

"I want YOU to be rich"

December 31, 1989

My dog, Daisy, has been at it again. The other day she discovered a whole new world up on the kitchen table. She found a cannister of powdered hot chocolate mix and decorated the house with it. Some things never change--but some do. We sing new songs; we move on to new positions; and now, because of change, I find myself before you preaching one last sermon. I must tell you, though, it has not been easy to prepare this sermon. There are a great many things I would like to say, and not enough time. I could launch into an academy award-like speech offering thanks here and there, but I don't think I'll do that--I'd forget names and offend someone for sure. But were I to do something like that I'd certainly mention Phil and Mark, Les and DdG, the office and custodial staff. I'd thank those who have helped in the P.F. groups, the parents and advisors. I'd thank those who have taught Sunday school classes, covenant classes, those who provide music, those who lead, all who sing and all who ring--by the way, speaking of music, You should see how Betty Dethmers hands and feet go back here. It is truly something to behold. I would also thank the congregation--you who gather to worship and pray, you who serve on the boards and committees, who have served as officers of the church; I would certainly say thanks to the youth who have ministered to me during my years here, and I would thank my wife, Lisa for her support and I would thank God for the chance to minister here--but like I said, I won't do that sort of a speech. Instead, I'd like to preach a good solid sermon for you. And the text we just read seems quite appropriate for this day.

This morning's scripture passage addresses three topics. First of all it speaks about spiritual leaders--more specifically, your relationship to them. Paul wrote, "...respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and ... esteem them very highly in love because of their work." And today, I would ask the same of you. You have chosen your spiritual leaders well. I have worked with Phil and Mark for almost three and a half years now and have come to appreciate them, their gifts, their talents and their devotion. A computerized study about which I've read found that the perfect pastor is 26 years old and has 30 years of preaching experience and that he or she makes 15 calls a day on church families, shut-ins and the hospitalized while being always in the office when needed. Now if that sounds ludicrous, real job descriptions for ministers are worse. I wish I had one to share with you. On more than one occasion Phil and Mark and I have had a good laugh as we read job descriptions found in the want ads of clergy journals. The list of necessary qualifications is sometimes so extensive--so ridiculous that

we find ourselves saying things like "the only thing they left out was "must be able to walk on water"". We pastors often fall short of those expectations--still, heed the words of Paul, for in this place, God has blessed you with good and Godly men. I wish you could know how important you are to your ministers--how they labor and pray and care for you. "respect those who labor among you...esteem them highly in love."

Secondly, Paul speaks about the life of the church. He says, "be at peace among yourselves." Now that sounds rather passive--but later in the passage, he writes, "always seek to do good to one another and to all." As Paul speaks of this community of faith, this family of believers, he speaks as well about how to deal with the idlers, the fainthearted and the weak. And what strikes me about this passage, is that Paul presupposes a sense of family, a sense of community among those to whom he writes. We couldn't expect strangers to behave toward one another as Paul expects the members of the Church in Thessalonica to behave. And one thing that has been especially exciting to me has been the growing of community here. Perhaps it has always been a part of First Congregational Church--but over the last three and a half years, my perception has been that this church family has been growing closer. Cherish that sense of family. Nurture it and never let it's growth be hindered--for in the case of a church, to work for the good of the whole is to work for the good of the individual--and the good of the individual is cause for the whole church to rejoice!

And the apostle Paul, as he addresses a third topic, that of spiritual life, tells us to do just that--REJOICE--"Rejoice always" he writes, "pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances." I've tried in a rather fumbling sort of way, to say my goodbyes to the P.F.ers. I haven't done that as well as I would have liked, but I could, perhaps, say most of what I would wish to say in saying to you that you give me reason to rejoice. Knowing you has given me hope and joy, and I thank you.

Rejoice, pray and give thanks--not complain, curse and grumble, but rejoice, pray and give thanks. Why? Because, as Paul writes, "for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." And though we need no more reason than that, we've had reason to rejoice and pray and give thanks. We've welcomed many new friends into the church. We've lost loved ones too. We've built a clinic in Honduras and enjoyed a beautiful place to worship. This church family has been blessed.

I HAVE had reason to complain on occasion, I suppose. When I first arrived here I was frustrated by what appeared to be a lack of respect for me as a minister. I can best describe it by telling you a story. I was in the office and

I heard one-half of a conversation. Betsy picked up the phone and this is what I heard: "Good morning, Congregational Church...I'm sorry, Dr. Muth is off today...No, I'm sorry, Rev. Dunn is out right now, Rev. Currier is here...yes, I can take a message." It doesn't surprise me now I was a stranger in your midst.

But it got better. Just last week I was saying my farewell to the Jr. P.F. group. I had picked up some pizza for our last gathering and we were all together around the table. I began by saying, "This will be the last time I'll be with you and I just want you to know how important you are to me" or something like that. One P.F.er raised a hand right in the middle of my best farewell attempt and I nodded to him. And he said, "Is this thin crust or thick crust?" Nonetheless, I do rejoice and give thanks that I have been in this place.

There is more in this third section about spiritual life. Paul also tells us, "do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying." of all the words in the 11 verses we're considering, these seem to give people the most trouble. "do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying." Allow me to paraphrase: "Don't put a lid on the inspiration that God gives to you--it is given for a purpose. And if words spoken in the name of the Lord happen to touch your heart--it is so for a purpose--don't turn your back on what the words say to you." And I would add, allow, no, invite the Spirit of God to grow in this place!

And then, Paul says something we should all hear regularly: "test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil." In a time when we are bombarded with fabricated necessities from our television screens, assaulted with many varied and opposing views that we find in our newspapers and magazines, and faced daily with decisions that try our moral character--we must examine, question, scrutinize and choose what is good, that which is true to our faith.

Congregationalists have been this way from the beginning--otherwise we never would have left England. Our willingness to examine rather than to be told, is seen in our nature as a church of a covenant rather than being a church of a creed. But as the covenant class knows, the covenant of our church is not just something to be read on the day we join the church, not simply a statement to be agreed upon, not only a promise--it is more. Our covenant establishes rights, duties and relationships that should be taken seriously. The new covenant under which ALL Christians live was established in the death of Jesus. That's serious business. And we who are followers of Jesus Christ in this church have bound ourselves together in our covenant so that we might share in the worship of God and so that God's will, that we see modeled in the life of Jesus,

might become the dominant factor in the way we lead our lives. Look it up. It's in your hymnals and, I hope, in your hearts. For in our Covenant relationship we can have a truly nurturing and supportive community. But if we allow our covenant to slip from our hearts and minds, we become a mob of worshippers, each seeking to satisfy our own needs, rather than being a family of worshippers seeking to minister to the needs of others.

My goodness--I've talked about a lot this morning. I've encouraged you to care for your ministers--to care for your church family--and to care for your spiritual lives. And I haven't said half of what I would like to say. But I will say this much more; you will be remembered often. Know that I leave this place with fond memories and that you have been a blessing to me.

Now, some of you might be wondering why the sermon title is "I want YOU to be rich." One of the first sermons I preached from this pulpit was entitled, "I want to be rich" Some of you may remember it--I'd like to think so, anyway. I didn't know you well at the time and in that sermon I confessed my struggle with wanting to know material comforts--but most importantly, I spoke of my desire to know the richness of life in Christ. As I leave this place, I say, I want YOU to be rich. Allow me to quote the statesman Patrick Henry. After dispensing with his estate, he wrote these words as the final words in his Last Will and Testament: "This is all the inheritance I can give to my dear family. The religion of Christ can give them one which will make them rich indeed." May the richness that is Christ-in-you, never end. Thank you and may God bless you all!

AMEN