Sunday, September 9, 1984
TO HIDE OR TO RISK? THAT IS THE QUESTION
Matthew 25:14-29

Thirteen years ago, on the second Sunday in September (September 12, 1971) this congregation in a specially called meeting voted unanimously to call a new senior minister. I was fortunate to be that person. The following Sunday, September 19, my wife and I came to Lincoln, to meet with the congregation, preach the sermon and to officially accept the position.

I remember one of the first things said to me since I was going to preach the sermon that Sunday — and that was that the church had an inadequate sound system and would one day have to do something about it. In the intervening years, many other important projects and programs took priority, but today, thirteen years later, we have in addition to the most beautiful and functional church building in the Midwest, a sound system that none can equal. It has taken several years of planning and work to get it. I want to thank all of you who had a part in bringing this new system into being.

The title of my acceptance sermon on that Sunday in September thirteen years ago was: "Helping Miracles Happen." It was based on the New Testament story of the feeding of 5,000, with five loaves and two fish. I pointed out, among other things, that together we could help miracles happen and I think we have. Like the little boy with five loaves and two fish, we help miracles happen by taking what we have, and not being afraid to share it with others. The little boy gave his five pieces of bread and two small fish to Jesus and it fed more people than he could've ever imagined. The little boy wasn't afraid to risk what he had. He could've hidden the little lunch his mother had made for him and had it all to himself, but he didn't.

Jesus told a parable that makes a similar point. It was read as the scripture reading this morning. It's a story about an individual who entrusts his property to his servants while he is gone. To one he gave 5 talents, to another two and to another one — each according to his ability. The one who had given the five talents was not afraid to use them and he thus multiplied them. The one who had been given the two talents did the same. But the third individual was afraid to risk anything and so he hid what was entrusted to him. He lost nothing and he made nothing.

When the Master returned, he highly commended the first two servants who were not afraid to use what was given them and he condemned the third individual for hiding what had been entrusted to him.

This morning I want to use this parable as the background for what I want to say about this church and how we might use what has been entrusted to us, not and in the near future. What I am going to suggest is based on these three basic assumptions.

I. The reason for this church's existence or any church's existence is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. Or to use the words of Jesus — "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." It's not our church, but god's church which has been entrusted to us.

We have been given the good news of the love of God for all people and all nations so that we can tell others about it.

II. We are to use the most effective means that we can find to increase among people the love of God and neighbor; to spread the good news!

III. We have been given in this church, a number of outstanding resources which need to be used for the good, not only for our own good, but for as many as possible. To use the language of the parable which Jesus told, we have been given at least five talents which we are to use and not hide. Here are a few of them.

1. We have been given a beautiful and unique church building. A treasure has been entrusted to us. Hundreds and hundreds of people who have been members of this church in the past have sacrificed and given of their time and money that this building could be here in all its beauty. The last major capital funds drive was held in 1966, when the building was remodeled and the East Wing added. That drive was for &750,000, which in today's dollars would be at least $1,500,000, and the membership then was much smaller than we have now. Presently, we have between 1900 and 2000 members, and only 400 of these were members in 1966. So, we have inherited a treasure.

To be sure, this congregation has been generous in letting this building be used by community groups of all kinds. We have not hidden this treasure, but have risked its use, and that's to our credit.

2. A second talent or treasure that has been entrusted to us is a strong and vital music program which includes two unique instruments — a magnificent pipe organ and our beautiful carillon, the only one of its kind in Nebraska. These treasures also have not been hidden, but continue to be invested and used.

3. A third talent or treasure is a strong, vital and healthy congregation. We have individuals from all walks of life — young and old, rich and poor, coming from a diversity of religious backgrounds. We believe in participating in the life of this community and do so in many ways.

4. We have a talented and dedicated staff — from custodians, secretaries, part-time workers, volunteers to full time professionals. Like other talents, the staff has not been hidden from the wider community, but has invested itself in many ways and places.

Now since we have been entrusted with these treasure or talents, this places two strong obligations upon us who are today members of this congregation, according to Jesus' parable.

1. First, we have the obligation to maintain these treasures and not let them deteriorate. This applies especially to this beautiful artistic masterpiece of a building. And this leads to my first proposal for the future of this church.

A. We need to renovate the interior of this worship area in particular. It needs repainting, new pew cushions and a new and efficient air-conditioning system.

B. Secondly and related to the renovation of this area, our main pipe organ in this room needs to be completed and updated if it is to remain the magnificent instrument that it is. Some new stops need to be added and a new console.

C. We also need renovation and repair of the carillon, and part of this is now being planned.

D. The east courtyard outside the chapel needs a new retaining wall and the interior of the courtyard itself will then need to be redone. It has deteriorated badly.

These four items, and there are, no doubt, some other smaller ones that will be added in the future, need to be done in order to keep this building the treasure that it is and so that we can continue to use it for ourselves and for the good of the community as Christ has commanded us.

But not only do we have the obligation to maintain and improve what has been entrusted to us, we also have the second obligation of using the treasures that have been given us in the most effective way possible in our time.

For this church I believe this means that we need to begin to use television as another means of outreach for this congregation.

In the beginning the Christian faith was spread by word of mouth; then it began to be written down and was also spread by the written word and so today we still have the Bible.

It is significant that one of the first books to be printed after Gutenberg invented the printing press was the Bible. So again, the most modern means of spreading the gospel was used. Consistently, each generation of Christians have utilized contemporary communications methods to spread the gospel. Television is one of today's methods.

First-Plymouth Church here in Lincoln, began broadcasting its worship services on the radio more than 40 years ago. We were pioneers in using this new medium. Now I believe we need to take the next step and that is television.

You may rightly ask, why us? Why First-Plymouth? We have the resources — a beautiful building, the music, and we have a message that needs to be heard more widely. Up to this point in church history, the most fundamentalist churches have dominated television. Certainly, they have the right to be on television as much as they want. I simply believe that other points of view within the Christian faith need to be heard and seen as well. There are thousands of people out there who are not aware that this kind of inclusive church exists.

Here's how it would work. The Sunday morning worship services with television would be exactly as they are now. Television would neither detract from nor necessarily change anything we do. We would continue to plan and carry out our worship services for those who are present here in person. Television cameras would be discreetly place so that there would be no intrusion on what we do. Permanent lighting would be added and hidden. Since we would be televising in the daytime, not as much light as we use on Christmas Eve would be necessary. The important point is this — we would not adapt or change our worship service in any way for television — television must adapt to the worship service. The order of worship would not be interrupted at any point for the sake of television.

Each 11:00 A. M. service of worship would be taped, not broadcast live. Then on Monday, the tape would be edited to 28 and one-half minutes or 29 minutes. This tape would then be shown the following Sunday morning on one or more television stations throughout the state. This would be a first-class, professionally produced tape of the highest quality. There is nothing like it now on television anywhere in the Midwest area.

The televising of the Sunday morning service edited to the one-half hour tape would be the main feature of our use of television, but there are numerous other uses for the television equipment.

During the week, we would produce television programs for us in our church school classes and in the nursing homes. The Nebraska Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Lincoln Fellowship of Churches, Interchurch Ministries of Nebraska — all have expressed an interest in working with us in other uses of religious television.

Our national church offices have been strongly encouraging churches like ours to explore this use of media. In our kind of church, we believe that the integrity and dignity of a local church telecast is dependent upon the fact that it issues from a local congregation going about the business of being a church in its community. Too much of religious programming now seen on television does not have that kind of base. The local church is the basic unit in the Christian faith.

When a local church uses television, it is just one more way of expanding and extending the ministry of that congregation, just as we now use radio. We would purchase our own basic equipment and when ready, employ a trained media specialist to take charge of this part of our outreach.

According to recent Gallop Polls, nearly 60% of the U. S. population does not regularly attend worship services in churches. And according to another just released study of religious television now being seen, only about 6.2 percent of the persons in households with television are regular viewers of religious programs. This most recent study found that the audience presently watching religious programs is much smaller than had been claimed. Furthermore, the most recent study shows that most of those who do watch religious programs are active members in churches. So, there is a vast number of people to be reached, here in Lincoln, and throughout this area if the right kind of religious television is available. We would want our service telecast either at 8:00 A. M., 8:30 A. M., or 9:00 A. M. on Sunday mornings.

Our target audience would be those people who now turn off current religious offerings because they find them irrelevant, too exclusive, narrow and boring. I believe we offer the kind of worship experience which is inspiring, and relevant.

We want to reach people who accept responsibility to think in the midst of believing; people who know that simple answers to complex problems are often not adequate. We want to reach people who are socially concerned and who care deeply about human beings even if their faiths differ. We want to reach people who want to hear thought-provoking, challenging sermons and outstanding religious music.

To hide it or risk it, that is the question. I believe that we have a responsibility to use the gifts and treasures which God has entrusted to us in the most effective way possible. Amen.