Sunday, July 26, 1992
HOW MY MIND IS CHANGING (No. 2 in a Series: A Look at the Church during 35 Years)
John 21:15-17

Thirty-five years ago, I was ordained into the Christian ministry. On the occasion of this anniversary, I'm doing a two-part sermon series. The first was last week with the theme—"how my mind is changing about myself" during these 35 years of ministry. Today's sermon is part two, and the theme is "how my mind is changing about the church."

Although I was ordained 35 years ago into the Christian ministry, I have been in the Christian community we call the church since my birth. I was baptized as an infant 61 years ago. I grew up in a Christian family of seven children, where active participation in a church congregation was taken seriously. As a family, we attended both church school and worship every Sunday. We never thought of such things as leisure-time activities as something to be done only if there was nothing else on the schedule. Today, I'm still surprised that individuals and families who are members of the church do not make regular attendance at church school or worship a very high priority, especially in the summer.

As I look back, I can never remember not thinking of myself as a Christian. I grew into the faith. I seemed to learn at an early age that religion and life are not to be separated — they are intricately interwoven. For my brothers, sisters, and me, our Christian faith and our participation in the many activities of the church were always seen as happy and joyful experiences. It is no accident that all my siblings have been and still are active members of local congregations where they live. Two of my younger sisters even married ministers.

Thus, my perspective on the church and how my mind is changing about the church encompasses 61 years, not only the 35 years of ordained ministry. These past 35 years, however, my view of the church is different because I see it from the perspective of a parish minister rather than as a lay member of a congregation. Although, for the three years before coming here, from 1969 to 1972, when I was working in the national offices of our denomination, I had the opportunity to participate again as a lay member of a local congregation along with my wife and children. It gave me a fresh perspective after 12 years of ordained ministry as a pastor. As I look back, those three years of sitting in a pew each Sunday helped me learn some things that I hope I've been able to put into practice here for the past 20 years.

I learned, first of all, that sermons can be too long, and many of them I listened to were boring and not very helpful.

I learned, secondly, that nobody ever gets mad for getting out early.

I learned, thirdly, that people, upon leaving a worship service, should feel better than when they came in. In the church life that I experienced as a lay member for those three years, that was not always the case. I also noticed that many church worship services have too much dead time, lacking excitement and movement.

But back to the main question — how is my mind changing about the church over these years, 35 years of ordained ministry and a total of 61 years as being a part of the Christian community?

First of all, there are some things about the nature and mission of the church that do not change, although how we carry out that mission is always undergoing alteration.
The New Testament in the Bible uses several metaphors to describe what the church is. In the letter of 1 Peter, the writer says to the church of his time, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

St. Paul uses another metaphor in his first letter to the congregation at Corinth. He describes the church as being the “body of Christ.” “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it,” he told that congregation. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Think of it — this congregation here, First-Plymouth Church, is the body of Christ. We are to be the physical presence of Christ in today’s world.

St. Paul then went on to further apply the metaphor of the body of Christ in its functioning as a local congregation. He said, and I am paraphrasing, “just as the human body has many members — arms, legs, ears, eyes, hands — each with its own function, so also it is with the body of Christ. Some are to be ordained ministers, others teachers, and still others will carry out their ministry in a variety of ways.”

What then is the purpose, the main business, the mission of this body of Christ, which is the church? Jesus said it in several different ways: “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” “Go and make disciples of all nations.”

Others have described the mission and purpose of the church as being the “increase among people of the love of God and neighbor.”

To put it another way, the church exists to remind people that there is a God who loves creation and each one of us, and that we are spiritual beings as well as physical, and that God dwells within us and among us.

The church is also here to help us remember that there’s more to life than this world here and now, and that the most important things in life are not what we often think they are — accumulating as many things as possible, getting as much personal power as one can.

It can be argued that the central message of Jesus is that life is transitional. We human beings are powerfully tempted to see this life as “it"—birth, life, death. In other words, we are always tempted to be “this-worldly.” But, according to Jesus, that’s not “it.” There’s also life after this life. Life with God begins in the here and now but continues after death.

Thus, it is the job of the church to continually remind us that life is both “this-worldly” and “other-worldly,” and we can emphasize either one to the extreme while almost forgetting the other. The church in its message has at times been too much “this-worldly,” and at other times too much “other-worldly,” neglecting today’s problems and issues.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said in one of his books, “Any church that pretends to care for the souls of individuals, but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the government that corrupts them, the economic order that cripples them — that kind of church is no church at all.”

Second, there are some things about being a minister in a congregation that do not change, or rather should not change, and the most important of these is that parish ministers do their work within and from a community of faith. A congregation does not call a minister to do your ministry for you or to be religious on your behalf.
One of the most important truths the 16th-century Reformation recovered under the leadership of Martin Luther and others was the “priesthood of all believers.” We, in a Christian congregation, are all priests or ministers to one another and to the community outside the church. A congregation calls an ordained minister or ministers to lead in that ministry or priesthood of all believers.

In the church, as it has evolved over these 2,000 years, ordained ministers have come to have some specialized tasks. We are asked to be present with individuals on behalf of the local congregation in times and places of high personal vulnerability — the graveside, the hospital room, the intense counseling session, and more. Just being there is a privilege, never to be exploited, always to be treated with respect and reverence. Even more, the presence of the ordained minister in people’s vulnerable moments is an opportunity to bring hope to a person in crisis. But I and other ordained ministers always must remember that in addition to what I might bring in my own person and in my training, I also represent the congregation and its Lord and Savior.

The longer I have been in the ordained ministry, the more I am coming to see that the work of parish ministry is the nurture of the congregation. As an ordained parish minister, I do not have patients, clients, or customers. The care and feeding of a congregation is the work of parish ministers, and at the same time, it is our work to lead the congregation in its individual and varied ministries to the community outside the church.

There’s a beautiful story in the Gospel of John. Several days after the resurrection, Jesus is having breakfast with his disciples on the seashore. After breakfast, Jesus said to Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” Jesus asked Peter the same question three times, and each time Peter answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” and each time Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The early church remembered this story because of what it said about the role of the pastor in leading a congregation and the role of the church in its community.

Jesus liked the metaphor of sheep and shepherd, and the parish minister has the role of shepherd. As I said earlier, the care and feeding of a congregation is the work of parish ministers. One of the primary ways in which this is done is through regular public worship, where the congregation gathers to sing, to pray, to eat at the Lord’s table, and to hear God’s word.

The greatest danger we constantly face in any organization or institution, and especially the church, is for that institution to come to exist only for itself. Jesus faced this issue when he made the statement, “The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.” Jesus was reminding us that all institutions, all rules, all organizations are made to serve and to be of benefit to human beings rather than for us to become slaves to the institution, system, or procedure.

Sometimes we get so involved in our organization or institution that our only goal is to get it running smoothly, and we don’t want people interfering with our little systems or procedures.

We don't want people messing up the place. A church congregation can get so comfortable with itself that it no longer wants to reach out to others. It begins to see new people coming in as only causing problems. It's the same with every institution.

Imagine what wonderful hospitals we could run if the patients didn't get in the way to foul up our systems and procedures. Think of the gleaming laboratories, the antiseptic rooms, the faultless corridors, the impeccable charts, if only doctors, nurses, and administrators were allowed to populate the nation's hospitals.

Or take libraries as another example. It often seems as if the book borrower is considered a nuisance who interferes with the Dewey Decimal system and the perfect uniformity of each book in its proper place on the shelf. Sometimes we act as if libraries are for books and not for people.

The same is true of parks. Beautiful parks would remain beautiful and neat if only we could keep the people away. Or consider how nice universities and colleges would be if only the professors and administrators were allowed on campus.

The church exists not only for its members but also to reach out to others. We are to be an inclusive community. We never want to forget the words from Jesus which we have inscribed above our main front doors: "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

My mind has not changed about the nature of the church and its mission and my role as a minister among you, but my mind is always changing as to how we can more effectively reach out to others. What is always changing is how we carry out our mission. Fortunately, this congregation has always been one of vision and not afraid to take risks and find new ways of carrying out its ministry.

Sixty-one years ago, this building was completed at the height of the Great Depression.

Over 45 years ago, this congregation was a pioneer in the Midwest in taking the bold step to broadcast its worship service live on the radio. We are still doing that as a way of reaching out. Then in 1988, four years ago, we took another big step in reaching out to others through the telecasting of our worship services. I wish all of you could read the letters we get every week from all kinds of people who tell us how much our televised worship services mean to them.

Twenty-six years ago, we added the east wing for early childhood education and the chapel. Now we need space for early childhood education, for church school, and classes for all ages and our growing music ministry.

So we are about to engage in adding another much-needed new addition to our beautiful building. We are doing it so that we can continue to minister more effectively not only to our own members but to others as well.

Years ago, when this building was built, most of the members and others lived in the neighborhood of the church and could walk to its activities or take public transportation. That is no longer the case. Our members and friends now live all over the city, and there is no public transportation in the evenings or on Sundays, so we need more space for parking.

Earlier this summer, we added a Saturday evening worship service as an attempt to reach out in a new way. Who knows what other changes will be necessary in the coming years if we are to be faithful to our calling as the “body of Christ.” Amen.