

## Retirement Tribute

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Spoken at Christ Community Church

On Sunday, June 27, 2004

During the Celebration of Richard Rhem's Ministry

For a long time, I confess, I didn't understand how one could be attracted to the ministry as a vocation. There seemed so little reward in this abstract profession: no gadgets to manipulate, no tangible outcomes to measure one's performance, certainly no money to make. A minister's life seemed an uphill battle to convince people to come, serve, and give to church when they would really prefer to sleep late, take the day off, and spend money on themselves. Worst of all, it involved adherence to an antiquated, dogmatic belief system to which few intelligent people any longer gave credence. Where was a sense of accomplishment or job satisfaction to be found?

And then I encountered a series of charismatic individuals who brought me back into the church and forever changed my concept of what the ministry can be. Premier among them stands Dick Rhem. And when I consider his life, so consumed as it is by all of the things that make life most worth living, I am in awe. To start, recall how much time he spends simply dispensing and receiving hugs ~ or rather embraces, where one briefly but totally engages another and feels the energy of life flowing in both directions. Envision his time spent in contemplation and in discussion with the greatest minds in the world of the mystery and meaning of life, and in communicating his insights through the spoken and written word. Imagine his time spent responding to requests for his presence, sharing our occasions of greatest joy and sorrow. All this time at the heart of what it means to be truly alive. Would you like to be Dick Rhem for a day? I certainly would, and I suspect I am far from alone. I can imagine no life richer or more rewarding.

Today we celebrate his ministry of 30 plus years at First Reformed/Christ Community Church, and say goodbye, although only in a limited sense, relieved that he will still be close by for a time. Some of us may yet receive the mixed blessing of having him perform our funerals - in person, not pre-recorded. But it is not primarily the length of his ministry that we celebrate. Sometimes longevity — whether in a personal relationship, a job, or even church membership — may represent only habit or tolerance of mediocrity, a lack of opportunity for change and growth, or fear of pursuing such an alternative. Nothing could be further from the experience of Dick Rhem at Christ Community: the extraordinary journey of spiritual growth he has led, enriched by the personal intimacy that flourishes in the best of long-term relationships.

So what is it that makes Dick so special, the source of the magnetism that draws people to him? It doesn't take much exposure to him to answer. Although I watched the beautifully made and very moving film of his history with this church, the only big surprise was discovering that he gets better looking with age. So why is he special? Most obviously there is his mind: the theology he expresses through his preaching, always honestly and courageously without concern for the personal cost. In searching for a quotation by Galileo that I knew to be particularly apt for Dick, I was struck by others that resonated

as well. For example, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forego their use." How refreshing it has been for Dick to free us from the guilt of doubting conventional dogma, and to encourage us to think for ourselves. "You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself." Dick has a rare ability to articulate for us what we feel but did not realize or could not express for ourselves. He says it, we recognize and embrace it, and our lives gain dimension as a result. And finally, "In matters of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual." Certainly this is true of religion as well, especially if the humble reasoner is Dick Rhem. Even their lives are strikingly parallel: Both were led by their exceptional intellect to unconventional but inescapable conclusions about the world in which they lived, hung tenaciously to them with unshakable integrity, and consequently were indicted by religious institutions of their day. Perhaps Galileo today would lead a church such as Christ Community, or better yet, perhaps we should consider him to be the Dick Rhem of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

But there is not only Dick's mind; there is also his heart. It must be more than coincidence that so many have found this place, as did I, at a time of personal crisis. And they found not only a place where intellect and spirituality could coexist, but also acceptance, and experienced healing of wounds from loss, disappointment, rejection, or isolation. They found Dick a nonjudgmental listener, one who lives inclusiveness as the essence of Christianity; one who recognizes that life's journey is not always clean and straight. Being new I know only a few of the stories, but I'm certain there are many, for I so often see in the eyes and hear in the voices of people in Dick's presence that he has done more for them than preach good sermons. We may not owe him our lives, but we owe him their wholeness.

And then there is his charm and grace, the ever-present grin that reflects the joy of life inside, his warmth and sense of humor and seeming inability to avoid making friends with most everyone he meets; his only material desires good food and drink, always to be enjoyed in the company of others, and a view of the lake to admire the majesty and beauty and contemplate the mystery of creation. And despite all his talents, there is his unparalleled humility, which prompts him at his farewell dinner, to hundreds of people gathered solely to pay him tribute, to say as his final words, "I'm not that good." So far it's the only thing he's said to which I take exception, because he clearly is that good, and better. For not only has he led us to where we are, but also he has given us the greatest gift a leader can give: the ability to continue the journey without him. This, in turn, is the greatest tribute to him we can pay.

Ultimately, Dick Rhem cannot be captured in words; he simply must be experienced. He is fond of saying that no one has seen God, but God is reflected in the face of Jesus. I haven't seen Jesus either, but I have seen the face of Dick Rhem, and that is enough. We can only say we love you, Dick, and we promise to honor your life and ministry by taking your legacy and continuing to strive to make this place truly Christ's community, a place of which you can be justly proud.