Sunday, January 8, 1978
MINISTRY IN A SETTLED-DOWN TIME (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
Matthew 5:43-48, 7:13-14,21-23

There is a sense in which the ministry of the Christian Church always implies change because the church is to be an agency of grace in the world, bringing the good news of God to all people.

Thus, it is the mission of the church to help persons be born again, to find new life, to live without fear of tomorrow, to bring to people the peace and joy which passes all understanding. As the Bible says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

Jesus Christ didn’t care very much about whether or not a person said that he or she was born again or save or what words a person used to describe his or her religious experience but was concerned with the way in which we live out our faith. Over and over again, Jesus Christ said, “You will know them by their fruits.” And he went on to say, “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he or she who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

In other words, we Christians are to be different. In what ways different? Again, listen to what Jesus Christ had to say: “You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you,” Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... for if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Anyone can do that. You therefore must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect. “That’s being different from the way in which human beings usually behave in the world.

As Christian congregations we are to carry on this ministry in this world. To do so effectively, we have to answering questions which people are asking. We have to be aware of what is going on in the culture. Jesus tells us to be “wise as serpents.” This does not mean that we change the content of the Gospel entrusted to us, but that the emphasis may change, or the way in which the Gospel is presented may change.

How then can we characterize our time so that the good news the church offers can be heard and received? And then more specifically, how does this effect the ministry of First-Plymouth church? What are we to emphasize in this year of 1978, and the years following?

Dr. Martin Marty, Professor of Church History at the University of Chicago Divinity School, describes the brief period of history in which we are now living as a “settled down” time. He uses this description because as we all know we have recently come out of a much more unsettled period. Within the 15-year period just past, we were involved in the Viet Nam war, there was campus unrest, President Kennedy was killed, Robert Kennedy was murdered, the civil rights movement was active, Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot, there was economic recession, and then Watergate.

Vast changes have occurred in the last 15 years. And these changes still affect us. In the nation’s capital, more conceptions are terminated by abortion than by birth; and in Ca1ifornia, more men and women live together unmarried than married. Eastern and African religions for the first time became serious options for millions of Americans.

What did not occur in this unsettling time just past was violent revolution, drastic political change, or fundamental cultural or religious reworking. And so, we are now in a more settled-down time. How long this will last, no one knows. Predictions about the future are very difficult if not impossible. We need always to allow for surprises, for the unexpected.

President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem some weeks ago is a good example of the unexpected. Not one expert among the many in government and the news media publicly predicted the Sadat visit. It was a total surprise when it happened. But so have been a number of other momentous events in our lifetime.

The Nazi-Soviet Pact before the second world war, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the excommunication of Tito, the invasion of South Korea, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech, the Sino-Soviet feud, the Middle East wars of 1967 and 1973, the American pilgrim ages to China, and more — all came as almost total surprises. We human beings are simply not much good in foretelling the future.

As one historian put it, "If history teaches us anything, it is that the future will be full of surprises and will outwit all our present certitudes. We cannot overlook the role of initiative, accident, chance, of wisdom and of stupidity too, in the unfolding of history." (Arthur Schlesinger Jr.)

The failure of prophecy is surely one of the reasons why many Americans do not take the energy problem very seriously. In 1914, the Bureau of Mines forecast a total future production of 5.7 million barrels of oil. In 1939, the Department of the Interior said the United States would be out of oil in 13 years.

On the other hand, one recalls the confident futurologists in the early 1960's who managed to chart the rest of the century at enormous length without ever seeing energy shortage as a problem, promising us a surprise-free economy, vastly increased leisure and next-day mail delivery everywhere in the country.

In the field of religion, we were told that Black religion was going to change everything. But the old-style black churches outlasted the innovators. Eastern religion, we were told, would turn everything around in America. But today, the eastern religion devotees are back to button-down corporate existence, leaving their Zen to their moonlighting hours. Even Hare Krishna devotees put on business suits and wigs for their airport contacts, and we are not saved.

So maybe we are entering a more settled-down time because of mere exhaustion and disillusionment with recent promises of new utopias, messiahs, gurus, panaceas, and therapies. Public suspicion is growing and will continue to grow.

Thus, I believe the time has come when we Christians and. the congregations we are a part of will have to work patiently and diligently and faithfully in this settled-down period. And that's not easy. Slow, painstaking, diligent, faithful work never is. Gimmicks, slang words and phrases, and easy simple answers are always more attractive. This is true not only in religion but in all areas of life. But emotional "highs" always come to an end, and then comes the need for faithful work, for commitment, for follow through.

Being born again, accepting Christ as one's personal savior, joining the church, whatever term we use to describe our "high" in religious experience, is only the first and beginning step and often the easiest one. It's the follow-through that's difficult. Living out one's faith, day after day,

week after week, year after year, being faithful at worship and prayer, paying one's pledge, that's the difficult part.

Living with peaks and valleys is exciting, but living on the plateau is not so easy. In marriage, for example, it's often the settled-down period that takes strength and commitment. In a church like this one, it's easy to attract a large over-flow crowd on Christmas Eve or Easter, but to have faithful worshippers Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, that's a different story.

We are at a time in this church and in this country which calls for the faithful and disciplined practice of our faith, for growth in depth, without always looking for new emotional highs or fads. We've become a nation of faddism in almost all endeavors. Want to lose weight? Try this crash diet! You can do it in three weeks. But then most people give up and get fat again. Few want to work at the disciplined art of watching one's weight, year after year, and thus taking care of the body. Why not simply eat less food and better quality each meal over the years?

So it is that I believe that in churches like this one, it's time for the longer deeper aspects of the faith; time to wrestle with some of the basic questions about the cross I of Jesus Christ and our day-to-day behavior; time to wrestle with meaning and eternity. It's time to be serious about faithfulness in marriage, keeping our commitments, honesty in our day-to-day dealings; time for loving our enemies.

The kicks and highs of the Jesus and spirit movements have perhaps been good compensations for the overprogrammed underexperienced church, but some day people have to come back to basic faithfulness in everyday living.

We in the practice of our Christian faith need to be like some of the very faithful research scientists. Here's an example.

In October 1977, the University of Chicago granted an honorary degree to a French scientist. He wants to be of help in curing what ails the pituitary gland by means of addressing the special hypothalamic portal venous system, a cause that necessitated his identifying infinitesimal amounts of neurohumors. It became obvious that immense amounts of tissue would be required to isolate and then identify these chemicals.

This scientist established an organization for the collection of fresh brains for this purpose. In the first few years, over five million sheep brains were collected. His laboratory extracted more than 50 tons of hypothalamic tissue and in 1968, succeeded in isolating one milligram of a simple peptide of the sort he needed. Clinical endocrinologists have employed it to learn much about the physiologic control of the pituitary and thyroid glands. Slow, painstaking work and devotion and zeal were given to this inquiry. Such faithfulness puts to shame our often quick and easy packaged answers to deep questions or our sporadic attempts at prayer. It also puts to shame our mere experimentalism and frantic search for novelty.

In churches like First-Plymouth and in the individual lives of our members who claim to know Christ and in the lives of those who are still seeking to know Christ, it's time again for the longer, deeper search. It's time for us in small groups to listen to each other and the Holy Spirit; to learn from each other and support each other; to pray together and get into deep discussions about our doubts and our faith, and how to live it day after day on the plateaus of life as well as on the peaks. It's time for all of us to make faithful regular attendance at worship an integral part of our lives and the lives of our children.

Thus, the Boards of Deacons and Deaconesses and we on the staff are proposing that early in this year of 1978, a number of small groups be called together. Each group formed will strive to have within it a diversity of age, interests and backgrounds, married and single, young and old, some members who have recently joined this congregation and some who have been members for a longer period of time. Each group will meet about six times, perhaps twice a month in the homes of its members.

In these small groups, we will seek together to ask and search for answers to some of the most important questions in life. We will seek to deepen our faith and our commitment so that we can know more fully the joy that comes from being a follower of Jesus Christ.

I invite you, the members and friends of this congregation to join with me in 1978 and in the years following, to build not only a stronger foundation for our individual and family lives, but a stronger foundation for this congregation and for society as a whole.

Will Durant, one of our nation's great historians has said over and over again that the decline of religious belief has seriously undermined the social order. I am calling upon you to help reverse that decline, not with a superficial hollow faith, but with a faithful steady commitment. Amen.