Sunday, October 24, 2004
THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION AND ANSWER
Mark 12:28-34

"Which commandment is the first of all?" The person who asked this question was convinced it was the most important religious question that could be asked. If Jesus had believed that everything written in the Bible had the same value, he would have answered, "All the commandments are equally important." Instead, he replied, "This is the most important commandment of all. 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. The second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus gives the same answer in Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel. You might remember that in Luke's gospel, after hearing what Jesus said about loving your neighbor as yourself, a lawyer asked a follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan, which teaches that even people you consider your enemies are your neighbors and you are to love them.

In Matthew's version of the same question and answer, a significant comment by Jesus is added. He said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." In other words, love of God and neighbor has the highest priority as far as God and the Bible are concerned. The Apostle Paul underscored this by saying, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself." Years later, St. Augustine wrote: "Love God and do as you please."

According to Mark's gospel, even the scribe, the Bible scholar of that day who asked Jesus the question, agreed with the answer that Jesus gave. He said, "You are right, Teacher." He knew that the commandment to love God and neighbor, and the fact that God loves all of us equally, has the highest priority of all the traditions and teachings in the scriptures. It is the lens through which all scripture needs to be evaluated. It is also the guide to following the way of Jesus. In everything you do, you are to ask yourself the question, "Does my decision, does my action, increase among people the love of God and neighbor?" It's another way of asking, "What would Jesus do?"

What is true for you as an individual, as you do your best to follow the way of Jesus, is also true of a church congregation like First-Plymouth as it does its best to follow the way of Jesus. Thus, it is no accident that in this congregation's recent strategic planning process we agreed that our mission is: "To increase among people the love of God and neighbor."

We carry out this mission by putting into practice the invitation of Jesus, which is inscribed in gold letters above our main front doors: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

We carry out our mission and this invitation in a variety of ways. This building is bustling with activities and programs every day and evening of the week. At the center of our life together is worship, where we gather to participate in and experience the presence of God. 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 could read the letters that come to the church office every week from people who have been here in person or who have

experienced our worship services through our media ministry. The people who take part in our worship services in any of these ways always say that they feel better because of it.

We have an outstanding Christian Education program for all ages, which includes the Sunday Church School, many adult Bible Study groups, youth groups, confirmation classes, and discussion groups. Add to this our many choirs for children, young people, and adults. Our church website continues to get 4,000 or more hits per day. The program, the Singles Ministry, our new Tower Club 2 for couples, grief workshops, divorce recovery classes, and our media ministry — all these are ways of increasing among people the love of God and neighbor.

This church building itself is a powerful witness in this neighborhood, in the city of Lincoln, and in the state of Nebraska. You have heard me say many times that it is the "Protestant Cathedral." I am pleased to report that even though the main part of the building is 73 years old, it is now in the best condition that it has been for many years. In the past three years, we have spent more than one million dollars on major repairs and renovation.

This beautiful building continues to be used by AA, neighborhood groups, and for many other community activities. It is intentional that we are known as an open and inclusive congregation. We welcome all people who are weary and heavy laden. We welcome all who want to join us to pursue their own spiritual journey. We are at different places on our journeys and are here to help each other along the way.

Now let's talk about the future, yours and mine. During the next two or three years, this congregation will go through some major staff changes. Jack Levick moved to Florida last November. Judi Cook will retire this December 31, 2004. Kathryn Campbell talks about retiring within the next several years.

Will I retire? I will celebrate my 74th birthday in April 2005. The elected lay leaders of this congregation are aware of these changes. Therefore, we will be appointing very soon a "Staff Transition Planning Committee." The purpose of this committee will be to propose a carefully thought-out plan for all of these changes. I am pleased to announce that Larry Monson, our Minister of Music, has agreed to continue to be our full-time Minister of Music until July 31, 2006.

One option that is being considered for the position of Senior Minister is that within the next year and a half the congregation will find an individual to work with me for a period of time yet to be determined but who will assume the Senior Minister's position. I like the metaphor of a relay race, where one person runs alongside another for a distance before the baton is handed off. That's one of several options the Staff Transition Planning Committee will consider. I'm mentioning this now so that you will know that careful planning is taking place. In the meantime, it's very important that our congregation remains strong financially and in every other way.

I do not want to repeat what happened in the 1950s when this congregation reached a peak, was static for several years, and then began a slow decline for 16 years. We need to continue to grow in membership, in financial strength, in programs, and outreach, which includes our caring for one another and for the community in which we live. This is not for the sake of growth 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 else needs to be done to assure that our ministry continues to increase? What I am going to say next is what you expect me to say. We need your continued and increased financial support for the work of this congregation. Our many programs are led by our talented and dedicated staff. Their salaries are paid from our annual operating budget. Each one of them deserves an increase. I hope you will help make this possible. We still have too many members on what I call “church welfare,” members who give little or nothing for the financial support of the church yet continue to benefit from its many programs and activities.

Fortunately, we also have many members who are generous in their financial support. We have people on very limited incomes who proportionately give more than 10% of their incomes. We also have people whom you might consider to be wealthy, who are very generous in their giving.

In the mail this week, you will receive a letter from me, as you have each fall in late October or early November, asking you to tell the church treasurer what you intend to give for the support of this church’s ministries for the coming year, 2005.

Every year there are people who ask me to tell them what the Christian faith teaches about giving for the support of the church’s ministries. Here’s my list of what you should not do and what you should do in making your decision about how much to give.

Here’s what you should not do. First, do not base your level of giving on what you think other people might be giving. Giving is a deeply spiritual act. What you need to be giving for your own spiritual growth cannot be determined by what others are doing. People who are giving enough are the happiest people in the world.

Second, do not try to determine what the average gift might be. Some people will ask the minister or treasurer, “What’s the total church budget?” Then they ask, “How many members does the church have?” Next, they divide the number of members into the total dollar amount of the budget and pledge that amount. That might be okay for a private club, but the church is different. I’m told that’s how the Augusta National Golf Club, where the Master’s Golf Tournament is played, determines the amount of dues each member will pay each year. At the end of the year, the management totals up the expenses and sends each member a bill. Each fall when I need to talk with you about your financial support of the church’s ministries, I often wish I could use that formula, but that would not help you grow spiritually.

Third, do not take the easy way out and simply decide to give what you gave last year. Your personal financial situation changes each year or more frequently, and the church’s needs vary from year to year. Furthermore, since giving is a spiritual discipline, you need to take it seriously. It could be that if you are to grow spiritually, you need to be giving more.

A few years ago, a member of the church invited me to talk about spiritual growth and how that might relate to his financial support of the church. He was quite open and told me that he was presently giving $1,200 per year, $100 per month, but he was not experiencing the joy of giving.

He volunteered that his income was about $200,000 per year. He was a member of a country club, and he said that his dues there came to $3,500 per year. The more we talked about other kinds of spending and how that compared with what he gave to the church, he began to understand that he needed to increase his giving. A week later, he sent me a note in which he thanked me for listening and said that he was going to increase his giving to the church to

$10,000 per year. He added that he now had a sense of joy that was beyond description and that he had a new understanding of what Jesus meant when he said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

I’ve mentioned three things you should not do when deciding how much to give for the support of the church. (1) Do not make your decision based on what you think other people are giving. (2) Do not determine the size of your gift by dividing the church’s expenses by the number of members. (3) Do not simply give what you gave last year.

Now, on the positive side, here are three principles from the Bible to guide you in making your decision for the coming year. I mention these three principles in the orientation meeting for each group of new members, so most of you have heard them before. I call them the C P R of giving.

First, give cheerfully. The Bible says, “God loves a cheerful giver.” The fact is all of you love cheerful givers. No one appreciates a complaining, unhappy, miserable giver. It has been demonstrated over and over again that if you are not cheerful in your giving, it means you are not giving enough. The word “miserable” comes from the word “miser,” which means a stingy person. If you want to be a cheerful, happy individual, then the most important part about giving is not what it will do for the church, but what it will do for you.

Second, the Bible teaches that you are to give proportionately. Those who have more are to give more. Jesus said, “To whom much has been given, much is also required.” You cannot be a cheerful giver until you become a proportionate giver. I suggest that you calculate what percentage of your income you are giving to the church now, and if you are not cheerful about it, then increase the percentage.

Third, the Bible teaches that you are to give regularly. That means you need to give every year. The important principle at work here is to make giving a regular part of your life. I heard a person say, “I’ll give when I feel like giving.” Unfortunately, this person never felt like it. Suppose your employer said to you, “I’ll pay you when I feel like it.”

“Which commandment is the first of all? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s why the mission of this congregation is “to increase among people the love of God and neighbor.” Your generous financial support will help us do that. Amen.