Sunday, April 19, 1998
FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS
John 20:19-23

Today in the 10:30 a.m. worship service, 60 young people will be received into membership in this congregation through the rite of Confirmation. Since last September, these young people have participated in weekly class sessions and discussions led by a team of dedicated teachers and coordinated by our minister for youth, Rita Christensen.

I have also had the privilege of meeting with each student individually by appointment in my office during the past month. In preparation for these "one on one" meetings, each young person was asked to write a paper about their Confirmation experience, which both Rita and I have read.

During these past eight months, each class member has been expected to attend worship services regularly, to listen closely to the sermons, and then write summaries of 20 sermons during this period. Rita has read every one of them — 1,200 in all.

The Confirmation class members have also learned how readily available the First-Plymouth sermons are: you can be here in person on a Saturday evening or at two different times on Sunday morning, you can obtain an audio tape immediately following the worship services on Sunday, you can hear it on the radio, you can hear and see it on television in the Lincoln area at 5 different times during the week, you can get it on the internet at any time on First-Plymouth's web page, or you can get a printed copy — there are twelve opportunities to hear or read the sermon each week.

Because these 60 young people are being received into membership this morning, the sermon has the title, "Five Principles for Growing Christians." These five principles are not only for them but for all of us. It is an important part of our heritage that as Christians we are to continue to grow and mature in our faith until the day we die.

It's also part of our heritage, which comes out of the Jewish tradition, that God continues to be revealed in new ways. As Pastor John Robinson said to our Pilgrim forefathers and mothers as they boarded the ship named the "Mayflower" to come to this country, "There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's word." God's revelation is never finished. Revelation did not stop when the 66 books in the Bible were complete. We also received from our Jewish heritage, as I said in last week's sermon, the belief that with God's help, human progress is possible. Life is not an endless cycle of birth and death. Time is not like a wheel spinning ceaselessly, never altering its course. Because we human beings are created in the image of God, we are co-creators with God, and therefore it is possible for tomorrow to be better than today.

This leads to the first principle for growing Christians. Confirmation is not graduation. Too many times in the past, young people get confirmed, and we seldom see some of them again. The same happens for some adults who join the church. They were more active when they were non-members. One day they join and then, after a time, fade away.
It's part of a cultural trend. Sociologists have been saying now for a number of years that people are more and more reluctant to make long-term commitments, and even when they do, they drift away from them. You might be surprised to know that we have some church members who, for some reason or other, do not make a financial commitment for the support

of the church. Why, I don't know. Many of them would probably say they would not want to be on welfare, yet they are accepting church welfare all the time. Someone else is paying for all the programs from which they benefit.

Following the way and will of God is a journey of continued growth and maturity. It takes commitment. We never arrive at the point where we can say, "Now I have it all and know it all."

There's an incredible benefit that comes from discipline and commitment — the pleasure of knowing you have kept your commitment, the joy of having God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," or as Paul said to Timothy in the Bible, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." What an epitaph that is for one's life.

The first principle: keep growing in the faith, and this includes making commitments and keeping them. The two go together.

The second principle is this — and you have heard me say it in sermons time and time again in many different ways because it comes straight from the life and teachings of Jesus: Live from the inside out and not from the outside in. It means you will be able to act and not react. You may remember that I said in the Palm Sunday sermon two weeks ago that Jesus was able to deal effectively with the temporary successes and failures he faced because he lived from the inside out.

In order to live from the inside out, you have to have something of worth inside. You can't be hollow. Jesus had a strong sense of what God's will was for him. He had a worship discipline that kept him constantly in touch with the source of all spiritual power — God.

On the other hand, when you live from the outside in, then you are always giving in to peer pressure. You have a need to wear the same kind of clothes that your peers wear and to do what they do. You let other people decide how you are going to act. However, if you follow the way of Jesus and live from the inside out, you will not let other people decide how you are going to act but instead will base your actions on eternal ethical principles as taught and lived by Jesus.

Recently, some of my grandchildren showed me a new bracelet that's popular and worn by young people. It has on it the initials, W.W.J.D., which stands for the words, "What would Jesus do?" I like the idea of people wearing that bracelet to remind them to always ask that question before making a decision.

The best-selling novel ever written is called In His Steps, by Charles Sheldon, a Congregational minister. The story is about a group of people who decided to make all their ethical decisions in life by asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" The book is still available, and I hope you will read it.

The third principle for growing Christians is to be a "giving" person — to let your life be one of service to others. Jesus said that you will only find your life by losing it, by giving it away. To follow this principle is not easy. It goes against much of what present-day secular culture would have us do. Over and over again, there are strong voices in the culture that tell us that we will find meaning and happiness in life by making more money so that we can buy and consume more for ourselves.

The world is filled with stingy, hoarding people, many of whom seem to believe that what they have belongs to them and not to God, and that they can take it with them when they die.

One of the requirements for this year's Confirmation class has been that each young person participates in a certain number of hours of volunteer service to others. I know that many of you have found this to be very rewarding personally because you were giving of yourself and not just taking. If you are going to continue to grow and mature as a Christian, you will need to make this a regular part of your life. Always remember the words of Jesus, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

Connected to this requirement of service is that of making a financial commitment to support the work of the church. This past week, each of you received a pledge card in the mail from the church office. The Board of Trustees of the church expects each one to become a regular giver. It's not the amount of money you contribute, but the important thing is to establish the discipline of regular giving. If your parents are not regular givers, they also received a pledge card so they can set a good example for you.

The fourth principle is: Remember always, you are created in the image of God, and so is every human being you meet. The implications of this principle are astounding. For example, because you are created in the image of God, your body, as the Apostle Paul said, is a temple of God. It is holy because God made you in God's image and because God's Spirit lives in you. Therefore, do nothing that will desecrate your body as God's holy temple. When you abuse your body in any way with drugs, tobacco, alcohol, or other such substances, you are treating your body as less than holy.
In the same way, when you abuse another person in any way or use another person for your own selfish desires, you are treating his or her body as less than holy and forgetting that he or she is also created in God's image.

In the scripture lesson read earlier, there is the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples on Easter Sunday evening. Among other things, he said to them, "Peace be with you." And then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In this way, he was once more reminding them that they were created in the image of God and that God's Spirit lived in them.

The fifth principle for growing Christians is: If you are going to follow in the steps of Jesus and continue to grow and mature in your faith, then you will need to participate regularly in public worship. This will help keep your life and your values in perspective. It will be a continual reminder to you that there is a spiritual dimension in your life that is not to be neglected but continually cultivated.
Here's an illustration from Stephen Covey that's been helpful to me. Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree. "What are you doing?" you ask. "Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply, "I'm sawing down this tree." "You look exhausted. How long have you been at it?" "Over five hours," he answers, "and I'm beat. This is hard work." "Why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen the saw?" you ask. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster and easier." "I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man replies impatiently, "I'm too busy sawing."

Taking time to keep your spiritual life nourished is like taking time to sharpen the saw. This fifth principle surrounds and gives you the power to make the other four possible. Amen.