Sunday, October 1, 2006

CHARGE TO JIM KECK ON HIS INSTALLATION AS SENIOR MINISTER

No one is more pleased than I am to be invited to participate in your installation as Senior Minister of First-Plymouth Church. As the retiring Senior Minister, I want to give you a different kind of symbol of your office — one that is usually not given to ministers. It is a "hard hat" on which is inscribed "Chief." Hard hats are worn by construction people, builders, and as Senior Minister, you are our chief in leading us in continuing to build this congregation into a "beloved community," that which the New Testament calls "the Body of Christ."

Parish ministers do their work within and from a community of faith. Within this beloved community, ministers earn their ordination. They must also earn their status by demonstrating, over a period of time, their trustworthiness within the community. Individual people have necessary and sometimes unnecessary barriers of protection around their privacy. Parish ministers are welcomed within these barriers at certain pivotal and transitional moments in the life of another human being. That is a high privilege, never to be exploited, always to be treated with respect and reverence.

Then there is the privilege and responsibility of institutional leadership — you are the chief builder. The congregation, which I prefer to call the beloved community, is the locus and focus of your ministry. The privilege of being the chief is the nurture of the whole community. Parish ministers do not have patients or clients. We work within a whole community, which is inclusive of age, race, need, gender, and people with a variety of talents and resources.

Every congregation is a microcosm of its society. The care and feeding of the congregation is the work of the parish minister. Our tradition provides a variety of ways for the care and feeding of a congregation. Rituals, worship, preaching, teaching, guidance, and leading a staff are all a part of congregational nurture. These too belong to the members of the congregation, but you, as our chief, have to be the leader.

I believe that, in a certain sense, the congregation must always be a kind of "counter-culture" for the common good. By that, I do not mean that Christians are called to dress in some kind of holy apparel, or to speak a kind of spiritual jargon, or even to transform a nation into some kind of holy commonwealth. Instead, the congregation is to be a beloved community that increases among people the love of God and neighbor.

Too often, the contemporary church simply mirrors the culture. For example, all too frequently the diet in church congregations is too much determined by the spirit of the age. Youth are treated as borderline cases to be cajoled into thinking that God is cool. Too many congregations today are captivated by the same obsessions as our culture: religion as individual spirituality, therapy, and sentimentalism. It all serves to keep people turned into themselves.

Here's a final bit of wisdom from an old minister ordained almost 50 years ago: It is very easy to get caught up in matters that seem so important, but in the grand scheme of God's plan for creation and our lives, they aren't really that important. It's important to learn what to overlook. What is really important is more basic. How have I related to and cared for those with whom I have come into contact today? Have I reflected on how incredible the gift of life truly is? Am I continuing to cultivate the spirit of gratitude?

Jim, as our new chief, I am convinced that you will continue to build this beloved community, so that individually and together we will increase among people the love of God and neighbor. Amen.