Sunday, September 24, 2006
ONE MORE TIME
Mark 9:33-37

Now that I'm standing here, I'm not sure I want to preach a sermon. I simply want to stand here and look at all of you, this beautiful worship area, the pipe organ, the brass, the choir. I want to stand here and tell you how much I love you — each and every one. What a miracle all of you are. These past Sundays when Rowena and I have been privileged to worship as members of the congregation, I've been even more aware of the power and beauty of all of you and this holy place. One thought continually crosses my mind — what a privilege it is to have been your minister in this place. You are, and I know you will continue to be, a "beloved community." We have learned from each other and done our best to search for the truth in love, believing that "there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word."

Preparing this sermon has been especially difficult. There's so much I want to say that there isn't time for it all. Some years ago, a minister wanted to make the Guinness Book of Records with the longest sermon ever preached. It went on for hours and hours. Near the end, a woman in the congregation stood up and, speaking for everyone, said loudly, "At least make the point." Another minister made the Guinness Book of Records with the shortest sermon ever preached. He stood in the pulpit and after a slight pause, said one word, "Love," and then sat down. Many people present said it was the best sermon he ever preached. The sermon today will not be the shortest or the longest.

I still remember preaching my first sermon here on September 19, 1971. The title of the sermon was, Helping Miracles Happen. How many of you here today were present on that Sunday morning? The sermon was based on the story of Jesus feeding the crowds. The day was growing late, and the crowd was getting restless. He asked his disciples to find some food. Then a little boy came forward and offered the lunch his mother had fixed for him — five loaves and two fish. When Jesus took what the boy offered, the disciples asked, "What is that among so many?" However, Jesus paid no attention to their negativity. He took the five loaves and two fish, asked God's blessing, and broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to distribute. After all had eaten, the story reports that there was food left over.

No one knows what actually happened. Some scholars have speculated that many people in the crowd had brought lunches, but they thought, "What's the use of offering what I have? It's so little that it will hardly be enough for me." That kind of outlook is present in many places. There are those who think they have little talent, nothing much to offer in helping solve a problem, and so they tightly hold onto what they have. This is a fallacy with disastrous consequences. The largest problems are often solved through the undistinguished services of people with only five loaves and two fish. Maybe the people in that crowd were moved by the example of the little boy, and they began to share what they had with others. If that's what happened, that too is a miracle. Stingy people became giving people. When that happens, God's multiplication takes over.

The point I wanted to make that Sunday in 1971, with that story, was that I was coming to this congregation like that little boy. I would bring whatever gifts I had, ask God to bless those gifts, and my hope was that everyone in this congregation would do the same. Then miracles would take place, and that's what has happened during these 35 years, and I am convinced it's going to continue under the leadership of Jim Keck and this talented staff and you, the talented members and friends of this congregation.

Here's the second point I want to make. In the scripture story for today, Jesus overheard the disciples discussing among themselves which one of them was the greatest. He gave them this advice, "If anyone would be first, that one must be last of all and servant of all."

These 35 years of ministry have been good for all of us because of the wonderful staff people I've been privileged to have as colleagues in ministry. Certainly, we've had our disagreements and tough moments, but overall, we've tried to be servants of one another and of you, the members. We've worked together for the health of this congregation. We've not worried very much about which one is the greatest.

I want to publicly thank these staff members, in random order, who have worked with me and have since retired, died, or moved on to other positions: Ray Johnson, Jack Levick, John Smeltzer, Jane Ellefson, Jeanne Sutter, Judi Cook, Larry Monson, Matt Geiger, Cheryl Cornish, Kathryn Campbell, Jo Darrington, Nancy Clyne, Sara Bainbridge, Quinn Lawton, Sue Buss, and Dale Schuerman.

I also want to publicly thank those staff members, again in random order, who have been my colleagues and are still active: Tammy Alvis, Tony Minear, Barbara Smisek, Nancy Erickson, Nancy Rosenow, John Cummins, Charles Ore, Louise Bremers, Deanna Bahr, Rita Christensen, Beth White, Kathie Johnson, Addie Powell, Gary Schuerman, Mike Comstock, Adam Witte, Zuri, Ruth Diedrichsen, and our new leader, Jim Keck. All of you have been my cherished colleagues, and what I will miss most about retiring is my daily association with you.

The third point I want to cover today concerns Jim Keck and all of us. I firmly believe that in calling Jim to be our Senior Minister, we have selected the best person possible for this position. Since he began on May 1, we have become trusted colleagues and friends. This transition has gone better than even I ever imagined, and I have a pretty wild imagination. But I also know that as our new leader, Jim is going to need the help of all of us. So I promised him that today I would lean on all of you in a loving way to continue to generously support the work of this congregation with your prayers and time, but especially with your money.

Within a few weeks, you will be receiving a letter from Jim asking for your pledge of financial support for 2007. We've had some unusual expenses this year with all of our transitions. We're in the process of increasing our parking. This very talented staff deserves a generous salary increase. With your increased financial support and with Jim's leadership, this congregation is going to increase its ministries beyond any of our wildest imaginations.

For years now I've talked about the CPR of giving. The C stands for Cheerful Giving. If you are not cheerful in your giving, it means you're not giving enough. Giving people are always happy people. Stingy people are never happy. The P stands for Proportionate Giving. Those who have more are to give more. The R stands for Regular Giving. To be a "follower of the way," as early Christians were called, means to make giving a regular part of your life. Jim, if you notice some people in this congregation are a bit crabby and need cheering up, ask me to go visit them, and I'll see if I can add some cheerfulness and joy to their lives by getting them to increase their giving.

Someone asked me recently, "Otis, what is the legacy of your 35 years of ministry here?" I replied, "It's still to be determined. The test of any ministry is what happens after that person is gone. That depends on all of us."

In July of next year, 2007, I will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of my Ordination into the Christian Ministry. What have I learned? What are some of the ways my mind has changed during these 50 years? Here are some of my random thoughts — some theological, some not so theological. Some of these you have heard in previous sermons, some you have not. Some are original, maybe! Others I'm sure are borrowed, and I have no idea of their origin. Some are "left-overs" that I haven't had a chance to use.

Here are a few of my observations about the privilege of being a parish minister. What attracted me to it? It began with being intrigued and compelled by the Reality we sometimes call by the holy name, God. I can no more define that Reality today than I could fifty years ago. More and more I realize that all of our definitions of God are woefully inadequate. As one person said, "The older I get, the more deeply I believe, but the fewer beliefs I have." The mystery at the heart of the Christian faith is far beyond creed, dogma, and doctrine. I am learning to treasure holy ignorance more highly than religious certainty. I believe that it's too much religious certainty that's causing many of our problems today.

In times of rapid change, such as ours today, too many people have the urge to live out of the past with the certainties they have inherited. The more disruptive the times, the greater the urge. That is what gives fascist ideologies and fundamentalisms their appeal. It appears safer to withdraw into the presumed safety of old assurances and from there to take up arms against an unknown and uncertain future.

More and more I am discovering that, as a general rule, human beings never behave more badly than when they believe they are protecting God. The Holy One I believe in doesn't need my protection nor anyone's. Someone said, "People of the Book always risk putting the Book above people." That's true of all religious rules. Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath." Jesus also said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Make love your aim, not biblical inerrancy, nor purity, nor obedience to holiness codes. Make love your aim."

Here's another saying about love that continues to teach me: "Love measures your stature; the more you love, the bigger you are. There is no smaller package in all the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself or herself." One more random thought about love: If you hate yourself, you can never love others, for love is the gift of oneself. How will you make a gift of that which you hate?

Being a parish minister allows one to enter the lives of people in deeply personal ways. A minister is frequently invited to journey beyond the masks that people wear into the depths of their souls and to be present not only in their joy but in their trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, and every other kind of adversity. This awesome privilege and responsibility is deeply treasured and must be handled with care and absolute integrity.

Also, I know of no other vocation, other than parish ministry, which requires the person to stand before a congregation weekly to address issues of personal and corporate life from the vantage point of a belief system. That is what a sermon is, and I've been doing this almost every week for nearly 50 years. It's a high privilege and sacred responsibility.

Some scholars maintain that Descartes launched the age of reason with the statement, "I think, therefore I am." Apple Computer devised a modified version of that statement to sell one of its new devices: "iPod, therefore I am." Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for his role as Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, proposed

another “I am” saying: “I belong, therefore I am.” He wanted to make the point, as Jesus did, that you cannot be fully human until you recognize your affinity with all other human beings. Your humanity and mine are diminished any time and anywhere other human beings are being belittled or demeaned.

In other words, life is meant to be a team sport. Every good basketball coach knows that any five players acting as a unit are superior to another five acting as individuals. The acquisition of wisdom is also a team sport.

If you have the good fortune to lead a team in the quest for new knowledge, surround yourself with people who are at least as smart and clever as you are and who have the strength of character not to be misled by your charm.

Wisdom is the ability to manage the transitions in life with equanimity because you have surrounded yourself with good companions and friends.

Last week, Jim Keck talked about graffiti wisdom. There’s also bumper sticker wisdom. I saw one that said, “Jesus loves you. Everyone else thinks you’re a jerk.” That little gem restores equilibrium to our self-assessment. Another one said, “Don’t honk if you love Jesus, tithe.”

One more bit of wisdom: Oscar Wilde said, “We wouldn’t be so concerned about what people think of us if we realized how infrequently they do.”

Some final words which you’ve heard before: Remember Jesus taught — LIFE IS GOOD! BE HAPPY NOW! LET IT GO! Amen.