Sunday, November 12, 1989
A LETTER TO YOURSELF
II Corinthians 9:6-11; Luke 21:1-5

In a small book of short essays by Halford Luccock entitled Like a Mighty Army, the author has one piece called “Take a Letter to Yourself.” “Most of us,” he says, “write letters to ourselves even though we do not mail them and so save a lot of postage.” The trouble is that most of our inter-self letters carry too much comfort when often a well-placed kick would be more in order and contribute more to our salvation. Too many of our letters to ourselves run something like this:

Your Poor Dear: It was a dirty shame you were not elected President of the Village Improvement Association last night. You deserved it a thousand times more than the complete moron who was elected. It was all due to spite and jealousy. But remember the greatest minds were never recognized, and your defeat proves you are a great mind. Think of Keats and Galileo. Your unfailing admirer, (signed) Yourself.

That can grow into a 20-year correspondence. Here’s an example of another letter some people send to themselves:

You Poor Soul: You can’t carry the world around on your shoulders any longer. You do almost everything, and all those other lazy people do nothing. You have lost weight and are down to a mere 200 pounds. If only everyone else would give as much money and work as you do, the world would be a fine place. Your Constant Well-Wisher. (signed) Me.

Today, why not try a different kind of letter to yourself? You need some variety. How about something along these lines:

You Big Bluff: I have been looking over your checkbook stubs and your pledge card to the church for last year. The figures ought to make you hide your head in a rain barrel. Your contributions to the church did not even equal the amount you spent eating out. You spent more on renting video tapes and going to the movies than you gave to your church. Your sense of values is all out of whack. Not Very Cordially, (signed) Your Anemic Conscience.

What kinds of letters do you write to yourself? Suppose you were to write a letter to yourself on “Why and How Much Money to Give to the Church.” What would you say?

Here’s what I find some people writing:

Dear Me: It’s that time of year when the church to which I belong will be asking me to make my annual pledge for the work of the church. If you are in the 21-30 age bracket, maybe you say to yourself, “I can’t give much to the church now. I’m just getting started in life — and don’t make much money. I will give more later on. You can count on me then.”

Or if you’re in the 30 to 45 age bracket, some people write a letter to themselves that goes something like this: “I can’t give much to the church now. Two children are in college and that takes every penny. Sure, my income is the highest ever, but so are my expenses — and my taxes! I may have to cut my giving — only temporarily of course.”

In the 55-65 age bracket, letters often read: “I can’t give much to the church now. I need to put aside more for my later years. Retirement is just around the corner. I’ll give the same as last year.”

And if you’re over 65, your letter to yourself might read: “I can’t give much to the church now. Since retirement, I have to watch every penny. Let the younger ones support the church — like I always did. Don’t they remember? They could always count on me.”

But there’s another kind of letter which you can write to yourself. It could go something like this:

Dear Me: Here’s that pledge card from my church — First-Plymouth. I like to think that I give a lot, but if I’m honest with myself, it’s not very much compared to what I spend on many other things, and a lot of these things I could do without. So this time I’m going to look at the whole matter of giving in a fresh way.

To begin with, I can think of some very practical reasons for giving more money to the church. I live in a free society, and some of the most important institutions in that society are the voluntary organizations called churches. These churches, like the one to which I belong, carry on vital, unique, and indispensable work in our community. For example, the church is a kind of conscience for our society. Sometimes it says things to me that I don’t like, but I wouldn’t want to live in a community or society where there were no churches.

The church is also a constant reminder to me and others that we live in a creation that does not belong to us, but to God, and that God has so made this creation and us so that we are all connected to one another and to all parts of creation in many ways. Therefore, whatever we do always has an effect on someone else and the creation as a whole, for good or for ill. In addition, the church and its message are continual reminders to me that there is more to this creation than meets the eye. We are also part of the realm of spirit. We live in God, and God lives in us.

I also have to admit to myself that, like all other worthy institutions, the church needs money to continue to do its work. Nowhere does the Bible say or imply that doing good costs nothing or is non-monetary. Furthermore, First-Plymouth is continuing to expand its ministry. The church building itself carries on a ministry. It is used every day and night of the week, not only by groups related to the church, but by other groups in the community who need a place to meet and who do good for our community.

Your letter to yourself could also go on to say:

When I think about it, I’m proud of the fact that my church sees itself not as some sort of private or exclusive club, but as a community of persons that has a concern for all kinds of people. Even though I sometimes complain that the church is asking for money, if my church didn’t ask for money, it couldn’t be doing the job it’s doing.

In your letter to yourself, there would also be some other reasons for giving money to the church. Hopefully, you would say to yourself:

I know deep down it is unhealthy for me to be a taker and not a giver. To be a healthy human being, I need to be a giving individual. The life of the spirit is deepened and enriched by giving. As the Bible says (it always helps to quote scripture to yourself), “The person who sows

sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Giving and giving regularly and generously is good for me, as well as good for the church.

At its deepest level, the church is the representative of God's grace to us. It is a community of people who regularly celebrate in public worship the presence of God in the world and among people. The church reminds me of life with all its possibilities, its joys, and its sorrows.

I give to the church because I know that one of its main tasks is to help people like me and others to find the meaning of life as we experience it in all kinds of events. There is the miracle and mystery of birth, growing up, maturing, the choice of vocation and the change of vocation, for some there is marriage, for all of us — middle age, adjusting to growing older, facing retirement and finally death. The church, as a community of Christians, meets me and others at each of these points in life. I know of no other institution in our society for helping me and others in this way.

In addition, the church carries on an educational program beginning with little children and on up through adults.

In all that happens to me and to others, the church is the one community that keeps announcing and reminding me that there is a God in this world and beyond this world, creating, judging, redeeming — a God who wills the best for me and for all of creation.

And not only does my church carry on a ministry here in this community through its staff and members and building; through radio and television, it reaches out to all sorts and conditions of people who are hungry to hear of God's love and care.

My church also provides money for other church groups so that the work of the church is extended into areas where I, as an individual Christian, and the congregation to which I belong, are not able to go personally. This includes the ministry of the church through world ministries, church world service, the Nebraska Conference, the People's City Mission in Lincoln, and more.

If one word characterizes our contemporary world and our moral life, that word is "confused." I know that moral choices are often complex; visions of the good life are misty. There are no easy or simple answers, and Christians often disagree on vital questions — what to do about world hunger? About homelessness? Or what's the best approach to welfare? There is often no one right answer.

But my gift of money to the church is less ambiguous, less complicated, clearer than many other choices. I may wonder how much to give, and out of what motivations and with what expectations — these matters come in and out of focus. But the act of giving itself is clear. It is the good and right thing to do. It's part of being a Christian and part of being a responsible member of the church.

Certainly, it is easy to find fault with churches. But whatever the criticism of a church, the category is one of performance, not of intention. I believe our church tries to do what is right.

Why give money to the church? Because I need to be a giving person, and it is the right and good thing to do.

Also, today in this letter to yourself, ask yourself—"In what spirit am I to give, and how much?"

Those of you who have joined First-Plymouth Church within the last several years and have gone through one of the “Orientation Meetings” for new members will already know what to write in your letter to yourself.

First, tell yourself in your letter that you are to give proportionately. Those who have more are to give more. There is no minimum and no maximum.

Secondly, you are to give regularly. Not only when you feel like it. Very few people would take a job if the employer would say to them, “I will pay you when and if I feel like it. And the amount I’m going to pay you will depend also on my feelings.”

Thirdly, and equally important, remind yourself in your letter that you are to give cheerfully. Be happy when you fill out your pledge card or write your check to the church. If you’re not cheerful, you’re not giving enough. I remember someone saying to me years ago, “Give until it hurts.” I’m sure that’s not correct. “Give until you feel good about your giving.” There’s nothing worse than a grouchy or stingy giver.

So this morning, in your imagination, write a letter to yourself. Tell yourself how much and why you are going to give proportionately, regularly, and cheerfully. Then in a cheerful and thankful spirit, fill out your pledge card. We want this congregation to be filled with cheerful people. Amen.