Sunday, October 16, 1988
WHY THE CHURCH? (No. 4 in a Series: The Statement of Faith)
I Peter 2:9-10; John 15:16-17

There was once a woman in Nebraska who got married. She had long been enamored with the idea of marriage, so when she met the "man of her dreams," it happened. Things went well at first. She told her friends that her husband was all she had ever hoped for. He was handsome, intelligent, and had a good sense of humor. Life seemed like a continual honeymoon.

But this initial bliss did not last. Gradually, in day-to-day living, she began to notice certain imperfections in her mate. He was not as perfect as she had first thought. Sometimes he was crabby and short-tempered. Although he was intelligent, there were large gaps in his knowledge. He knew quite a bit about some things, but he also displayed a lot of ignorance about others, which embarrassed her at times.

Slowly but surely, she found herself growing cool toward this man. Marriage was different than she had imagined it would be. It was not all romance. It was not living happily ever after. She still believed in love more than ever. She still wished for the perfect partner. She continued to hang on to the idea of marriage. The idea was fine, but it was the specific experience of marriage that bothered her. There can be a lot of difference between the idea of a thing and the thing itself.

This not only happens in marriage and in many other parts of our lives, but it's also true in our religious life. Many of us have beautiful ideas about God, Jesus, prayer, and religious faith in general. We like to think in broad concepts. "The Christian faith is basically about love," some say. Or, "It's the golden rule." We generalize because it makes the Christian faith easier to swallow.

It's when we get specific that we get into trouble. It's easy to talk about loving one's neighbor in broad general terms, but when that means coming to the aid of someone we despise and going out of our way to do so, that's a different matter.

In the first three sermons of this series, based on the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, I have talked about God in more abstract and ideal terms, and I have used some new metaphors in speaking about God. Thus, in addition to describing our experience of God as a loving father, as the son in Jesus of Nazareth, and as the Holy Spirit, I have spoken of experiencing God as mother, as lover, and as friend.

Today, in the fourth sermon of this series, we are going to become more specific as we talk about the church because here we will be talking about how we carry out our faith. The Statement of Faith says, "God calls us into the church." It's not enough to merely experience God in our individual lives or in the realm of ideas; we are called to be part of a particular community of believers. We are called to live and grow in our faith.

And here is where many people stumble. Like the woman in love in my opening story, fascinated by the idea of marriage, many people approve of both the idea of believing in God and following Jesus and the idea of the church and are in love with these ideas but are horrified by the particulars. There are many people who claim to love God but are unable to love the kind of people that Jesus loved. Love in general is okay, but loving people specifically is not always easy, and many times it is downright inconvenient.

For some people, therefore, Jesus is best followed in the safe confines of their own living rooms through a religious program on television, or by religious feelings that bring tears to their eyes, or by thinking noble thoughts about God in the privacy of their devotions, or by having a religious conversation with someone else who sees things the same way. God and Jesus are fine. It's those people in the church congregation that bother them. It's putting their faith into practice that's difficult. This is where the church comes in.

Why the church? By its very existence, the church is an affirmation that one can never believe in God in general or in the abstract. You can't believe in Jesus without following Jesus. Faith is not simply a matter of being attracted to certain beliefs or a point of view. It is a complete response, a way of life, a self-giving to someone else, a way of being in love. As the Statement of Faith puts it, "God calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory."

The Christian faith is anything but a private affair. To be a Christian is more than having an emotional attachment to Jesus. It is more than having Jesus as one's personal savior. The New Testament depicts the Christian as one within a family, a household, a congregation.

To put it another way, the church is not, in the first instance, a group of people who have gathered themselves together like a neighborhood improvement association to solve a common problem, nor is it basically a gathering of like-minded people who enjoy each other's company, although it may include this. The church does not exist because some religiously enlightened people have decided to voluntarily associate with one another to advance the study of Jesus. The challenge of biblical faith is not, "Do you agree?" or "Do you feel?" but "Will you join up?" God calls us into the church. "You did not choose me, I chose you," said Jesus. The church is a group of people committed to following Jesus.

In the New Testament, there are many metaphors for attempting to describe the church. It is called the "body of Christ," "the bride of Christ," "a chosen race," "a royal priesthood," "a holy nation," "the new Israel."

Why the church? As you have heard me say many times from this pulpit, and it's part of our First-Plymouth Church Statement of Mission, "The purpose of the church is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor." In other words, the church is the means through which we are encouraged to live the Great Commandment of Jesus.

Remember the New Testament story — one day, one of the scribes came up and asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" And Jesus answered, "The Lord our God is one, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Why the church? Because we human beings are not changed easily, and our institutions are not changed easily either. Over and over again, it's been proven that we do not change merely by coming to an understanding of our situation but by entering into new relationships and into a different way of living, and that's not easy.

"To have a conversion experience is nothing much," say two sociologists, "the real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously, to retain a sense of plausibility." "Christians are made,

not born," said Tertullian. In spite of what many modern evangelists would have us believe, Christianity is not a momentary, instantaneous affair. It takes time, cultivation, constant practice, keeping at it. The essential center for helping us do that is the church.

All of us know that we are creatures of habit. We do not automatically self-sustain goodness, hope, and vision. Our values are taught and caught from the social systems in which we live. Today, in contemporary society, we can easily become infected with the values of narcissism (putting oneself first), consumerism (the belief that buying and owning more and more things will bring meaning to one's life), and the many other values that surround us, or we can conform to a different set of standards as taught and lived by Jesus. But it's not easy. We need the help of others; that is, we need the help of the church.

Remember that unusual letter to Dear Abby:
"Dear Abby, we live in one of the best neighborhoods in town. There is not one house on our block worth less than $75,000. Some new neighbors moved in next door, and I understand they bought the house for the asking price and paid cash. They seem very nice, but they are weird. The first thing we noticed was that they didn't have a television antenna, so my little boy asked their little boy about it, and he was told they didn't have a television set. They have only one automobile (and a two-car garage!) and the father drives the car to work every day. The children and mother all use the bus. They rarely go anywhere except to church. The wife doesn't have any fancy clothes or jewelry or furs. The children aren't permitted to have any toys dealing with war or violence! Could they belong to some off-beat religious cult? What do you make of them?"

Why the church? We need a community of forgiveness of which we can be a part and a community that continually undergirds us and reminds us of God's presence in our lives and in the world — a community that has as its mission the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor.

But there's even more to the church than that. The church cannot be defended as simply a useful means, a vehicle for bringing people a little closer to God. It is a place of God. Whenever people are in the church, they have, in a large sense, fulfilled their existence. They are at least partially aware of their connection with God. This divine-human union is its own reward. It is of intrinsic worth, regardless of whatever extrinsic good may come of it.

Think of it this way. If I were to ask you, "What good does being a friend of Joe Brown do you?" you might tell me that the question was out of place and a misunderstanding of what friendship means. No doubt, your relationship with Joe Brown influences your life in all sorts of ways. But none of that fundamentally describes why you are a friend of Joe Brown. Friendship has an intrinsic value all of its own, or else it is little more than manipulation, the use of another person for your own selfish ends. And that's the way it is with the church — it has an intrinsic value for us all of its own.

"God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil." How does the church do that? Here's a true story that illustrates how it can happen. A group of churchwomen were looking for a service project within the community. Someone suggested that they might do something at the local jail. Because the town in which that church existed was a resort community in the summer, the antiquated little jail was always filled with unfortunate young people awaiting bail or fines.

So someone suggested it might be nice if a group of church members made something for the people in jail. Perhaps a toiletries kit would be good — a toothbrush and toothpaste, soap, shampoo, a piece of candy.

One of the women met with the jailer and asked him about it. “It’s not our job to make life soft for them,” he said, “but I’ve got no objection to you ladies at the church doing a little something. Just keep it simple.” So simple little kits were made.

The first thing that impressed the women as they began to regularly visit the jail to deliver the kits was the sheer number of prisoners for such a small town — at least 30 per week. They were also shocked at how the female prisoners were treated. They heard the guards make suggestive comments to some of the young women who were being kept at the jail. Also, they were surprised that in the incarceration procedures, no distinction was made between older and younger prisoners or first offenders and repeat offenders. The women were beginning to feel that their city jail was a disgrace.

Meanwhile, the little kits were expanding. Someone ordered Scripture pamphlets from the American Bible Society to include in the kits. A prayer group donated a quarter for each kit. The coin was placed in an envelope with a note that read, “Use this to call someone who loves you or call us. We’re always ready to listen. We care and God cares. Christ Church. (With a phone number.)”

The quarters and the notes were fine, but the prisoners were only allowed to make one call a day, and that had to be made from 8:00 to 9:00 A.M. or from 4:00 to 5:00 P.M. The jailer said the guards didn’t have time to spend all day watching the prisoners talk on the phone. So the churchwomen volunteered to go down to the jail and supervise the telephone for the prisoners. One of the women said, “Can you imagine a 15-year-old, first time in jail, who can’t even call her mother to help out?”

Because of the telephone supervision, the churchwomen began spending more and more time at the jail. That’s when the trouble started. They saw things that few citizens of that small town had seen — excessive force being used on prisoners, rumors of money changing hands for lighter sentences.

“I knew we were asking for trouble when we let you churchwomen stick your noses into things,” the jailer said when a delegation from the women’s newly formed Task Force on Local Jails met with him to ask questions. “You women ought to stay out of what is none of your business,” he advised. “What goes on here is really no concern of yours. Why don’t you stick to church work and leave the legal work to us.”

“This is church business,” said one of the women, as she pounded her fist on his desk. “And therefore, this is a concern of ours. If we don’t get good answers from you and if we don’t get them fast, we are calling the State Law Enforcement Division to look into the situation here.”

The jailer refused to cooperate. “You ought to stick to religion, stick to saving souls, and let me handle the criminal element,” he said.

The jailer did refuse to cooperate. The women did indeed call the State Law Enforcement Division. They then drew up a formal complaint against the jailer and its administration. An investigation was launched. The city was charged with improprieties. This led to the jailer’s resignation, and things changed for the better at the jail.

This small group of churchwomen did not start out to reform the jail. They were committed to serving God by serving others. In their own way and in a very specific situation, they “accepted the cost and joy of discipleship, were servants of the human family, and resisted the powers of evil.” God calls us in the church to do the same. Amen.