Sunday, September 20, 1981
A LOOK AT MYSELF
Isaiah 6:1-8

A question that is often asked of me is — — "How did you happen to become a minister? What brought you to this decision?" This morning I'm going to try to answer that question. To do so means giving you a brief autobiography.

My life began in Union, Missouri. I was born at home, the second of seven children. I have a brother who is two years older and then four sisters who are younger and the seventh child was another boy. As I look back, I remember my childhood and teenage years as being varied and happy.

My father was a largely self-educated man. He finished the sixth grade in a rural one-room school and then out of necessity began to work at various jobs full-time. He was born and lived on a small farm and was the oldest of five children. Early in life, he became a traveling salesman and remained a pedd1er of one kind or another until he retired. He was also a farmer, a politician — serving eight years as County Assessor, a musician, a horse-trader, small businessman, and more. At one time or another in his life he sold Model T Fords, gasoline and oil, firewood, seed corn, farm machinery, auto insurance, life insurance, mutual funds, and farm produce. During all these periods in his life we lived on a small farm.

There I learned to milk cows by hand. We usually kept six milk cows — I milked two each morning and evening, my brother milked two, and my dad milked two. We were normally paid 5¢ per cow, which came to $1.40 per week. To teach us the value of stewardship and giving, we were encouraged to give 14¢ a week, or 10% to the church. And this rule we followed carefully.

In addition to milking cows, we learned early to feed the chickens, gather the eggs, feed the hogs, hoe the garden, split wood for the kitchen stove and more. In the summers I regularly drove a team of horses for cutting and raking hay and for planting corn. One day at about age 12, I was almost killed in a runaway with a team of horses, I learned also to drive a tractor by age 12. We cut our own timber for firewood and sold some on the side, butchered our own meat, made our own sausage, grew our own fruits and vegetables and were in many ways self-sufficient. My mother made her own laundry soap, baked all the bread, made her own clothes and the clothes for my four sisters. When we wanted to build a new barn, we sawed down the trees, had a sawmill come, and had our own lumber.

We were poor as far as money is concerned but were rich in so many other ways. For years as I was growing up, my dad was the leader of a small dance band which usually played for public dances and weddings on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights. As children, our mother often took us along to these dances and so I learned to dance the polka, the waltz, the two step, the fox-trot, and many more by age 10.

Within a five-mile radius lived both sets of grandparents, all my uncles and aunts and first cousins. Our main entertainment consisted in visiting with these relatives. All of us were members of the small-town church — Zion Evangelical and Reformed, in the town of Union.

As I look back, my overall memory is one of a loving, happy family. Each one of us felt loved and accepted as we were growing up. My mother was crippled all her life but never gave up.

She had graduated from high school and before being married taught school in a one-room schoolhouse for several years.

Music was a part of our everyday life. Each one of the seven children played at least one musical instrument. For a while we even had a kind of family orchestra. We were all in the high school band at one time or another. In addition, I sang in the high school mixed chorus, the boys glee club, a boys quartet, and the church choirs. During high school I also p1ayed in a local dance band on weekends for extra income.

For the most part our family was free of tragedy and sadness. There were the expected deaths of great-grandparents and grandparents. My mother had numerous surgeries for her crippled condition. What affected the family the most was the death of the youngest child, my youngest brother, when he was ten years old. He died of a malignant brain tumor. It was a long, lingering slow death which took a toll on all of us.

Our family was not outwardly religious. We were all active in the local church but that was nothing unusual. As far back as the family tree can be traced, no one on either side of the family had ever been a Christian minister. Yet when I was in the 8th grade and attended the Confirmation class in the church, I began to feel a pull in the direction of becoming a minister. I also later considered becoming a physician, a lawyer and could easily have stepped into my father's flourishing insurance business.

As I look back, I can never remember not thinking of myself as a Christian. I grew into the faith. I also learned at an early age that religion and life are not to be separated. They are intricately interwoven. Also, for me and my brothers and sisters, Christianity was always seen as being a happy and joyful experience. I do remember taking the Confirmation vows very seriously as I confirmed the baptismal vows taken only behalf by my parents. Now I was a believer in Jesus Christ on my own. I made my decision to be a fo11ower of Christ in my own life.

On the other hand, this does not mean that I was a young person who never got into trouble. I was more mischievous than most.

During High School, I found that I particularly enjoyed public speaking. All during those years I believe the ministry was in the back of my mind. The summer before I became a senior in high school, I attended a senior high church camp and there I met several of the leaders who were ministers who made a big impression on me. The timing was right. At this point in my life, I was beginning to wonder what my future would be. One morning in the church camp, as I was walking along a drive away alone, having just come from a period of private personal devotions, and puzzling about my future — I felt an overwhelming peace which can only be described as some kind of call from God to become a minister. I can still see in my mind the exact spot where it happened. Thus, my decision to become a minister was both a rational decision and a nonrational one. As I surveyed my talents and abilities, it seemed the right thing to do, and the super-natural experience was to me a confirmation of what vocation I should follow.

Months later when I began hinting to my family and some of my friends that I might enter seminary after completing college, there was general disbelief. For those who knew me best, I seemed an unlikely kind of person to be a minister. During my college years, I thought many times about changing the direction of my vocation, but the overall decision persisted. God wanted me to be a minister.

The college years were good ones for me and the best thing that happened to me was that I met the woman who was to become my wife.

Following graduation from Westminster College, I entered Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. The first major period in my life was over and a new adventure was to begin. Attending Yale was the second major influence in my life, the first being my family and early years, including college. I could hardly believe it myself — a small town farm boy from Missouri, attending Yale Graduate School.

In addition to the outstanding facu1ty at Yale Divinity School, another major influence on my life during those years was my being for three years an assistant minister in a large congregational church in West Haven, as part of my field work requirement. I learned as much about practical everyday Christianity and the operation of a church congregation and what it takes to be a minister in those three years as I learned about the history of Christianity, Bible studies, and theology at Yale. The man who was then the senior minister of that church became during those years one of the best and most trusted friends I've ever had. We still keep in touch from time to time.

After my first year at Yale, Rowena and I were married--so that we spent the first three years of our married life in New Haven, Connecticut.

Following graduation from Yale, I was ordained to the Christian ministry in my home church in Union, MO, on July 7, 1957. My first church assignment was to organize a new congregation on the far south-side of Chicago, in a suburb called Markham. I was a missionary under the supervision of the Board for National Missions as it was then called. Markham was an old small town which was then beginning to grow rapidly with new subdivisions. My assignment to call on every home in the village and attempt to interest the newcomers in starting a new congregation. I began my door-to-door calling in July. In September we began holding public worship services by renting a room in the Village Hall. Later that fall we organized our new congregation with 109 charter members, and within five years we had a congregation with a new building and about 250 members.

These were exciting years for us. Our first two children, Krista and Caris were born there. It was also thrilling to see a new church come into being. But there were also serious problems. Markham was the scene of racial conflict. Many young white families had moved into the community from the near south side of Chicago, in an attempt to escape from the black population. But many young black families were also moving into Markham. Integrated housing was resisted. When some black families moved into the white subdivisions, houses were set on fire and other threats were made. Our church was a witness for peaceful integration.

In addition to that there were the usual conflicts which arise in beginning of a new congregation. Some of the early leaders got angry and quit. Other members were unhappy because from the beginning we welcomed black members into our congregation. Furthermore, many of the young couples were having serious personal and marital problems. For most, it was their first home. Some spent too much. Others drank too much. All were making house payments, furniture payments, car payments and were new parents as well. I spent more time in personal counseling during those five years than I will probably ever spend again. My office was in our home, and our home was also the meeting place for all church organizations including choir practice.

During those five years, two groups saved me from total despair at several points. One was a prayer group of about five lay people which met regularly with me for prayer, and the second was a group of young ministers who were my neighbors and colleagues and all of whom were also organizing new churches in the Chicago area. We met each week, studied the Bible together, played golf together, and shared our failures and successes. Some of these men are still among my closest and most valued friends.

Also, at one of my low points, I was able to attend for ten days a special seminar sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies near Detroit, Michigan. Those ten days of intensive group discussion and re-assessment helped me regain my sense of direction, and I returned to the parish with new energy. I had to learn that as a minister I couldn't do everything and please everyone. The church is the people of God, not just the minister.

After five years in the parish in Markham, I was called to be the minister of the Evangelical United Church of Christ in Webster Groves, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. We spent about seven happy years there, during which time our third child, Joel was born.

One day, while there, a telephone call came to me without any prior knowledge, and the caller from New York City asked me to take the job as General Secretary for Church Extension of our United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. There was no interview; I hadn't been aware that I was even being considered for the job, nor had I applied for it in any way. I had never even imagined being a church bureaucrat.

After several months of agonizing indecision, plus continued pressure from the people in New York to take the job, we made our decision. This began the third major-period in my life. We spent three years in the New York City area, and since my job required me to travel extensively throughout the United States, it was a valuable educational experience. I also learned to sit in the pew of a congregation as a lay person and this helped me to see worship and preaching in a new way.

I had always thought I would probably stay in the New York job about five years and thus I was not ready to move when the offer came to come to Lincoln after I had been in New York about three years. But the people here were very persuasive, and we have never regretted coming here. But again, it was something that came quite unexpectedly. More than any place else where we have lived, we consider this our home.

What have I learned from this look at myself? First, that childhood and family background were crucial in my formation. One of the things that made our daughter's wedding so joyful this summer was that my brother and all my sisters and their spouses and children could be with us. Unfortunately, my father's health would not permit him to come.

Secondly, I have come to value our marriage more and more as each year passes. A few weeks ago, Rowena and I celebrate our 27th wedding anniversary and I am more and more convinced that one of the best things ever to come my way is my wife.

Thirdly, I know that in my spiritual journey, I need to be born again and again and again. Toward the end of his life, C.S. Lewis wrote that from time to time he had experiences that made him realize that "the progress he thought he had made religiously was largely imaginary and that the real work of redemption was still to be done."

What still intrigues me most is that mysterious boundary where the human and the Divine intersect. I still believe'that the main part of my job as a Christian minister is stay close to God, stay close to human beings and work to bring God and humankind closer together. Each of us is already related to God whether we know it or not or admit it or not. We are sons and daughters of the Most High, not because of anything we have done, but because of what God has done and continues to do. "All things work together for good to those who love God."

There is a mercy in the unfolding of history that is just as great as the goodness that lies behind it. That is what the church has proclaimed since Christ, and it is my belief. In the love of God, fully revealed in the life of Jesus, you are being redeemed. All you have to do is to accept that redemption.

As I continue in the coming years to work among you, to love you and to be loved by you, I hope that we can all continue to experience more and more the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.