Sunday, October 18, 1987

LIFE'S STOPPING PLACES (Zion United Church of Christ, Union, Missouri Sermon for the 75th Anniversary of Zion Church)

Leviticus 25:10-12; Mark 9:2-8

Life is a journey, and like all journeys, it has its stopping places. We cannot always be on the move. Sometimes there are emergency stops for repairs, and at other times we simply stop to rest, to get out and stretch. We cannot always be on the move.

One important function of religion has been to build into our life's journey various stopping places. This is the purpose of the Sabbath, of taking at least one day off in seven. The Bible tells us that even God takes a day off.

In the scripture lesson read earlier from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, God gave Moses some very specific instructions about another of life's stopping places. The Israelites were to celebrate a "Year of Jubilee." In their case, it was to be the 50th year. It was to be a time of rest and celebration, a time to look back from where they had come and to look forward to the future.

Although this is Zion Church's 75th year, it is a similar kind of stopping place, a year of jubilee, of celebration, of looking back and looking forward. And I'm delighted to be here with you on this one day for that purpose.

As all of you know, I grew up in this congregation. My grandfather on my mother's side of the family, Fritz Barlage, was one of the charter members. I remember Fritz Barlage's funeral here especially because it was a double funeral. His son, and my uncle, Arnold, drowned in the Bourbese River a day or so after my grandfather's death, so a double funeral was held in the old church. My mother was, in the earlier years, the church organist. My dad served on the Church Council and was President of that Council as well as serving in a number of other capacities. All of the seven children in our family were baptized in this congregation. Six of us were confirmed here, and it would have been seven, except the youngest child, Kermit, died at age 10. His funeral and all the other funerals of our family have been held here. My four sisters were all married in this Church, and I officiated at all those weddings. All of these were stopping places in our family's life and in our personal lives.

My growing-up years were all spent in the previous church building. I remember dozens of wonderful potluck dinners in the old church basement. I remember singing in the choir with Mrs. Gaebe as organist and director. I remember singing in quartets and playing saxophone solos in Sunday School. And I remember doing other things in Sunday School that were not supposed to be done. I remember the children's Christmas program and having to say a memorized piece and being rewarded, along with all the other children, with a bag of hard candy and an orange as we left the church on those evenings.

The minister I remember being here in my early years was the Reverend Fred Schenk. My older brother Marvin and Howard Schenk were very close friends. I used to tag along with them. The next minister who was here during the rest of my growing-up years was the Reverend Albert Gaebe. We became close friends during those years, and he was very helpful as I made plans to enter seminary to study for the ministry.

I remember sitting on the front row of the old church building with other young people my age during the worship services, and we would sing the hymns as loud as we could sing, and we loved it.

Overall, I remember my growing up in this congregation as a happy time, and I'm sure that these memories and others were all a part of what led me into the ministry. Early on, I came to have a love for the church, for what this church was doing in this community, and for what it stood for.

I know this congregation and the faith it proclaimed had a deep effect on our entire family. My mother is a good example. She lived her faith in a quiet, yet demonstrable way. Here's an illustration: A friend of one of my sisters in high school had become pregnant and was not married. This young woman's family did not know what to do. The young woman needed help, and she needed acceptance. So in about the seventh month of this young woman's pregnancy, my mother organized and held a baby shower for her in our home. That made an impression on all of us.

Life's stopping places — there are all kinds. Think of some of the stopping places in your personal life. Like any journey, some of them have been planned and others not planned.

An individual who loses his or her job experiences one of life's stopping places. Then it's time for taking stock of yourself. What new direction will your life take? What direction do you want it to take? Maybe this stopping place will lead you into an entirely new place in life.

Another one of life's personal stopping places is illness. Or to change the metaphor a bit — illness or fatigue can put us into a holding pattern. Sometimes illness comes to us because we have not been pacing ourselves — because we have not been paying attention to the rhythm of life — because we have not taken any planned stopping places, we are now forced into one.

Through the years, I've visited and talked with dozens of people who have experienced heart attacks and later recovered. Almost all of these people have said to me in one way or another that the kind of stopping places or holding patterns that their illness put them in caused them to rethink their whole pattern of living. They re-evaluated what's important in life and what is not. The stopping places of an illness can be the occasion for examining one's journey in life and for changing directions in that journey.

Grief caused by the death of a spouse or some other person very close to us can also be one of life's stopping places. Often in the first stage of grief, there's nothing we can do but wait like an airplane circling round and round over an airport, waiting to land.

A divorce or separation can be another stopping place in our life. Again, we reassess our life and then go on.

Young people during the high school years and in college too are in one of life's stopping places. We stop to obtain an education. All those school years are a time of studying and waiting as we try to decide what direction our life should take.

The life and ministry of Jesus underscore the fact that stopping places in life are necessary and useful. In the second scripture lesson read this morning, Jesus took time out to go up on the mountain, and he invited three of his disciples to go with him. It was a stopping place.

While there, they had an overwhelming religious experience. It was so inspiring that Peter wanted to stay there.

But Jesus knew that, as important as life's stopping places are, we cannot stay there forever — there comes a time to move on. So Jesus took the three disciples back down the mountain. There they found the other nine disciples waiting. They had been trying to heal a boy who had a form of epilepsy but were unable to do so.

The father of the boy quickly ran up to Jesus and said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic, and he suffers terribly; and I brought him to your disciples, and they could not help him."

The disciples who had not gone with Jesus had tried to help the boy while Jesus and the others were on the mountain. Jesus said, "Bring the boy to me," and he healed him.

In one of the gospel stories about this event, the disciples asked Jesus later and privately why they had not been able to help the boy. And Jesus told them—"Because of your little faith." They had been trying to heal the boy on their own power. They thought they didn't need any of life's stopping places to renew their faith. They didn't have time to go up on the mountain with Jesus to pray.

So stopping places like this 75th Anniversary Celebration are important for all of us. We take time to look back to where we have come from, to learn from our past, to renew our faith in God, and then to go on into the future. Stopping places are important, but they cannot last forever.

Stopping places can be especially important for building and leaving a heritage for those who will be coming after us.

One of my favorite poems describes this better than any other words I could say this morning:

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim —
That sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned, when he reached the other side,
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,
"You are wasting strength in building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way.
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide,
Why build you the bridge at eventide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head.
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.

This chasm, that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim:
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him."

During these past 75 years, there have been many bridge-builders in this congregation — individuals who have built and left us a heritage. They stopped on the other side of the stream to build for us who would follow them.

Now it's our turn. We too can stop, and turn, and build for those coming behind. Amen.