Sunday, January 21, 1979
THE NECESSITY OF FAITH (No. 1 in a Series)(Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
Romans 12:1-2,9-13

Several weeks ago, in the 9th grade church membership class we were discussing the questions: What are some of the reasons individuals need the church? What are some of the reasons the church needs individuals? And a third and related question which we didn't discuss is: What are some of the reasons a country and community like ours need the church? In other words, overall, what is the necessity of faith?

As we talked about the first two questions, it occurred to me that as a congregation we need to look at these questions as we consider the year just past and look ahead to the future. So, in this Part I of my annual report to you, we are going to take a look at the last of these three questions and then next Sunday in Part II, of my annual report we will look at the first two questions.

To restate the question: What are some of the reasons our country and communities like ours need the church? A knowledge of the history of the United States reveals a religious foundation of American society. It is this religious foundation of our society that made G.K. Chesterton call us a "nation with the soul of a church." And it is this religious foundation to which Alexis de Tocqueville, the wisest analyst of American society yet, pointed to so eloquently at many places in his work, "Democracy in America." He said, for example, "It was religion that gave birth to the English colonies in America. One must never forget that. In the United States, religion is mingled with all the national customs and all those feelings that the word, 'Fatherland,' evokes."

Although de Tocqueville was a great believer in the separation of church and state, he maintained that "religion should be considered as the first of our political institutions, not because of any established church, but because free institutions in America rest of the vitality of its religious life. He put it this way, "By their practice, Americans show that they feel the urgent necessity to instill morality into democracy by means of religion. What they think of themselves in this respect enshrines a truth which should penetrate deep into the consciousness of every democratic nation."

If we look at our history, we find religion permeating every aspect of our society. Many of the voluntary associations that were formed to meet social problems and to carry out necessary tasks were nurtured by the church. Though religion has been a force for stability, it has also been and continues to be a force for social change. It is hard to think of a major reform movement in American history that did not come out of the Christian Church. The abolitionist movement is an example. While it is true that the opposition to reform was also frequently led or at least defended by Christian spokespeople, religion in American life has always been a socially effective demand that we become what we ought to be.

Thus, not only has religion been pervasive, it has been and continues to be essential for our kind of free society. Free institutions always require a large measure of public spiritedness and devotion to the common good. "A republic will survive," said Montesquieu, "only so long as its citizens love it." They will love it only so long as they participate in it and care for their neighbor's welfare as well as their own.

We have also had and still have in our country a kind of radical individualism particularly geared to the market economy, an economy for which self-interest is both a primary motive and ultimate norm. Here again the church is needed, for our Christian faith reminds us that even the highest form of self-interest needs to be restrained by an even higher morality. And the one institution in American life that stands for a morality higher than self-interest is the church. If our free society is to survive, strong and vital churches are always necessary.

The vast changes in our society during the past 200 years often make the work of the church more difficult. Among such changes are the rise of industrial capitalism, the increase of vast private and public bureaucratic centers of power, large cities with immense social problems and the rise of an increasing consumer economy with an emphasis on consumption.

A hundred years ago, for example, the only advertising in our society consisted of a few little newspaper notices. Today more is spent on advertising than on all churches and all the schools and universities. And that immense social force which affects all of us does its best to stimulate an insatiable desire for materials things whether we need them or not.

Recently the Wall Street Journal carried a front-page story which told about the cost of launching a new personal consumer product — a new anti-perspirant being developed by the Gillette Co. “We’re going to be the dominant marketer in the underarm business,” said the President of Gillette’s personal care division. “This company knows more about armpits than any more than a dozen major competitors in the 11 billion dollar a year personal-care-products business.

So, Gillette is spending 18 million dollars to launch, “Dry Idea,” its new roll-on anti-perspirant. The company concedes that Dry Idea won’t stop perspiration any better than at least five products on the market, but no matter, for Gillette says its product goes on dry, feels better, and thus leads the use to feel that it is more effective. The company concedes that what a so-called emotional product does is apt to be less important than what the public can be convinced it does.

This underscores what I mentioned in a sermon a few months ago, the fact that we are becoming more and more a society which emphasizes the self. We are willing to spend on “me” items but less willing to spend on “we” items.

Furthermore, we no longer worry about going deeply in debt especially for “me” items, in fact we are encouraged to do so, to buy on the installment plan. All of this has an effect on our total society and on voluntary institutions like the church. The church is often far down the list of our priorities, perhaps because it’s more of a “we” item than a “me” item. Thus, for example, at the end of 1978, we had over $22,000 in unpaid pledges from 141 pledging units — the highest we’ve ever had. Debt is common, so why worry about paying one’s church pledge in full. It’s the attitude, the spiritual problem that I’m worries about as much as the financial one.

It’s the trend I see that worries me and should worry you. When our self-interest takes first priority most of the time, when the restraint of our faith loses its effect, then we are all in trouble. Corruption sets in, and by corruption, I mean the love of one’s own good more than the common good; it is concern for oneself no matter what happens to one’s neighbor; it is the vice that destroys republics. It’s this trend that worries me and it is to this trend that the church must continue to speak and try to change.

Robert Bellah, a sociologist at the University of California, notes that this kind of corruption which is related to excessive self-concern has at least three results. First, it elevates luxury, which is that pursuit of material things which divert us from concern for the common good and which leads us to exclusive concern for ourselves and our small families; today we call it consumerism. A second result is dependence which naturally follows from luxury, for it consists in accepting the dominance of whatever group or person which promises to take of our material desires.

This leads to the welfare state — and here I refer as much to the welfare that goes to large corporations in many forms and to hundreds of all kinds of groups which like government subsidy, to the workers and corporations whose livelihood depends on an enormous military budget, to subsidies for growing tobacco, as well as the welfare that keeps the poor from starving.

Thirdly, all this leads to ignorance — political ignorance that is the result of luxury and dependence. It is the lack of interest in public things, a concern only for the private, a willingness to be governed by those who promise to take care of us even without our knowledgeable consent.

Again, we are back to the necessity of our Christian faith; the necessity for strong and vital churches like this one; the necessity for churches which are not afraid of tough issues. I say this because there are large sectors of our population for whom our problems are so great and so confusing that they do not wish to hear about them. Sometimes such people are attracted by a conservative fundamentalist portrayal of the faith that makes little attempt to understand what's going on in our culture except to see it was the arena of conflict between God and Satan. I can understand how such people feel, but not wanting to know the questions does not help find answers.

In addition to often over-simplifying the questions and answers, such expressions of the Christian faith can lead to another danger — an intrinsic authoritarianism, the most extreme example we all read and heard about recently in South America, the case of the Rev. Jim Jones and the People's Temple.

Professor Bellah maintains that when our Christian faith is over-simplified it has such an inability to related to the modern world that it actually accelerates the withdrawal into privatism and escapism and the lack of any sense of the common good beyond the boundaries of the group itself. It comes to see all the rest of the world except itself as evil and as the enemy. It actually cultivates personal immaturity because it does not allow individuals to come to some painful sense of themselves with all the doubt and despair that religious faith allows us to cope with but never in any simple way denies. I'm going to deal with this theme in more detail later in a series of sermon on "The Temptations of Religion."

Perhaps the deepest problem with over-simplified religion is that although it calls itself conservative, it is not conservative enough. It is not traditional enough, not historical enough, not even literal enough.

It's a danger we all have to be aware of. By ignoring the history of the Christian Faith, we forget that the world of the first century Christians was profoundly different from our own. And forgetting the 2000-year history of the faith, we think we can return to New Testament purity.

My hope is that First-Plymouth Church will continue to be a place where our faith is not over-simplified, but a congregation that at least attempts to deal with and understand the very real problems we face as a society and as individuals and continues to search our faith for the right direction.

Among other things, this calls for more Bible study in the coming year — Bible study groups where we wrestle with the problems that face us. However, complicated it is for us to find the meaning of the Book, it is still the basic book for our life together as Christians and we need to continue to take it seriously.

Presently I am leading tow such Bible study groups, and I invite your participation in one of them. One meets at 7:30 a.m. on Tuesday mornings and one at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday mornings. For those of you who are not available in the morning, we plan to offer other evening groups in the coming months. I encourage you strongly to attend one of these.

I know that some of you may be tired of hearing me stress attendance and participation in worship, but I'm not going to give up. Our society desperately needs people whose spiritual lives are regularly being nourished through participation in public worship. If our Sunday or Thursday worship services seem to do very little for you personally, be here anyway. Your presence will at least do something for others and for the community and country as a whole. And who knows, after a time, it may even begin to do something for you. Although numerical goals do not mean a great deal, they are at least a small measure of the direction we are heading. I'm happy to say that last year, 1978, our overall average attendance at public worship increased for 519 per week in 1977, to 563 in 1978. On the bad news side that's still 137 per week short of our goal of 700.

What are some reasons our country and communities like ours need the church? If you value freedom and the kind of freedom this country offers, remember that strong and vital churches must continue to exist. Also remember that however much we American Christians are devoted to our nation, and I think we should be, we must not identify our faith and our nation. Politics are never ultimate, never absolute. Even though we can and must fight the good fight for a better republic and a better world, our hope does not ultimately depend on any political outcome. Our hope and our faith derive from Jesus Christ who survives all nations and all politics.

St. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. Amen.