Sunday, September 19, 1982
HOW MY MIND IS CHANGING (A Look at 25 Years in the Ministry)
Luke 8:4-8; I Corinthians 13:1-13

There are two “givens” in life that seem to me to be beyond dispute. The first is the fact that change is a fundamental characteristic of life as we experience it hour by hour, day by day, and year by year. Someone has pointed out that the only thing in life that does not change is the fact of change itself. Think about it for a moment. Nothing remains exactly the same forever. Our bodies are continually undergoing real, if largely imperceptible, alterations. You will not leave this service with exactly the same bodily condition that you came in with. And I hope you will not leave in the same mental condition, but will have some new ideas, new thoughts, and inspiration.

Every day the world is new, whether we realize it or not. The tree outside my house is never the same. There have never been two sunsets exactly the same since the beginning of time. Everything is in the process of change, including you and me. The other “given” is that change is, by its very nature, ambiguous. For something to qualify for the noun “change,” there must be an experience of both gain and loss. Every new beginning also means an ending. As we move on, we always have to leave things behind. An investment in life is an investment in change. We cannot freeze time and keep things as they are or as they were, as much as we would many times like to do that.

So today, as you are celebrating with me 25 years in the ministry and ten years in this parish, I want to tell you how my mind is changing. To do that, I’m going to talk about change in three areas: 1) how my mind is changing about myself; 2) how my mind is changing about other people; and 3) how my mind is changing about God.

First then, a look at myself. When I began my professional ministry 25 years ago in a southside suburb of Chicago, fresh out of seminary, newly ordained, like many young ministers, I thought I could change the world. After all, I had been trained in one of the best schools in the country. It was 1957, and I was sure any problem could be solved if only enough effort was put forth. During these 25 years, I’m learning that’s not necessarily so, and it’s a difficult lesson to learn. But there comes a critical moment in the human process for all of us when the idealism and energy of our youth and young adult life collides head-on with the complexities of the real world. This does not mean that I’m no longer idealistic or that I’ve given up in any way, but my idealism is tempered with realism. I’m still basically very optimistic, but I also know that pure effort in and of itself does not solve all problems.

Perhaps that’s why the Parable of the Sower read earlier as part of the scripture lesson means so much to me. Some of the seed we sow, some of the effort we put forth, always goes to waste. Some of the seed falls on the path and is walked on or the birds eat it. Some falls on the rocks and withers away because there is no soil for it to take root. Some falls among the thorns and is choked out. But some seed falls into good soil and it yields a hundredfold. And we can’t always tell the good soil from that which will not bring any yield.

This is a parable of both failure and success. Sometimes three out of four seeds we sow do not make it, but one does, and it yields a hundredfold. So we have to learn that if we do our work faithfully, all of the effort will not go to waste. No one is successful 100% of the time. No one bats 1000. I don’t have to bat a thousand. If I bat 300, that’s very good. Things in life do not have to be perfect to be good. The secret is to learn not to be cynical when a lot of our

effort comes to nothing and not to be too cocky with success. We learn more from our failures than we do from our successes.

As I look at myself over these 25 years, I also find that I'm becoming more patient with the unrighteous, but less patient with the self-righteous. Actually, all of us make up the unrighteous; that is, we all make mistakes and need forgiveness. But the self-righteous are those in our midst who are sure they are better than others. They're like the Pharisee Jesus described who prayed, "Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other people." The self-righteous are those who are certain they are always right and you are always wrong. There is no common ground.

I discovered I'd lost my patience with self-righteous people in my two experiences as Chairperson of the County Jail Adequacy Committee. I met many just plain mean self-righteous people. I also lost my patience with self-righteous people who wrote me mean letters and at the same time claimed to be loving Christians when they heard that the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus was going to sing in this building. I finally wrote back to some of them and said, "This church welcomes all sinners, including the self-righteous."

At the same time, I've discovered that I don't have to be right all the time. Isn't that nice? That frees one to be right some of the time. It means I can be right, and you can be right. We can both be right. There can be two hundred rights.

Recently I read in a book something an 85-year-old man had written when he learned he was dying. He said, "If I had my life to live over again, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I wouldn't try to be so perfect." What difference does it make if you let people know you are imperfect? They can identify with you then. Nobody can identify with perfection.

He went on to say, "I'd relax more. I'd limber up. I'd take more chances. I'd take more trips. I'd climb more mountains. I'd eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I'd have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones." And he's right. Ninety percent of what we worry about never happens anyway, yet we go right on worrying about everything.

Something else I've found during these 25 years is that I'm involved in unlearning as much as learning. I'm having to continue to unlearn many prejudices and unexamined assumptions which we all pick up as we go along in life. I hope you're having the same experience. Questioning our basic assumptions is the only way we grow and learn.

In Merle Miller's biography of Lyndon Johnson, he quotes Mr. Johnson as saying in 1969, after he left office and was reflecting back on his handling of the Vietnam crisis, "I never felt I had the luxury of re-examining my basic assumptions. Once the decision was made to commit military force, all our energies were turned to vindicating that choice and finding a way to somehow make it work." And therein, of course, is the heart of that tragedy in a nutshell. It's the heart of many tragedies.

The questioning and re-examining of our basic assumptions is never a luxury, it's a necessity. It's the way we learn and grow. Every major leap in human progress has come about because of someone having the courage to question and re-examine a basic assumption. One which needs to be examined in our time is the assumption that the arms race will deter war.

I keep discovering more and more about other people. As many of you have heard me say before, I grew up in a happy family. As children and young adults, we got a sense of self-worth

from our parents. Now I meet more and more people who are unhappy, filled with pain and loneliness, often leading lives of quiet desperation. I meet people who are afraid of life, afraid to venture forth. I meet people who are low in self-esteem, people who feel unloved and unworthy to be loved.
The good news is that human beings are capable of change. In order to change, a person needs someone else who cares about him or her. It can be just one person, but it needs to be someone who really cares. An individual also needs a feeling of achievement, affirmation. Christian love can and does change people for the better.

At the same time, and this may sound contradictory, I now see that religion in and of itself, that is religious belief, does not automatically make people more sensitive to human pain and suffering. Even if people know the truth, they will not necessarily do it. We all know, for example, that racial prejudice is wrong, but that does not in and of itself keep us from acting in prejudicial ways. St. Paul said, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Romans 7:15-19)

That’s why we need to continue to help people change. We Christians need to let people know that they have a choice; that they can become lovers and they need not be losers. It scares me that there are over 26,000 successful suicides in the United States every year. The latest statistics show that crimes of violence have increased seven percent across the nation.

Each one of us has an incredible potential to love and to be loved, but it’s only a potential, and like all potentials, unless it is realized, unless we do something about it, it’s not going to happen.

Sometime ago, I was riding on an airplane and a woman sat next to me and said to me, “I bet I can guess what you are.” So I asked, “What am I?” She said, “I bet you are a lawyer,” and I said, “No, I’m not a lawyer.” “Then what are you,” she asked, and I said, “I’m a minister.” “How nice,” she said, and I went back to reading my book. But after a bit, she started to talk, and as I listened, she began to tell me all kinds of things. Sometimes we’ll tell a stranger what we won’t tell our closest friend. She told me that she had four children and had just come back from the Bahamas. “Did you have a good time,” I asked. “No,” she said, “It was terrible.” I asked, “Were you alone?” She said, “Yes. I’m trying to get myself together. Two months ago, my husband left me.” “I’m sorry,” I said.

Then she told me the story of her life. “Imagine, I gave him the best years of my life. I gave him beautiful children. I gave him a magnificent house, and I always kept it clean. There was no dust anywhere. My children were always on time to school.” She went on and on. “I was a magnificent cook. I always entertained his friends. I was always ready to go every place he wanted to.” I really felt sorry for this woman. Because all of the things she had considered essential were things that she could have paid for. She had lost herself. She had not given her husband what was essential about her, the magic, the wonder, the undiscovered self.

I asked her, “What did you do for yourself?” She said, “What do you mean, what do you mean for me?” “I mean, what did you do for yourself?” “There wasn’t any time to do anything for myself.” Then after a pause I said, “What would you like to have done?” And she didn’t know. She had lost herself in a role. She was fulfilling a role. Then the story unfolds, “Husband meets interesting young woman in office who isn’t interested in dust.”

This woman had never bothered to ask herself, “What is essential about me? What is my worth? What are my needs?” Thus she had no self to give. People have to develop themselves, and this kind of development is not selfishness. It means finding and fulfilling your own potential. It means the right kind of self-love. More and more I see this as crucial, and it’s part of the Christian faith.

My mind also continues to change in regard to God and the meaning of the Christian faith. My concept and ideas about God, my experience of God, continues to grow and expand, and still, my God is too small.
For me, more and more, God is a loving presence, a transcendent power, a forgiving love. I believe that we human beings can never be separated from God. We are an expression of God. Though God is not a person, God is, at the same time, very personal. There is no place that God is not. God is not selective. As Jesus said, God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Jesus Christ is God’s love focused in a human being, and he showed us that God is more than just an object of worship, but God is also a presence dwelling in each one of us. God is the loving power that permeates creation. More and more, we need to find new metaphors for talking about God.

Now for some other comments on how my mind is changing. I take preaching more seriously each year, and I enjoy it more. At the same time, it’s an awesome responsibility. I’m continually amazed at how much the sermon can mean to the listeners. That people want copies of the sermons and read them and save them surprises and thrills me.

Public worship becomes more and more important through the years. It’s the one indispensable function of the church. Here’s where we can sing together, pray together, rejoice together, listen together, and here’s where we can bring our pain and loneliness as well as our joy and happiness. My biggest disappointment in my ten years here is that we have not yet reached a 700-per-Sunday average attendance at our Sunday worship services. Worship is the most important thing we do, and I believe we have here inspiring and creative worship experiences.

And I hope you will continue to grow and change. I hope I will continue to grow and change. St. Paul wrote, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, I thought like a child; when I became an adult, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.” Amen.