Sunday, October 11, 1992
A VISION FOR THE FUTURE
Matthew 28:16-20

In a sermon series on “Endangered Character Qualities” several years ago, one of the sermons was on “Vision” and the lack of it in our time. I said it was an endangered character quality. However, there are some grand and splendid exceptions, and First-Plymouth Church is a good example. The leaders of this congregation have never been short on vision.

The people who founded First Congregational Church in 1866, when there were only six buildings in this small town then called Lancaster, had vision. They knew the importance of churches in a community. Only twenty-one years later, the vision continued when First Congregational Church completed its second and larger building, and later that year organized Plymouth Congregational Church and located it at 17th and A.

Thirty-six years later, in 1923, the two churches merged to become First-Plymouth Congregational Church, and five years later in 1928, the vision continued when the decision was made to build our present building. Despite the stock market crash of 1929 and a growing economic depression, this beautiful and unique building was dedicated on April 5, 1931.

Still, the vision grew. In 1966, we celebrated our 100th anniversary with the building of a major addition, providing a chapel, much-needed space for a nursery, classrooms for younger children, an elevator, and a redesigned chancel.

The vision expanded when twenty years later, our two church kitchens were completely renovated, the worship area repainted, and the carillon restored and expanded. The east courtyard wall was replaced with a memorial garden and columbarium. We also added a video production facility so worship services could reach our shut-ins and other people in and beyond Lincoln via television.

In this year, 1992, we are engaged in adding a desperately needed major building addition, and we are working at providing more parking spaces. When completed sometime in 1993, our entire building will be handicapped accessible. Several years from now, we will begin the second phase of this project when we expand the main pipe organ and redesign the chancel area to provide more choir space and greater flexibility for worship.

And so the vision continues. But a church is much more than a building. During all these years, this church has been growing in members and in the ministries it provides not only to its members but to countless other people. The people are the church, and ultimately the church belongs to God. Today I want to talk with you about how I see that vision continuing for us together as a people of God.

There are three parts to this vision for the future. The first is personal and concerns the future of my ministry here. Second, I want to tell you briefly what I think are the strengths and weaknesses of our ministry together as we look toward the future. Third, I will suggest what I believe some of our goals need to be in these last years of my ministry with you.

I. The Personal

When December 31st comes in a few months, I will have completed twenty-one years of ministry among you. That is longer already than any previous senior minister of this congregation. This past April, I celebrated my 61st birthday.

There are some advantages to a long-term pastorate. It causes the minister to grow. You have to grow. You can preach and disguise who you are for a few years, but then comes the time when you have to make a decision. Am I going to move to a new place and disguise myself again until they discover who I am, or am I going to become something more? If you decide to stay, you will be forced to become a deeper and more extensive person. I know that I have been forced to grow and to extend myself in many ways during these years, and I am grateful for that and for the strong support you continue to give me and the other members of our staff.

At least a dozen times in these past 21 years, I have been asked to consider other positions in a variety of places, and even though a few of them were very tempting, I've never regretted turning them down because I've always felt that God wanted me to continue here. I am a believer in the saying, "bloom where you are planted."

Therefore, my present plan is to remain here with you as Senior Minister for at least the next five to seven years. This is based on several assumptions: one, that you want me to continue; two, that my overall health remains good; and three, that I continue to feel that I am contributing and adding to the overall ministry of this congregation. I do not want to coast into retirement.

II. Strengths and Weaknesses

With that in mind, let's move to part two. As we look ahead, what are the strengths and weaknesses of our ministry together? I am a strong believer that we need to build on strengths and overcome our weaknesses.

I see at least nine major areas of strength in our ministry. I'm sure there are more than nine, but these stand out in my mind. I hope you will add to the list as you think about our strengths. These are not listed in any particular order; they are equal. Think of them as being in a circle around a hub.

We are the leader in early childhood education with our excellent preschool, our parent's day-out program, and our Sunday church school for young children.

We have one of the outstanding music ministries in this country, and it continues to improve. There are four handbell choirs, voice choirs for all ages, a brass ensemble, a unique carillon, and music in worship that is unexcelled.

Our worship services are inspirational, uplifting, and help us to experience the power of the presence of God in our lives. Yet I am never satisfied and am committed to improving these worship times.

We are on the way to becoming a leader and model in youth ministry.

We have a wonderful Christian education program for children, young adults, and people of all ages.

We are leaders in Christian outreach. Examples are the founding of Daywatch, our participation in helping to provide low-income housing through the Interfaith Housing Coalition.

Our outreach is also extended by our radio and television ministry, and our members are leaders in helping to work at solving all sorts of community problems.

We have a first-rate professional and support staff. We work well together and benefit from the wonderful support of the congregation members and the strong lay leadership in every area of our church's life.

We have been given the gift of a beautiful and functional building, and we have continued to expand and modernize it so that it is an effective and inspirational tool in our ministry.

We are an inclusive community of people who welcome all who want to join us in their spiritual journey. We try to live out the words above our main front doors, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

What then are some of our weaknesses? I believe there are three.

Our attendance and participation in worship are much too low in numbers and too sporadic for a church our size.

Attendance and participation of children and young people in our church school program are too low and infrequent. This, of course, is connected to the attendance and participation of their parents.

A woman said to me the other day, "Among the countless mistakes we made in raising our three children, there is one terribly important thing we got right. The family habit in our home was that we would all be in our respective places in church every Sunday, and what a difference it has made in our family life and in our children's lives now that they are adults. In a day when there is a lot of talk about family values, what could be more important?"

There is nothing stronger in this world than the force of habit, and one of the greatest defenses of church-going and church school attendance is to make it a habit. Day in, day out, we are inserting into the child's mind things that will never come out.

Our third weakness is in our giving for the support of the church. We have 162 members or families who give no money at all toward the support of this church. They have, for one reason or another, never learned the joy of giving.
In addition, we have 98 individuals or families who give less than $200 per year. And for the most part, these are not people on fixed incomes or below-average incomes. $200 per year is only 54 cents a day. And there are many others who are not giving cheerfully, proportionately, and regularly.

Church members who are poor givers have a spiritual problem, not a financial one. To be a Christian is to be, by definition, a giving person.

I believe that as a church, we have not and are not doing an adequate job in stewardship education both in our Sunday church school and throughout our membership. Again, I want to emphasize that I see this not only as a financial problem but as a spiritual one. This congregation will survive and continue to carry on its ministry in spite of the lack of support from some of our church members. However, I want those who are not giving at all and those who are giving way below their potential to become joyful givers because of what it will do for them.

III. Goals for the Future
What are some of the goals to be accomplished within the next five to seven years? What would I like to see happen before I leave this place? Some of these relate directly to overcoming what I see as our weaknesses.

First, we need to become more of a worshipping church. I will not be satisfied that my ministry here has been fruitful until our average attendance at worship on weekends is at least 1,000. I'm talking about weekends because I believe our Saturday evening worship service will continue to grow.
I had a dream, a vision, a few weeks ago. It was Sunday morning, and I saw hundreds of people walking together to this church from the Lincoln High School parking lots. They were happy and joyful. The vision reminded me of the crowds walking from distant parking lots to Memorial Stadium on a home game Saturday.

I want this to continue to be an ever-growing worshipping church. This is the center of our church life from which all else radiates. If our regular participation in worship improves, so will our attendance in the church school.

Second, I want us to become more of a giving church. As I said earlier, it's a spiritual issue. Jesus said that "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." My personal goal is to have at least 10% of our church membership become tithers, people who are joyfully giving at least 10% of their income. I know this subject is one that some people do not like to talk about, but miracles happen when people become joyful, generous givers.

Third, and I believe most important, during my remaining years of ministry here, I want more than anything else for this to become a church of prayer. Teaching people to pray is the most important gift the church has to offer. Where there is prayer, there are always miracles. Our Christian faith teaches that we are more than physical beings; we are spiritual beings having a human experience, rather than human beings having a spiritual experience. The difference in perspective is crucial.

Kathryn Campbell, this past Monday, began to lead a prayer group that will meet regularly. Sometime later this fall or winter, I hope to begin one or more additional prayer groups, and some of these will be especially for men. We will study prayer, we will learn how to pray, and we will pray for this church, for ourselves, and for others. We will learn how to become more aware of the loving presence of God in our everyday lives. We will learn to be more in touch with the deep spirituality that is the eternal part of each one of us.

In the deepest sense, I see myself and all of us together as bridge builders in the present and for the future. Others who came before us gave us the Christian faith and in Lincoln gave us this congregation and this building. They built not only for themselves but for those who would come after them. We can do no less.

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 —
The 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 this 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.
The 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.”

— Will Allen Dromgoole