Sunday, November 5, 2000
FIRST THINGS FIRST
Mark 12:28-34

On January 1, 2001, I will begin my 30th year among you as the Senior Minister of this congregation. When I was considering your Search Committee's invitation to accept the position, I consulted several of my colleagues in ministry who knew something about this congregation and its history. One of them, in particular, suggested that it would not be a wise decision. He said that churches like First-Plymouth, located in a near downtown neighborhood with inadequate parking, declining membership, very few younger people, and low worship attendance, had little chance of doing much more than barely surviving. His conclusion was that this congregation had reached its peak in the mid-nineteen-fifties, and there was little hope for its recovery. For example, its membership in 1952 had reached a high of 2,076, remained static for four years, and then began a slow decline so that in 1972, when I arrived, the membership was 1,233 — a loss of 843 members in 16 years. Attendance at public worship had declined to 250 per week.

Your Search Committee members affirmed that much of this analysis was true, but they were very hopeful about the future. They described First-Plymouth as a "sleeping giant." The congregation, according to the committee, was ready to awaken and wanted to grow and expand.

After much soul searching and prayer, I agreed to accept your committee's invitation, and on January 1, 1972, I began my ministry here among you. My first task, with the help of the leaders of this church, was to assess our strengths and weaknesses.

We identified the following strengths:

- A willingness and readiness to grow in every way: membership, programs, reaching out to others, and providing the funds for employing the best staff possible.
- A tradition of leadership. Because First-Plymouth was the first congregation to be organized in Lincoln, it had a solid history of leadership in the community and of having among its members people who were leaders.
- A history of a vital music program.
- An impressive building that is also an architectural gem.
- A congregation that had boldly used the media for its outreach. Since the very early 1940s, the church had been doing a weekly live broadcast of its early Sunday worship service over a local radio station.

The weaknesses we identified were these:

- Very few young people in the congregation. A whole generation was missing. The Sunday church school was not functioning very well, partly because there were few children.
- Financial deficits. There was a debt remaining on the east wing building addition with an accumulating annual operating deficit.
- Not nearly enough members were supporting the church with cheerful, proportionate, and regular giving. A report from a special planning committee noted: "We need four hundred families or individuals to face candidly the fact of their poor stewardship in our

congregation. One hundred-fifty families or individuals give no financial support to the congregation, and another 150 give less than $2.00 per week. We have too many members on church welfare."

- Poor worship services. In spite of better-than-average music, worship had become a boring, routine exercise. Worship attendance was poor.
- A reputation for being an unfriendly, cold, and unwelcoming place for visitors.
- A lack of a sense of purpose and direction.

Today, 29 years later, the giant is no longer sleeping but is wide awake, filled with energy, and carrying out a vital ministry in this community and beyond. Today, First-Plymouth is a seven-day-a-week church. This building is bustling with activities and ministries. Worship attendance is greatly improved. I am told over and over again by people who visit this church and who participate via television and radio that our worship services are inspirational, spiritually uplifting, and meet the needs of everyday living. I wish all of you could read the letters that come to me every week from people who have been here in person, or who have participated in our worship services through our media ministry. Individuals who attend worship feel better when they leave than when they came in.

We have not had a deficit budget in the past eight years, and our financial situation has greatly improved. We have an exceptional church staff. Our membership is now almost 2,800. Our Christian Education program for all ages, the Sunday Church School, outreach ministry through television, radio, our church web page, our work through the Board of Christian Outreach, Women's Ministries, Stephen Ministries, Abendmusik, Preschool Discovery Days, Parent's Day Out, Youth Ministries, Singles Ministries, Music Ministries, Bible study groups, and a variety of other programs to help people in crisis and decision-making, pastoral care to people in need, and many other programs too numerous to mention — all of these programs exist to spiritually nourish people so that they are able to carry out their own ministries in their work, in their homes, and in their leisure.

I am not going to list all the steps that were taken to bring this about. In general, our plan has been, and continues to be, an effort to build on our strengths and overcome our major weaknesses. Early on, we decided we had to clarify our mission and purpose — in other words, to put "first things first." We wanted to be sure that our ministry continued to be based on a solid Biblical and theological foundation.

What is the mission of the church? Some people say it is to help cultivate the Christian life, others speak of the salvation of souls, and still others say it is to teach the Bible. One traditional statement has been that the purpose of the church is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Someone else has said it is the development of the life of prayer and worship among its members. All of these are correct, but there is one overall mission that encompasses these, and it comes directly from the Bible story read earlier.

One day, a religious leader asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" This was a common question among the students of the sacred scriptures. Wouldn't it be helpful if it were possible to take all of the ancient laws and rank them from the most important down to the least? But that isn't the way it is. God's will for us is not a scale of good ideas from the greatest to the least.

Jesus knew the answer to the question. He replied, "The first commandment is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The religious leader who had asked the question agreed with the answer and he added, "This is much more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices." In other words, this is much more important than all the other religious activities in which we might participate. "You are right," said Jesus.

In one of the other gospels, this same story is told except it is a lawyer who asked Jesus the question. Jesus gave the identical answer, but then the lawyer asked a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" In reply, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

It was a way of illustrating that love is more than romantic feeling, it is more than liking someone, it is more than an intimate relationship. Love, in the Biblical meaning, is to treat another person or persons as a child of God. Love encompasses justice, caring, and respect.

The Bible says in another place, "If anyone says that he or she loves God and hates another human being, that person is a liar." The Bible also says: "We love because God first loved us." "If I speak in the tongues of men and women or even angels but have not love, I am nothing but a noisy gong or a clanging symbol."

"If we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love is perfected in us. Those who do not love do not know God, for God is love." "For God so loved the world, that God gave the only Son."

In other words, love of God and neighbor are basic to all of life. Therefore, it can be stated without reservation that the purpose and the mission of the church — the ultimate reason for its existence — is "the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor." This church was organized in 1866 for this mission, and it continues to be our purpose and mission no matter how much the world changes around us.

We said this in the Statement of Mission, which we officially adopted in the Annual Meeting in January 1976: "The church is a community of persons who acknowledge God as Creator and Sustainer (here the word 'Sustainer' means Holy Spirit), Jesus Christ as God's redeeming activity, and human beings as participating with God in the responsibility for the well-being of the created order. The church exists in history to increase among people the love of God and neighbor."

This mission continues to shape our vision for the future. Therefore, it is no accident that we are known as an open and inclusive congregation. We welcome all who want to join us as they continue to pursue their own spiritual journey. We are at different places on our journeys and are here to help each other and care for each other along the way.

Now let's talk about the future, yours and mine. I do not want to see a repeat of what occurred in the 1950s when the congregation reached a peak, was static for a time, and then began a slow decline for 16 years. We need to continue to grow in every way, which includes our caring for each other and for the community in which we exist. This is not for the sake of growth in itself, but because it is our mission to "increase among people the love of God and neighbor." There will never be a time in the future when there is not a need for more love of God and neighbor. In business terms, our market will never be exhausted.

What needs to be done to assure that our ministry continues to increase? First, we need your continued and increased financial support of the work of this congregation. Our many programs are led by our talented and dedicated staff. Their salaries are paid from our operating budget. Each one of them deserves, for the coming year, not only a cost of living increase but a merit increase. I hope you will help make this possible. We still have too many members on church welfare, members who give little or nothing for the work of the church yet continue to benefit from its many programs and services.

Second, contrary to rumors I hear from time to time, I have no plans to retire as your Senior Minister in the near future. Sometime, of course, I will have to retire, but when that will be, I do not know. I do not want this congregation to go into a static mode or decline when I do retire, but I strongly feel there are still some things I need to accomplish among you. I can assure you of this — when the time comes, your church leaders will find someone so good that you will say, “Why didn’t Young retire sooner?”

Third, we on the staff need your continued prayer and moral support. Each Tuesday afternoon in our weekly staff meeting, we pray for individuals in our congregation and for the church as a whole. In our private prayers, we do the same. When we pray for each other, the loving power and energy of God multiplies among us. It is another way of increasing among people the love of God and neighbor. It is putting first things first. Amen.