

"A FAITHFUL FOLLOWER I WOULD BE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 20, 1992

"A FAITHFUL FOLLOWER I WOULD BE"

INTRODUCTION

President Harry Truman once made a trip to the old West town of Tombstone, Arizona. Ghosts of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday and other famous and notorious men of the old West crowd the streets of Tombstone. However, when Truman returned from Tombstone, he didn't talk about any of those legendary heroes. Instead he recalled the words engraved on the headstone of a simple man buried at Boot Hill. The inscription read:

"Here lies Jack Williams. He done all he could"

Included on a church's annual commitment card was a question that read:

"How many Sundays do you plan to attend Sunday School and church worship in the year ahead?"

People were to answer with 50 weeks, or 40 weeks, or 30 weeks. One comment stood out. "We'll come as often as we can". Now, that's not really a commitment, is it? It's like saying, "We'll come when we feel like it", or "When we don't have anything better to do". Is this what Jesus had in mind when He issued the "call" to people to come and follow Him?

DEVELOPMENT

Two friends were having coffee one morning. Both were members of the same church. In fact, Doris had joined the church because of Betty's invitation. As they were sipping their coffee, they began discussing their Sunday School lesson of the previous Sunday and Doris said,

"I thought it was easy to be a Christian. No one ever told me about all this 'disciple stuff'".

Is this what Jesus had in mind when He called persons to be His followers?

Two colleagues had worked together for many years and had become good friends. They had lunch together every week. They even went out socially on occasion with their families. One Sunday Bill visited his sister's church to hear his nephew in the youth choir and he happened to notice his friend there. The next morning at work Bill confronted his friend and co-worker, saying:

"I never knew you were a Christian. In all the years I have known you not once did you ever mention that you attended church!"

Is this what Jesus had in mind?

Dallas Willard, in his book, The Spirit of the Disciples: Understanding How God Changes Lives, says that the average Christian has no concept of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. He writes:

"For at least several decades the churches....have not made discipleship a condition for being a Christian. One is not required to be or even intend to be, a disciple.....in order to become a Christian, and one

may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or "in" discipleship. Contemporary American churches....do not require following Christ in His example, spirit and teachings as a condition of membership...discipleship is clearly optional".

Is this what Jesus had in mind when He called people to be His followers?

Being a modern day disciple of Christ involves more than just pushing out to church on a Sunday when the urge happens to hit us. Being a disciple of Jesus is more than a hymn sung and vague feelings of goodwill toward our neighbors.

A WAY OF LIFE

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a way of life and it's a full time undertaking.

As we read the Gospel account we're aware that large crowds of people gathered around Jesus. Curiosity brought some people out to hear Him. They wanted to see Him, to hear Him. He was the "talk" of many villages - a bit of a celebrity, if you will. And though the crowds that gathered around were enthusiastic, I'm sure that Jesus must have wondered if they were really "in there" for the long haul. Remember how He said to them,

"Whoever comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister, yes - and even life itself, cannot be My disciple".

Now that's harsh. Uncomfortable. Jesus wanted the people to understand that being a disciple demanded their whole life - not just the times when it was convenient. It was something like the old ad that they use to run for the Pony Express. Remember how it went:

"Duty is hazardous. Orphans preferred!"

Back there in the First Century, there was often apt to be conflict within families when one member converted to Christ and the rest did not. Jesus wanted to be sure that those who were following Him knew the range of the difficulties they would face. Expectations were high. Being a modern day disciple of Christ may still cause hard feelings within families.

Anne Tyler, in her novel, Saint Maybe, tells the story of a 19 year old man named Ian. Ian feels guilty about his brother's death and feels some sense of responsibility to help raise his brother's children. At the Christmas break, Ian sees how taking care of his brother's three children is wearing down his mother. Ian contemplates leaving college to lend a hand.

One January evening a few days before he is to return to college for the Spring semester, Ian notices a yellow glow through a window. He creeps closer to read on a sign, "Church of the Second Chance". He hears the congregation singing, "Something...something...something lead us..." He misses most of the words, but the voices are strong and joyful and so he slowly walks in. They sing more hymns. The minister, a Reverend Emmett prays and there is something about the prayer that catches Ian's attention. After the service Ian gets up his courage and goes over to talk with the minister. The pastor asks Ian,

"What was it you needed forgiven?"

Ian tells him a bit about what he has been feeling and he remembers just about the last thing the minister says to him,

"It's the religion of 'atonement', and of complete forgiveness. It's the religion of the Second Chance."

The words stay with Ian and he goes home and tells his parents of the conversation with the minister and of his decision to take some time off from college to help with the family.

"I don't understand" his mother says. "No one in his right mind would approve" his father tells him. "What in the name of God...?" his mother exclaims. "Well", says Ian, "that's just it...." "I mean...I don't want to sound corny or anything but it is 'in the name of God'". Ian tries to quote some Scripture...."let us not love in....'what'... in just words or tongue, but in...."

"Ian" asks his father, "have you fallen into the hands of some sect?" "Of course, we have nothing against religion" his mother says...."why we raised all of you children to be Christians. But our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life."

"Well, maybe it should have" Ian says. His parents stand there looking at each other...wondering...."

Sometimes being a disciple of Christ can cause misunderstandings or even hard feelings among family members. A way of life. A fulltime undertaking. Jesus wanted His would-be followers to consider the risks involved in following Him.

BUT JESUS DOES NOT STOP THERE

But Jesus does not stop there. He goes on to say that "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple".

It's not something that one takes lightly...following Him and He wanted people to understand that. It demands our very best in everything we do. There's no such thing as a part-time Christian.

Maxie Dunnam tells about an American businessman who traveled to Europe to see the famous Oberammergau Passion Play. Following the performance the businessman had the opportunity to meet and talk with Anton Lang who portrayed Christ in the Passion Play. Seeing the cross that was used in the play, this businessman wanted his wife to take his picture with it and handing the camera to his wife, he asked her to take his picture while he lifted the cross to his shoulder. To his surprise he could hardly budge the cross from the floor.

"I don't understand" he said to Mr. Lang. "I thought it would be hollow. Why do you carry such a heavy cross?" And Anton Lang's reply explains why this play draws people from all over the world to that little Bavarian village every ten years. He said,

"If I did not feel the weight of the cross I could not play the part...."

If being a disciple of Christ costs us no pain to acquire, no self-denial to preserve, no effort to advance, no struggle to maintain...then this isn't what Jesus had in mind. Being a disciple of Christ is not something we should take lightly. It involves our total commitment.

"Which of you" asked Jesus, "would start to build a tower if he did not have the means to complete it....? Or, what King would wage war with another king if he had less troops than the other king?" Jesus wanted the people to think about what they were doing and then to decide if this was truly what they wanted. Following Him is a way of life. It's something we should never take lightly. And there may even be times when in order to remain true to His calling we will have to go against the crowd, go against the values of the world.

PAUL AND PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS

Paul knew the cost of being a follower of Christ. Shipwrecked. Stoned. Left for dead. Beaten. Thrown into prison. He knew the joys and also the pain involved in being a follower of Jesus.

In our Scripture lesson for today we find Paul in prison, but even in prison he talks about faith - his faith - in Christ. He meets a young man named Onesimus and converts him to Christianity. Onesimus is a runaway slave. As they talk together, Paul discovers that he knows Onesimus' master, Philemon. Paul had been to the home of Philemon and Apphia. In fact, Paul had even brought Christianity into their home.

Onesimus is convinced after his daily conversations with Paul that the best thing for him to do is to return to his master. There were risks involved for both Paul and Onesimus. Paul was aiding a runaway slave and Onesimus risked being killed.

Paul writes a letter to Philemon for Onesimus to hand deliver. In it, Paul says this concerning Onesimus,

"Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me...so if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me!"

Onesimus became a new person once he became a follower of Christ. Philemon was also a new person in Christ. Philemon accepted Onesimus and eventually sent him back to Paul.

Have you ever wondered just what happened to Onesimus? We know that Paul met death in Rome. Earlier, in the first century before Ignatius of Antioch was executed, he wrote several letters to churches in Asia Minor. One of these letters was to the Church at Ephesus and was addressed to the Bishop of Ephesus whose name was Onesimus. Bible scholars believe that the runaway slave Onesimus went on to become a great leader in the early church.

CLOSING

Sometimes being a disciple of Jesus means going against the way of the world. There is risk involved, but there is also great joy in being a disciple. You know that. But risks must be taken and to me, the greatest risk in life is to do nothing. The person who risks nothing does nothing...is nothing...becomes nothing. Remember that, but remember, too...as all His followers have found out down the centuries, as we walk in His way, He is walking with us, too - every step of the way!

CLOSING

And this is why we pause today to celebrate and to lift up the importance of Sunday School training for children and a program of Christian education for adults. Christian education is - at its very essence - the process of teaching disciples of Christ how to hear God's word in the midst of all the world's words. His Word teaches us not only how to think but also where to walk. The Christian faith calls us "to put on the armor of God" for the battlefields of life. Karl Barth said to read the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper on the other. Don't forget the Bible hand.

Remember when we use to have Rally Day in our churches. I remember once hearing a layman, a Sunday School teacher, say that the Church is only one generation away from extinction. I was just starting out in my ministry when I first heard that and I had never thought of it that way before. The Church is only one generation away from extinction. If one generation stops telling the Gospel story to its posterity, the Church will be "no more"...extinct.

Stop teaching. Close the Sunday School. That will spell doom for Christianity. Sunday School connects the present generation with the past. Our faithful teachers are links in a chain stretching from this moment back to Wesley, Luther, Augustine, Paul and the Apostles. A connecting chain. Will we break that connection. I think not. I pray not. "Say it ain't so...."

Better than that. Demonstrate it...by being present in Sunday School with your children and with your Bible.

"Sow an act and you reap a habit.
If you sow a habit, you reap a character.
If you show a character, you reap a destiny"

For many of us, the very best time to have begun the process of training your mind for God was 15 years ago. The second best time is today. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Go for it.

PRAYER

OUR PRAYER; September 20, 1992

OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD us with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word that we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our lives.

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of Your word, - in all of these may we feel that deep and abiding assurance of Your Eternal and Abiding Truth.

OUR GOD OF COMFORT, be near to those who may be feeling the burden of age, the pain of illness, the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, the inner turmoil of uncertainty.

WORK through nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and government officials...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life together in this land.

OUR PRAYERS this day reach out to include loved ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning - those to our left, those to our right.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with that perspective of "higher ground" that worship can provide.

OUR GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that the influence of another Sunday may be strong in our land, and that all who worship You this day may be given strong hearts to bear their burdens, willing hearts to bear the burdens of others.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us our sins. And make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow His way. In His name and spirit we pray.

(choral Amen)