Sunday, July 19, 1992
HOW MY MIND IS CHANGING (No. 1 in a Series: A Look at Myself during 35 Years in the Ministry)
Luke 10:38-42

An old story tells of a company attempting to start a new pension plan that required 100% participation. Every employee signed up except one. No amount of argument or persuasion could get this person to change his mind. Finally, the president of the company called the man into his office. “Here is a copy of the proposed pension plan and here is a pen,” he said. “Sign up, or you’re fired.” Whereupon the man immediately picked up the pen and signed his name. The president of the company then said, “I don’t understand why you refused to sign until now. What was your problem?” The man replied, “You’re the first person who explained it to me so clearly.”

Today, I hope I can explain to you as clearly how my mind is changing during these 35 years of ministry.

There are two “givens” in life that seem to me to be beyond dispute. The first is that change is a fundamental characteristic of life as we experience it hour by hour, day by day, and year by year. Someone has pointed out that the only thing in life that does not change is the fact of change itself. Nothing remains exactly the same for very long. Our bodies are continually undergoing real if largely imperceptible alterations, although over time, the changes are obvious.

Every day the world is new, whether we realize it or not. The tree outside my house is never the same. Each sunset at the end of the day is unique. Everything in creation is in the process of change, including you and me.

The other “given” is that change is by its very nature ambiguous. We experience some change as positive, although later it may turn out to be negative, and we see some change as negative, which in the long run may turn out to be positive. And there are changes that we experience as neutral — not good or bad, at least for the time being.

Furthermore, change involves the experience of both gain and loss. Every new beginning also means an ending. As we move on, we always have to leave things behind. Life is filled with necessary gains and losses. We cannot freeze time and keep things as they are or as they were, as much as we would like to do that.

So today, I am going to reflect with you on thirty-five years of ministry, twenty and one-half of those years in this congregation. It will be a more personal sermon than usual because I will be talking about how my mind is changing about myself as a human being and especially as a minister. Next week, in the second sermon in this two-part series, I’ll be looking at how my mind is changing about the church.

My ordination took place in Union, Missouri, at Zion Evangelical and Reformed Church as it was then named. Now it is Zion United Church of Christ. It was a small congregation of about 200 members. I began my ordained ministry as a missionary pastor 35 years ago this summer in a southside suburb of Chicago. My assignment was to organize a new congregation. I was fresh out of seminary, newly ordained, and like many young ministers, I thought I could change the world. After all, I had been trained in one of the best schools in the country. It was 1957. I

was filled with zeal and energy, and I was sure any problem could be solved if only enough effort was applied.

During these 35 years, I'm still learning that's not necessarily so, and it's a difficult lesson to learn for an optimistic person like me. There comes a critical moment in the human process for all of us when the idealism and energy of our youth collide head-on with the complexities of the real world.

This does not mean that I'm no longer idealistic and optimistic or that I've given up in any way, but my idealism is being tempered with realism and patience. I'm still optimistic, but I also know that pure effort, no matter how much, in and of itself does not solve all problems. There are always other forces at work that we cannot control.

That's why the parable of the sower, which Jesus told, continues to mean so much to me. Some of the seed we sow, some of the effort we put forth, always goes to waste. Some of the seed falls on the path and is walked on, or the birds eat it before it can take root. Some falls on the rocks and withers away because there is no soil in which it can take root. Some falls among the thorns and is choked out. But some seed falls into good soil, and it yields a hundredfold.

And when we are sowing the seed, we cannot always tell where the good soil is. Sometimes our efforts yield results in places we had not expected.

This is a story of both failure and success. Sometimes three out of four seeds we sow do not make it, but one does, and it yields a hundredfold. So we have to remember that our job is to keep sowing the seed faithfully, and if we do, all of the effort will not go to waste. No one is successful 100% of the time. No one bats one thousand. If I bat 300, that's very good. I'm learning more and more, as I've said before, that things in life do not have to be perfect to be good.

The secret is to learn not to be cynical and defeated when a lot of our effort comes to nothing and not to be too cocky with success. We can learn as much from our failures, if not more, than we can from our successes.

As I look at myself over these 35 years, I also find that I'm becoming more patient with the unrighteous, but less patient with the self-righteous. All of us fall into the category of the unrighteous. We all make mistakes and need forgiveness. But the self-righteous are those who are sure they are better than the rest of us. They're like the Pharisee Jesus described who prayed, "Lord, I thank thee that I am not like other people," and then reminded God and himself how righteous he was. He would never ask God or anyone else for forgiveness because he could never admit that he had made a mistake or done anything wrong.

Even though I'm less patient with the self-righteous, I'm also learning — and I hope you're learning — to be careful with hatred. Here's a quotation about hatred that means a lot to me: "Be careful with hatred. Handle hatred with respect. Hatred is too noble an emotion to be frittered away in little personal animosities. Whereas love is of itself a reward and an object worth striving for, personal hatred has no triumphs that are not trivial, secondary, and human. Therefore love as foolishly as you may. But hate only after long and ardent deliberation. Hatred is a passion requiring one hundred times the energy of love. Keep it for a cause, not an individual. Keep it for intolerance, injustice, stupidity. For hatred is the strength of the sensitive. Its power and its greatness depend on the selflessness of its use."

In other words, love everyone but be very careful with hatred. In the near future, I'll be doing a whole sermon on how and what to hate.

I think my mind is also changing for the better about what worries, distracts, bothers, and troubles me. Some years ago, I read in a book something an 85-year-old man had written when he learned he was dying. He said, "If I had my life to live over again, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I wouldn't try to be so perfect." He went on to say, "I'd relax more. I'd limber up. I'd take more chances. I'd take more trips. I'd climb more mountains. I'd eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I'd have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones." He's right. Ninety percent of what we worry about never happens anyway, yet we go right on worrying about everything.

That's what Jesus was trying to tell Martha that day he was at her house. She had a sister named Mary, who, according to Luke's gospel, sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks and after a short while complained to Jesus that Mary was not helping her in the kitchen. It was then that Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

Isn't that true of most of us? We are troubled, anxious, and worry about too many unimportant things, and all the joy goes out of our lives. We've all seen the posters that say, "Take time to smell the flowers." Have you ever heard of a dying person saying as his or her last words, "I wish I had spent more time at my job, more time at the office, or more time in the kitchen"? Over these last 35 years, it's as if I keep hearing Jesus say to me, "Otis, Otis, you are worried and distracted by too many things." Perhaps he's also saying that to you. Isn't it true that we can find ourselves trying to go in too many different directions all at the same time? Instead of being one integrated individual, we are a committee of selves, and there is no chair for this committee. We lack focus, direction. We start one thing and then are distracted by something else. This story of Mary and Martha reminds us that one thing is needful. Find your center or focus and then begin to live your life from the inside out.

Years ago, I was riding on an airplane, and I had a conversation with a woman that I've never forgotten. Normally I don't care to talk much during my air travels, but prefer to read. This woman, however, sat down next to me and said, "I bet I can guess what you are." So I asked, "What am I?" She said, "I bet you are a lawyer." "No, I'm not a lawyer." "Then what are you?" she asked, and I said, "I'm a minister." "How nice," she answered, and I went back to reading my book.

But after a bit, she started to talk, and as I listened, she began to tell me all kinds of things. Sometimes we'll tell a stranger what we won't tell our closest friend.

She told me that she had four children and had just come back from the Bahamas. "Did you have a good time?" I asked. "No," she replied. "It was terrible." I asked, "Were you alone?" She said, "Yes, I'm trying to get myself together. Two months ago, my husband left me." "I'm sorry," I said.

Then she told me the story of her life. "Imagine, I gave him the best years of my life. I gave him beautiful children. I gave him a magnificent house, and I always kept it clean. There was no dust anywhere. My children were always on time to school." She went on and on. "I was a wonderful cook. I always entertained his friends. I was always ready to go every place he wanted to."

I felt very sorry for this woman. Not because she had tried her best to be a good wife and mother, but because, like Martha, she had been distracted and worried about many things, and in the process, had lost herself.

So as gently as possible, I asked her, “What did you do for yourself?” She said, “What do you mean?” “I mean, what did you do for yourself?” “There wasn’t any time to do anything for myself.” Then, after a pause, I said, “What would you like to have done?” And she didn’t know. She had lost herself in a role. She was fulfilling a role.

This woman had never bothered to ask herself, “What is essential about me? What is my worth? What are my needs?” Thus, she had no self to give. People need to develop themselves. That’s what Jesus was trying to help Martha understand. And this kind of self-development is not selfishness. It means finding and fulfilling your own potential. If I’m going to remain fresh and preach halfway decent sermons, I have to take time to study, to read, to think, to pray, to get away, to relax, and even to play. Otherwise, I will have nothing to give.

As many of you have heard me say before, I began life with a gift — the priceless gift of being born into a loving family. I am over-privileged because I grew up in a happy family. It was not a dysfunctional family, as we like to say today. I don’t care for that word “dysfunctional.” It’s too clinical. The opposite would be a “functional” family, and that’s also too cold, too clinical a word to describe my family. Of course, it wasn’t perfect by any means. There is no perfect family, and remember, things do not have to be perfect to be good. As a child and young adult, I was given a sense of self-worth.

Some people are not given that gift as a child, but it’s never too late for us to give that gift to another person, and it’s never too late for us to receive and acquire a sense of self-worth. The good news is that human beings are capable of change throughout their lives. An old saying goes, “You cannot teach an old dog new tricks.” But that old saying is false. It has been proven conclusively that you can teach an old dog new tricks. I find myself learning new things all the time. We can continue to learn and grow until the day we die. But we have to choose to continue to learn and grow.

I am also continuing to discover that unlearning is as necessary as learning. I have to unlearn many prejudices and question many of the basic assumptions which I’ve picked up along the way. Maybe until today, some of you have never questioned the assumption that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. Questioning our basic assumptions is an important part of growing and learning.

A study of history shows that every major advance in human progress has come about because someone had the courage to question and re-examine a basic assumption. Jesus, in his teachings, did that over and over again.

As you would expect, my mind continues to change in regard to God and the meaning of the Christian faith. My concept and ideas about God, my experience of God continues to grow and expand, and still, my God is too small.

For me, more and more, God is a loving presence, a transcendent power, a forgiving love. I believe we human beings can never be separated from God. We are an expression of God. Though God is not a person, God is at the same time very personal. There is no place that God is not. God’s love is inclusive. As Jesus said, “God makes the sun to rise on the evil and

the good, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” God is mystery, and God is also a presence dwelling in each one of us. God is the loving energy that permeates creation. More and more, I continue to struggle to find new metaphors for thinking and talking about God.

Being a parish minister, especially in a congregation like this one, provides enormous personal satisfaction. As I look back on these 35 years of ministry and at the same time look forward to many more years, I find that I have always enjoyed my work and still do. I look forward to each new day, and I thank God and you for your continued love and support. Amen.