Sunday, January 15, 1984
ANOTHER LOOK AT WHAT GUIDES US (Annual Report of the Senior Minister)
I Corinthians 1:4-9; I Peter 2:9-10

According to the by-laws of this congregation, the Senior Minister "shall have in his charge the spiritual welfare of the congregation." This is in the best tradition of congregations in the United Church of Christ. Often the Senior Minister is also given the title of pastor and teacher. He or she is to be a kind of resident theologian.

It is for this reason that this year my annual report to you is put more in the form of a theological statement. As part of the preparation of this Annual Report Sermon, several months ago I led the members of the staff in an afternoon-long discussion of what we believe to be some of the "guiding principles which form the foundation for all of our work as a staff working within and with this Christian congregation." It was an attempt to look again at our theological foundations.

Thus, in this Annual Report, I am going to relate to you some of the guiding principles which I see as being basic for our work together. The other members of the staff contributed much to what I am going to state here, even though I have put many of their ideas into my own words.

In the Annual Meeting of January 1976, this congregation adopted a "Statement of Mission," prepared and written by a special planning committee which had earlier been appointed by the Church Council. That "Statement of Mission" is our beginning point. Here's how it begins:

1. "The church has been, is, and is to be a community of persons who acknowledge God as Creator and Sustainer, Jesus Christ as God's redeeming activity, and human beings as participating with God in the responsibility for the well being of the created order. The church exists in history to increase among people the love of God and neighbor and to increase health and harmony in all the creation."

So, our first guiding principle is this definition of what the church is. But then we need to go on and ask, as we go about our work of ministry, what kind of a God are we to portray? As we recruit and train church schoolteachers, what kind of God are we asking them to teach about and describe in the classroom? As we talk with people about God in the hospital or wherever we meet them, what are we to say about God? What metaphors are appropriate?

2. God is often described as an angry judge, a demanding father, an authoritarian lawgiver, as a God who is going to "get you" if you don't obey. Following this, Christian have emphasized the sinfulness of human beings and the fact that we need to be redeemed from our corruption. That's been one basic tradition in the history of Christian doctrine and spirituality.

On the other hand, we can describe God as a loving, forgiving presence and emphasize the experience of life as a blessing and draw attention to humanity's divine side and potential, rather than humanity's fallenness. That's another basic tradition in the history of Christian doctrine and spirituality.

It's primarily a matter of emphasis! I believe in our time it's necessary to stress creation and life as a blessing filled with divine potential, rather than to stress how corrupt human beings are.

Again, note that it's a matter of emphasis. This does not mean that we ignore the redemption tradition or that we ignore sin and evil. It does mean that when we talk about God, we stress the fact that God is a loving, forgiving God who created the world and us as good. We talk and teach about a god who seeks our well-being, who blesses us, a God who is involved in the world and in the creation.

We speak of a God who gives life, who sustains and preserves life, and who entrusts human beings in the world as agents of God for the continuation of life. There is no place where God is not. God is not selective. God is there where anyone opens his or her mind to accept God — and even if the mind is closed, God is there anyway.

The other day I saw a bumper sticked which said, "God loves you whether you like it or not." It's true. You are beloved of God — simply because you are the activity of God living itself out into expression as you. God loves you because God is love, and thus love is your true nature. Furthermore, grace, the divine favor, the activity of God's love, works for us constantly. It is not dependent upon any special faith or prayer on our part.

God's grace comes to all; by the grace of God the criminal who has broken the law is still loved by God, and he can find forgiveness and transformation if he wants to accept it. This is true for any one of us. Grace is not something we have to work for. We can't stop it or start it. It simply is.

This kind of description of God and God's love is our second guiding principles as we as a staff work on your behalf and as we work together as a congregation.

3. A third guiding principle has to do with the person we know as Jesus. We believe we know best what God is like by looking at the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We see in him the incarnation of God's gracious presence in a human being. We also see Jesus and the Christian church as a continuation of the covenant in the Old Testament.

This man Jesus lived the ideal human life. It was a life for others. He embraced the world as God created it. He came that the world might have life and have it abundantly. He achieved a unique relationship with God and became the channel for the expression of powers no one had ever before dreamed of. Because of Jesus, we can now all experience the Spirit of God in a new way. The Spirit of God, or that which we call the Holy Spirit, was always present in the world, but Jesus made it available to us in a fresh way. To say that we believe in the Holy Spirit is to say that we believe that God is present with us every day and in every place.

4. A fourth guiding principles which underlies our ministry is that Jesus gives us a new way of understanding ourselves, a new way of seeing human beings. We believe the "Christ potential" is present in every human being. We are made in God's image. When we live according to our true nature which Jesus revealed, we are gracious, compassionate, merciful, caring, and loving people. That's the way we are meant to be. It is one of the goals of the church to help people become transformed so that we live according to our true nature.

This is another way of saying that it is part of our job as a church to help us and others discover the Christ potential which is already a part of all human beings. We all succumb at time to the temptation to condone our mistakes and weaknesses with the saying, "After all, I'm only human." We say this as if being human is to be filled with failure and weakness. Rather, to be human means that God is with us and a part of us and that we have tremendous potential.

Thus, when we ask people to repent and turn back, this does not mean to forsake all hope of abundant living and resign oneself to sackcloth and ashes. It does not mean that we are all the time grim and serious and have no fun in life. Rather, it means to turn from the broad way of worldly pursuits that feed only the hungers of part of our nature but starve the soul. To repent means to realize that life is lived from within out. It means to open the eyes of spiritual perception and see life in a new dimension, to see hidden realities behind every appearance.

5. This brings us to a fifth guiding principles. We are all connected and related to each other. There is a wholeness, a unity in creation, which we often do not perceive. We are interdependent. We need each other, and we are meant to live in community, to live in harmony with one another and with creation itself.

You are just as close to a person in the far corner of the world as you are to the person next to you, and you are just as much a part of the diving family of a person you have never seen before as of one who is your closest blood relative.

One of the most helpful ways to define sin from a Christin point of view is to say that that it is the refusal to see our relatedness to connectedness. Sin means to live as if we are separated from others, and therefore from God. The letter of I John in the New Testament reminds us that “if we say we love God and hate another human being, we are liars.” Sin is when we elevate our independence and come to think that we are the only ones that are important, or when we believe we are better than others or that God loves us more than someone else.

Underlying all of these guiding principles is the study of the Bible, because it contains the stories of our tradition and because it tells the story of the coming of Jesus Christ, his life, his teachings, his death and resurrection, and then continues with stories of the early church as it sought to carry out its mission as a result of the coming of Jesus.

I mention these guiding principles in my annual report to you because they help remind us of who we are and what our purpose is. They also carry with them certain implications. Here are a few of them:

1. These guiding principles imply that we will regularly participate in worship. Worship, including prayer, is central in helping us to be more conscious of our relationship to God and to others. Without regular worship we forget that we are a part of God’s family. We forget that God’s power is present and always available. Without regular worship we tend to become separated from others and from God. Worship is the one indispensable function of the church.

2. Secondly, our guiding principles remind us that worship is not to be something which separates us from the world at large. As human beings we participate with God in the responsibility for the well being of the created order. So, we will find this congregation and members of this congregation involved in all sorts of community activities as we seek to improve society as a whole and as we seek to increase among people the love of God and neighbor and as we work toward bringing peace throughout the world.

Remember, the maximum impact of the church in the world is through the influence of all of you, whether it be as a teacher, an administrator, a sales person, a homemaker, a lawyer, a business executive, a factory worker, a truck driver, a carpenter, a nurse, a stock broker, or whatever you do every day in your work or in your volunteer activities. Each one of us has a ministry to carry out where we are.

3. Thirdly, these guiding principles which I have mentioned imply very strongly that churches like this one are to be places of hope and encouragement, not places of despair. As I've said so many times before, we are to be inclusive and forgiving, not exclusive and self-righteous. We welcome anyone who wants to join us in our search, anyone who wants to grow and learn. Ours is to be a place where we are not afraid of uncertainty or ambiguity or mystery.

Above all, churches like First-Plymouth are to be places where all kinds of people are loved and accepted, where individuals find compassion and forgiveness. Amen.