Sunday, October 27, 2002
THE MOST IMPORTANT COMMANDMENTS
Matthew 22:34-40

Some quotations from the Bible are so familiar that when you hear them, maybe you really don't hear them. That could be the case with the scripture reading from Matthew's gospel for today. You've heard it so often, you take it for granted.

Here's the question and the answer Jesus gave one more time. Jesus is being tested again by some of the religious authorities. He was asked, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" The religious scholars of his day had surveyed the Torah, counted carefully, and discovered 613 commandments. Applying all 613 at once was virtually impossible, even if they could be remembered.

If you were to hang all of these laws on one nail, what nail would it be? Jesus used two nails: love of God and love of neighbor. He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Most of you have heard that statement so many times that you could be missing some of its implications and its power. Here's why I say that. Every now and then, I have a conversation with someone that goes something like this. I will say to a woman who has been attending church for years, "I've never met your husband. What's his religious background?" She will reply, "He's a good man. He believes in God. He's kind to everyone. But he doesn't feel it is necessary to be a part of a community of believers and worship God with others."

I have gotten this answer so often that I wonder about its source. Where does one get the idea that worship is unnecessary and that loving God and neighbor is easy? I wonder if what Jesus said about loving God and neighbor is heard so often without explaining its implications that it contributes to the problem.

Someone said to me not long ago, "Loving is what it's all about, isn't it?" That's true, but more needs to be said. In Luke's gospel, the lawyer who asked Jesus the question about which commandment is the most important got the same answer from Jesus. But according to Luke's account, the lawyer asked the very important follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" To answer that question, Jesus told him the story of the good Samaritan. Loving your neighbor means being of help to those in need, even those people you were taught to dislike — the kind of people you try to avoid. Furthermore, loving God and neighbor is more than helping people one at a time on a personal basis. Suppose that same Samaritan went along that road from Jerusalem to Jericho regularly and each time found people in the ditch who had been beaten and robbed. That Samaritan would also be loving his neighbor if he worked to improve regular patrols of that road so that it would be safer to travel. Justice is a form of love.

Unfortunately, working on prevention is never as popular as emergency work. Preventing injuries from taking place is not as exciting as rushing to the scene in an ambulance with sirens screaming and lights flashing to pick up the injured. That's why programs such as Emergency Room on television attract large audiences. Programs on accident prevention or public health would never sell.

What has all this to do with this congregation and its ministry now and in the future? As Jesus pointed out, our basic mission is to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. This includes both prevention and emergency help. We carry out this mission by helping all of you be the best ministers possible where you live and where you work. In addition, our church staff people have their own ministries to carry on, personally and on your behalf. This beautiful building also has its ministry of inspiration as the setting for its many worship services and as a place of meeting for all kinds of groups who use it for the betterment of the community. It's an important tool that is used to increase among people the love of God and neighbor.

In my letter to you earlier this week, I promised you that in this sermon I would give you my vision for the present and the future. That vision has as its foundation our mission of increasing among people the love of God and neighbor.

As a way of doing this, here's what I think are our greatest strengths. Then I'm going to talk about areas where I think we can improve.

First and most important of all, our foremost strength is our talented and creative staff. Equally important, I am proud to say that our staff tenure, including secretaries, custodians, program leaders, and ministers, has been and continues to be one of the best in the country. We have very low staff turnover. That's because they find deep satisfaction in working here and are committed to increasing among people the love of God and neighbor. It's also because you, the members of this congregation, are so supportive and fun to work with. You are a very caring, loving congregation.

Because the staff is creative and talented and you are so supportive, our many church programs continue to expand in variety and in the number of people served. We are indeed increasing among people the love of God and neighbor.

One way we love God is through community worship. In addition to our three worship services every weekend of the year — one on Saturday evening and two on Sunday morning — we have added the Taizé service of meditation and prayer on the first Sunday evening of each month. We also have a healing service once a month in the chapel. Recently, we added the Jabez prayer service on the second and fourth Thursdays at 12:15 p.m. in the Prayer Room. Beginning this fall, we started a weekly Wednesday late afternoon and early evening program for young people, which includes young people's choirs, Bible studies, and a family worship service led by the young people once a month.

Our Singles Ministry, which began a few years ago, continues to serve an increasing number of people from all walks of life. Then this fall we added another program focused primarily on young adults, single and married. It's called "Inspired Young Adults."

Our Sunday morning church school and confirmation program continue to educate and inspire children, young people, and adults in Christian education and Bible study.

We are a seven-day-a-week church. Come to this building any day or night of the week and you will see all kinds of groups meeting here. Many of them are educational groups begun and coordinated by our Associate for New Program Development and Coordination. In addition, we have many groups initiated by our own church boards. Other groups that meet here are from the community. For example, fifteen different groups use your gym each week.

Three years ago, we began Stephen Ministry. We now have 25 active, trained Stephen Ministers who, every day, are increasing among the people they minister to, the love of God and neighbor.

Our outreach into the community continues to grow. We have successfully sponsored two refugee families, and a third will be here soon. In addition, we have worked directly and indirectly with other refugees who have come to Lincoln. Our partnership with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana, Africa, is another unique outreach program.

My involvement with the Russian Farm Community Project has also extended our ministry. Our young people have taken numerous mission trips to work with other Christians in communities outside and inside of Lincoln. The Puppet Team, organized by our Christian Education Department, has its part here and in outreach to other church communities. Each church department has its own unique outreach connections with other community groups such as the Gathering Place, Matt Talbot's Kitchen, the Lighthouse for young people, and the Interfaith Housing Coalition.

Our weekday early childhood education program, which now includes what we formerly called Parent's Day Out, the First-Plymouth Preschool, and Discovery Days, serves hundreds of children each day. These include children of our church members and many from the wider community. It, too, is a program of outreach as we provide tuition assistance so that children from all parts of our community can participate.

Abendmusik: Lincoln, our church-owned and operated concert series, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, has in the past and continues to bring inspiration to our own church members and the wider community. It is a unique contribution our church makes. Our music leadership in the church services on Sunday mornings continues to be inspiring because of our various choirs, the brass, and the organ.

On an average Sunday morning, and throughout the week via cable television, our television and radio ministry reaches an audience of more than 30,000. Many of these are people who are unable to attend a worship service in person because of their condition. The mail we receive is inspiring to read. Sometime within the next 12 months, we will need to replace much of our 16-year-old television equipment.

If you have a computer and access to the internet and have not yet visited our church website, you should try it. We have, for months, been averaging more than 2,000 "hits" per day. People from a wide geographical area go to the website to learn about our many church programs, to read the sermons, to do Bible study, and for a variety of other reasons.

Earlier in this sermon, I said that our beautiful church building plays an important part in our mission of increasing among people the love of God and neighbor. It is an inspiring work of art in itself and is very functional.

I am pleased to tell you that our building and property will soon be in the best overall condition since it was new in 1931. Here's a partial list of what has been done and what's still in process. We have new air-conditioning in every part of the building. We have just completed installing new windows to replace those from 1931. We installed new boilers a few years ago. New electrical wiring is now being done, with additional lighting added in the main worship area. The old wiring had been a fire hazard. New landscaping all around the building is almost complete. We have done major roof repairs in the last two years. Once the wiring and

additional lights are completed in the main worship area, we will proceed with plaster repair and touch-up painting. We added the new west addition in 1994 and the new pipe organ in 1998.

I said in my letter to you that I would also talk about my disappointments. Another way to say it is, where can we improve? My biggest disappointment is in the attendance of the worship services on Sunday mornings. People tell me every day, whether they come here in person or send their comments in the mail from our radio listeners and television viewers, that our worship services, including the sermons, music, and prayers, are among the best in the country. Why, then, has our attendance in worship leveled off and sometimes even declined a bit on Sunday mornings? If you have some ideas about how we can increase our worship attendance, let me know. We had an increase in worship participation right after September 11 last year, which lasted for six or seven weeks, and then we dropped back to where we were before and even a little lower than before. We should be filling this place in both the 9:00 and 10:30 worship services.

Here's one of my theories. Maybe participation in worship has leveled off and even declined because we take it for granted. Maybe our success has led to a kind of apathy. Sometimes I even think that maybe I've been here long enough.

Why is attendance at worship so important? We need you here, not only because of what it does for you, but also because of what it does for others. Your presence with us as we praise God together adds to this congregation's energy and power. Other people are inspired and enriched by your presence. When you are not here, you are missed. One of the most reliable indicators of the overall health of a congregation is worship attendance.

Now I need to talk with you about your continued financial support of the work of this congregation. In a few days, you will receive a letter from me with a pledge card enclosed and an envelope for you to return it to the church office.

I know, as you do, that the overall economy is struggling. All of us on the church staff are conscious of this as we have begun our part of the budget process for 2003. I also know that you are generous people and that you are committed to the work and ministry of this congregation. In times like the present, the ministry of this congregation is even more crucial than ever. Therefore, I encourage you to consider whatever increase in your giving you think is possible. You can be sure of this: for the past almost 31 years since I have been your Senior Minister, we have never had a deficit year. The Board of Trustees of this congregation has done and will continue to do an excellent job of managing and overseeing the financial health of this church. With your gifts, you are supporting a ministry that is efficient, caring, and loving. With your help, we will continue to follow the way of Jesus as we increase among people the love of God and neighbor. Amen.