Sunday September 12, 1982

"THREE MORE QUESTIONS" Matthew 5:13-16, I Peter 2:9-10

A year ago I preached a sermon entitled--"Three Questions." In that sermon I asked each one of you to ask yourself three questions and then to answer those questions as honestly as you could. The answers would reveal much about you and your values.

In case you can't remember, the three questions were:
1. How do you spend your time and your money? In other words, what are the priorities in your life?

2. What is your dream, your goal?

3. If you should die today, what kind of epitaph do you think would be written as a summary of your life? Or, how do you think those who knew you best would remember you? Or what has been the central thrust of your life? What would the minister be likely to say about you at your funeral?

These three questions cannot be answered once and for all. If you keep asking them, you will find that the answers change, and they should change, for we are not static individuals.

This morning, however, I want to pose three additional questions. Again you will have to supply your own individual answers.

1. The first question is similar to the first one last year--in what way are you spending the greatest amount of your waking time? If you work outside the home, the most likely answer will be that you spend the most time on your daily job or in your profession. If you're a homemaker then the answer will probably be that you spend most of your time in the home doing the things that are necessary there. This will be the easiest of the three questions to answer, but it sets the stage for the next two questions.

2. What are the problems or decisions you are dealing with in your occupation, that is, where you spend most of your time? Here's an example. A public school teacher in another town said that one of her biggest problems

or decisons facing her in her occupation was what position to take in a coming strike against the school board. She said, "our teachers are very much underpaid, and they are entitled to an adequate salary for their work." But she added, "I can see the school board's side of it too. Property taxes keep going up and that causes problems particularly for people on fixed incomes and there are also so many other people out of work."

Another example: a man said, "the most difficult decision I am facing in my job is whether to shut down my business now, or keep losing money in the hope that I can turn things around. I've got some good people who have been with me for over thirty years and I owe it to them to try to keep things going. But if I hang on too long, I'll lose every penny I've got and then who'll take care of my family?"

3. Now comes the crucial third question: How do you see your Christian faith relating to the problems and decisions you face in your life and work?

If we are loyal church-going Christians with an active faith then that faith ought to give us some guidance and support as we deal with such problems. It won't very often give us direct and simple answers, but our faith will give us a context and framework in which to make the best decision. It will influence the way we treat people and the way in which we arrive at our decisions.

Asking these three questions and attempting to answer them is a way of making the point that each one of us as a Christian is also a minister in his or her everyday life.

Too often the church has implied that an individual was doing church work primarily when a person was serving on a church board, or teaching church school, or singing in the choir, or helping with a church supper. Such things do need to be done and they are properly called church work.

But you are doing the work of the church wherever you spend your time during the week, on your job, in your home, in your leisure, wherever you meet people and make decisions. Your Christian faith should be supporting you and guiding you.

One man wrote: "In my thirty-two years with Bethlehem Steel, of which twenty-one were spent in various levels of management, there was a bewildering arrary of problems, involving interpersonal relationships, business ethics, economic justice and the development of the human potential. In so many instances there were no simple solutions to complex problems. The decisions I MADE AND the style of management affected the lives of people in so many different ways. In retrospect, I can see clearly that I had a priestly role to play."

In our everyday conversation about the church we often ask, "Do you go to church? or "Where do you go to church?" What we usually mean by such a question is--Do you go to a church building for worship on Sunday, or where is the building which your congregation uses for worship.

The surprising answer to the question, "Where is your church?" is, "Today our church is everywhere. Some of the church is at work in the factories, some in the businesses and in the banks, some in the courtrooms, some at home, some traveling, some on vacation. The church is wherever people are. It is wherever you are. Each one of us carries on a ministry in our everyday life.

One person said after hearing a sermon, "Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade the sphere of public and private life." But the church and religion have been there all the time and that's where they should be.

You are the church wherever you are. This is quite different from the idea of the church being something like a religious club in which we hold membership so that we can come and go as our whims may tell us.

The Christian church began as a lay movement. The men and women to whom Jesus entrusted his message and mission were not the priests. They were people who worked in all kinds of vocations.

However, the centuries following Christ brought a subtle change. As the church grew large and unwieldy, it required leadership by people who no longer earned their living in other vocations, but who gave their full time

to the tasks of organization and leadership. Within Christianity as in most religions, there emerged the religious professional, the pastor or bishop or minister, at first distinct from others in the church only by virtue of the function he or she performed. Gradually, however, the pastor evolved into a priest, possessing a kind of mysterious power, not available to lay members of the church.

The word church then became different in meaning. It no longer described the whole people of God. Although the laity came within the church, they no more consitituted the church than a theatre audience constitutes a theatre. Rather the church became identified with its ecclesiastical hierarchy. People came to believe that the clergy were the church and the church's witness became too much the exclusive role of a cast of relgious professionals. Religion for the laity became not much more than a Sunday duty.

The Protestant Reformation rediscovered an idea which for many centuries had been buried beneath the rock of ecclesiastisism--the idea that every Christian is a priest, not only in his or her approach to God without a human mediator, but also in his or her responsibility to be a minister or priest to others and to see that one's faith influences the way one make decisions and does a job. The very word "layman, or laywoman" comes from the Greek word "Laos" which means "people of God."

All this underscores the fact that you are ministers, priests, if you will, and your ministry is to be carried out in the context of your everyday work. That's why the third question of the three this morning is so important--how do you see your Christian faith relating to the problems and decisions you face each day?

You have a special responsibility. In the first letter of Peter read this morning as part of our scripture lesson, you are called "priests." "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of God who called you out of darkness into light."

If the church is to make a difference in this world, it will do so because of your ministry. The real battles

of the faith today are being fought in the factories, the shops, the offices, in political parties, in government agencies and policies, in countless homes, in the relationship of nations. We often hear that the church should enter these places, but we forget that the church is already there in people like you.

Your ministry in the world begins quite modestly with listening to the questions and problems of people, the neighbor, the colleague at work, your boss, the public official, the people who serve you. Simply listening and treating them with dignity is a ministry all in itself.

Not only are we ministers as individuals as we go about our everyday business, but together as Christians we have a ministry.

Today in Lincoln, has been designated as "Justice Sunday," a day when we as Christians pay special attention to our justice systems and to the victims and perpetrators of crime in our community.

Each one of us falls victim to certain crimes. It is estimated that 15% of the cost of any product or service is related to workplace crime. Estimates are that Americans steal up to 5% of the gross national product, some 65 million dollars from themselves and then have to make restitution through higher insurance premiums, higher prices and higher taxes. Every crime takes a financial toll and has a negative effect on the quality of life.

Some of the members of our congregation have been doing together their own small part in working at this problem by going once a month to the Lincoln Correctional Center simply as caring persons. They are going as ministers in the best sense of the word. They see it as a way of directly relating their faith to the problems that exist in this world. Later in the service, you'll have an opportunity to participate in this important ministry.

There is one more very important way that all of us can relate our faith to the problems and decisions in the world. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. . . . let your light so shine before people that they may see your good works and give glory to God."

The world desperately needs light, people need light--there is so much darkness. So many people in this world are not happy and do not expect to be so in this life. Given a choice between joy and despair, people will so often choose despair.

Daily each one of us is in contact with people who seem totally lifeless and frightening apathetic. Most disturbing is their lack of self-worth. Most of them dislike themselves and where they are, and would choose, if they could, to be someone else and somewhere else. They fear risks, lack faith and scoff at hope as if it were romantic nonsense. They seem to prefer to live in constant anxiety, fear and regret.

But our Christian faith says that's not the way life is. We human beings are created by God. We are unique, made in God's image, loved by God and have ultimate worth. God is in all of us each moment of our lives and there is always more to be realized in our future.

The spirit of Christian love has no place for self-contempt, self-pity, or self-humiliation. The Christian likes being a human being. Even with all our frailties, abilities to hurt, forget, cause conflicts, know pain and feel fear, we are delighted with life.

It is this kind of light we are to let shine. Let it shine in your life and then spread it to others. Amen.