Sunday Evening, May 30, 1982
THREE QUESTIONS (Baccalaureate Sermon for the Lincoln Public High Schools)

1. Life is filled with beginnings and endings. Tonight, I congratulate you as you come to the ending of your High School years. This ending makes you ready for another beginning.

2. During your high school years questions and answers have been a big part of your life. Every test contained questions to which you were supposed to have the answer. You probably learned that how a question is phrased determines what the answer is going to be.

There is a story about two priests arguing whether it was proper to smoke and pray at the same time. One said it was, and the other said it wasn't. To settle the matter, they agreed that both should write to the Pope in Rome, for his opinion.

A few weeks later they met and compared notes. Each claimed that the Pope had supported his view and suspected the other of falsifying the reply he got from the Holy Office. Finally, one asked, "How did you phrase your question?" The other replied, "I asked whether it was proper to smoke while one is praying, and the Pope answered," Certainly not, praying is serious business and permits no distractions. "" And how did you phrase your question? "" Well, "said the other," I asked if it was proper to pray while smoking, and the Pope said, "Certainly, prayer is a1ways in order."

3. As you leave high school and begin another part of your life, I want to give you three questions which I hope you will continue to ask throughout the rest of your life, no matter where you are or what you are doing. As you will see in a moment, these are very personal questions that only you can answer.

Here then are three very personal questions for you to ask yourself and answer throughout your life.

The first question is: "Who are you?" or as you ask the question of yourself, "Who am I?"

Your first response is likely to be, "What a silly question. I know who I am. My name is John Doe, and I live in Lincoln, Nebraska."

But there's more to the question than your name or where you live. Who are you? Are you simply a part of a large machine which we call the universe and therefore you have little or no control over your destiny?

Are you nothing more than an animal, to be sure, one of the higher animals, but in substance not much different from the other animals in creation?

Are you nothing more than just a collection of molecules arranged in a particular way? Or are you something more?

The way you answer this basic question, "Who am I," will determine to a large extent how you act, how you see yourself, and how you relate to your job and to other people.

Another way to ask the same question is to ask, "What is the most important thing about me?" Is it the color of your skin, or your ethnic background, or the neighborhood in which you live, or

your family name, or your good looks, or your athletic ability, or your scholastic achievements, or your popularity?

Who are you? What is the most important thing about you? You are a child of God, unique, a valued individual, with God given powers of reason and emotion. You have some control over your destiny. You have a certain responsibility for what you do with your life. You are something special. You are important.

But if you are a child of God, then all other human beings are children of God and have equal worth and value. No matter what color your skin, or whether you or tall or short, blond or bald, American, Chinese, Russian, African, Indian, poor, rich, educated, uneducated, you are valuable; you have worth; you are significant!

Then too, you must treat everyone you meet with dignity and respect. Each individual is as valuable as you, and each individual is your brother and sister. You are a child of God.

So, remember to always ask this question: “Who am I?” And remember the answer as well — “You are a child of God.”

2. The second personal question I want you to ask yourself and remember is this. What are you going to do with your life? Or another way to put it is — What is your dream, your goal in life?

Usually, we ask the question in the wrong way; we ask--How shall I make a living?

If you think you have no dream or goal, ask yourself this: “If ONE stood before me for whom all things were possible and who was able to make any desire of my heart come true, what single thing would I ask of such a person, and what does that request tell me about the values to which I am committed?”

When you ask and answer this second question — what am I going to do with my life, be sure that the answers you give are really yours and not some forced on you by an overly helpful parent or teacher. If you really want to be a scientist or a surgeon, make sure it’s your choice. I’ve seen too many cases of lawyers who wanted to be musicians and accountants who wanted to be carpenters. That only causes suffering as these folks try to live out choices made for them by others.

Also be careful in what you desire for it may come true in an unexpected way. We do not always realize the implications of what we wish for.

The son of a Welsh mining family had not wanted to go into the mines as had his brothers, but instead joined the British Navy and spent many years touring the world. When he came home from his travels, he showed his father a shriveled-up monkey’s paw he had gotten in Egypt. The legend was that if one held this paw and made any three wishes they would come true. However, the son had also been warned not to use it because everyone who had owned it before had experienced tragedy. He said, “I’ve decided to heed the warning and am going to throw it into the fire.”

However, the father was intrigued by the story and took hold of the charm and said, “I wish more than anything else in the world that I had a two-hundred-pound note at this moment.” No sooner had the words left his lips than there was a knock on the door and the father went and

there stood a representative of the mining company. He said, “Your son had just been killed in an explosion underground, and it is company policy to give a two-hundred-pound note to the family of such victims to cover the burial expenses. Here it is, I am sorry.”

On hearing this, the father threw the monkey’s paw away and began to weep loudly, “Oh no, oh no, bring me my son, bring me my son. I did not want the money at his expense.” Again, there was a knock on the door and there stood four miner friends carrying the mutilated corpse of the son who had just been killed. When the far saw them, he said, “Oh, take him away, I cannot bear the sight of my own flesh and blood now dead.” And so, the friends turned away and went to bury him privately. All three of his wishes had come true, yet none of them in the way he wanted.

So, remember the second question: What are you going to do with your life? What is your dream or goal? Ask this question and answer it now, but also continue to ask it throughout your life.

3. The third very personal question to ask yourself is this: If I should die today or next week, or next year or whenever I die, what kind of epitaph would I like to have written as a summary of my life? Or another way to ask tl1e same question is this: How do I think those who knew me best would remember me? What has been the central thrust of my existence? What would be minister be able to say at my funeral. What might you want said of you?

Some epitaphs are inspiring. I read one on a tombstone which said, “In the worst of times, he did the best of things.” Others are amusing such as the epitaph on the tombstone of the hypochondriac which said, “See, I told you I was sick.”

I found another epitaph which read, “In memory of Charles Ward, who died May 1770, aged 63 years. A dutiful son, a loving brother and an affectionate husband.” Then a footnote was added which said, “This stone was not erected by Susan, his wife. She erected a stone to John Salter, her second husband, forgetting the affection of Charles Ward, her first husband.”

How do you want to be remembered? What can be said about your life?

Three questions — keep asking and answering them for yourself throughout your life. Who am I? What am I doing with my life, what is my dream or goal and is it a worthwhile one? And third, how would I like to be remembered once I’m gone?

Again, congratulations to each one of you and best wishes for your continued success and happiness.