the church's existence, but only means to an end. There is always the temptation in the church as in other institutions to have the means become ends in themselves.

We need to remember in other words that "if we speak with the tongues of experts and consultants and have not love, we will have nothing but the noise of our own voices and the clanging of our pet ideas. And if we develop new methods, and write new curricula and learn new techniques, and if we understand all about group dynamics, so as to remove all problems of schedule and discipline, but have not love, we are nothing. If we give up all that has happened before and deliver ourselves to new prograrr1s but have not love, we gain nothing."

"Love never ends; as for meetings, they will pass away, as for budgets they will balance or not balance, as for leadership training schools, they will pass away. For our methods are imperfect and our plans are imperfect; so, methods, techniques, group dynamics, regimentation, small group experiences, there is all this and much more, but greater than all of these is love."

3. A third thing to remember as we look at the year past and the year ahead is that all institutions and systems, including the church, tend to forget the individual as a person. Systems can get in the way! We need to be constantly reminded that among us are persons who are hurting, who are lonely, who are afraid and who are looking for our love and care.

Recently as I was visiting persons in a hospital, I noticed that taped to the wall of the nurse's station, just above the Vital Signs Remote Sensing Console, which enables the nurses to record whether the patient is breathing and even to take the patient's pulse without actually going down the hall to see him, was the following hand-lettered reminder-- "THE CHART IS NOT THE PATIENT!" A good reminder for all of us. Unfortunately, most of the nurses were neither attending the patients nor making notations on the charts. They were in the hospital conference room, taking a course in interdisciplinary function. (Interdisciplinary function may be defined as the art of correlating one's own professional activities more and more with those of other professionals while doing less and less.)

We in the church constantly face the same temptation. We need to remember also that the chart is not the patient. We get so busy in all of our activities and busywork that we forget about the individuals who are hurting. A few months ago, a person who didn't sign his or her name wrote the following on one of the Prayer Request forms in the pews: "Sometimes I feel like I just can't go on and I don't think I can stand the pressure of another day. Would you please remember me in your prayers and those like me? Is it possible to die from loneliness and a broken heart?"

As I was in the midst of writing this sermon, I was interrupted by a person who wanted to see me immediately. The person had a pressing personal problem, and it took us almost two hours just to begin to sort it out. At first, I was read to resent the interruption. but then I remembered the words of an older experienced professor who had spent most of his life teaching students. He said, “You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.” That’s true of the church and for most of us individually.

II. With these warnings and temptations in mind, let’s look now at some more things to remember which are basic to our Christian faith and our life as a church congregation.

1. First of all, we are to remember that as a church and as individual Christians, our perception of the world is to be different. We are to be those who have gotten themselves untangled from the values of the world. We know there is more to life than the here and now. We know that persons are more important than property. We know that human worth is more precious than ideology or dogma. We know that quality is more important than quantity.

We know also as Christians that this world is on its way out and none can prevent that. We know that a new world is being given and we are invited to it. The movement from this world to the next is not made with full hands (you can’t take it with you) but requires empty hands. We know as Jesus put it, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he or she v1ho humbles himself will be exalted.”

We know that God’s ways are not always our ways and that our ways are not always God’s ways. The world is defensive because it believes things must be as they are. The world does not believe that God is making all things new. The world is grim because at best it is a desperate holding action to keep things from deteriorating. But our vision is different. We do not fear the turn in the world because we know God’s will for wholeness and justice will ultimately win out.

Remember the words of Jesus — “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you, not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

2. Secondly, we are to remember always as we go about the business of being the church that true life is in mystery and not in management. True, there will always be problems of budgets and programs and reports and goals and objectives. These are a part of the world’s existence here and now, but they are not to be our gods.

God’s love and care for us and for the creation has an element of mystery and depth to it that cannot be contained in any human vessel or goal or objective. God’s love is freely given. We do not earn it; we merely have to come with empty hands and accept it. “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” The creation is God’s, and it will not ultimately fall apart.

3. Thirdly, we are to remember the words of Jesus to his disciples and to us, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” In Nebraska, we don’t permit branch banks, but in the Bible, branches of another kind are encouraged. We are to be branches.

And there are some very important things to remember about branches. If they do not stay close and connected to the vine, they wither and die. Unless churches like ours stay close and connected to the source, the vine, God, we become nothing more than another social club or

institution. We need therefore to remember that prayer and worship are to be at the center of our existence. That's the way of keeping us who are branches connected to the vine.

Another thing to remember about branches is that they are not just to stay connected to the vine, but they are also to bear fruit. Jesus warns us in his statement ·about vines and branches that those branches which do not stay connected to the vine and which do not bear fruit are to be cast off and gathered and thrown into the fire and burned.

What are some of the fruits of the Gospel we are to produce? They are such things as justice and freedom, love, and hope. We are to be healers and lovers. We are to help people to be born again, to find new life, to live without fear because we and they know that while we are in this world, we are not of the world.

People often ask me, "But how does one know if he or she is born again?" You know them by their fruits, was the answer Jesus gave. And what are some of the fruits of this new spirit? "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." That's what the Bible says. Jesus Christ didn't care very much whether or not a person said he or she was born again. Jesus reminds us to look at our lives, to look at the fruit we bear. That tells the story!

4. And there is one thing more to remember as we go about this business of trying to be the church of Jesus Christ. When we do bear the fruit of newness, the fruit of the Gospel, there are always those who are going to be hostile to it and who will hate us. Jesus knew that. He was not much surprised by the hate and hostility that often came his way. He told his disciples before he left them, "If the world hates you, you know it has hated me before you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

Too often in our time, we hear people talk and act as if following Christ will bring them a Cadillac. The New Testament reminds us that if we follow Christ, we may receive a cross. The world and people sometimes hate the gospel of Jesus Christ and those who try to live it because it runs counter to so many of the values we now hold, and people don't like that. I well remember in the 1950's and 1960's when the church, even though late, began talking and acting in the civil rights area — it was hated. Some churches were down. We don't like to have our cherished worldly values called into question.

Remember then as we go about our being the church in this year and in coming years, the church's primary task is to build up the people of God as committed, mature, thorough-going citizens of God's community in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. We have an enormous task in becomi.ng what we are. Amen.