

"A LITTLE LESS RELIGION, PLEASE!"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

April 20, 1986  
Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
New York, New York

"A LITTLE LESS RELIGION, PLEASE!"

### INTRODUCTION

It wasn't too long ago that the Winfield United Methodist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, found itself in something of a dilemma. A member of the Church, Elbert L. Fausett, died and left the Church \$500,000. Now that's a sizeable gift - one that you would think the Church would eagerly accept. But there's a catch.

Mr. Fausett placed one restriction on his generous gift: the 1,000 member congregation must abandon its downtown building and construct a new church building in a newer part of the city. Among the church's present ministries are a food pantry, meals for hungry neighborhood people, and a day-care center. William Haltom, the church's minister, was quoted as saying: "We can build a super church in West Little Rock, but is that what really ought to happen?"

This Church has had many Methodist eyes - and other eyes - watching it now for some time as it faces a tough decision. Mr. Fausett, the man who gave the gift, has forced this congregation to re-think the church's goals and mission. Maybe they'll move. Maybe they'll remain where they have been for many years in that downtown location. I don't know what their decision has been or will be, but if I hear I'll pass it on to you.

### WHAT'S IMPORTANT

Something like this does force one to face the question of priorities. What is important. There are good reasons for the congregation to leave and there are good reasons to remain. They're faced with a critical question.

And sometimes I feel that we need to ask that same question of our denomination. The United Methodist Church owns and operates 71 hospitals, 13 schools of theology, 106 colleges and universities, 15 secondary schools, numerous retirement homes, the world's largest religious publishing house and much more including some 35,000 churches. Methodist real estate would add up to quick a big figure. But what's important? Surely it is important to educate the young, to heal the sick, to care for the elderly and publish good books and build beautiful churches - but sometimes...one wonders...what's important?

One might ask the same question for any local congregation? When you look at the calendar of events that any church sponsors, you're looking at what's important to the congregation. You're looking at its checkbook, its priorities, its purposes. And what about ourselves? What's really important in our lives? This is not an easy question to answer. Why? Because our lives are so spread out and set in patterns of commitment that we really don't take the time to answer that question.

Let's turn to today's Scripture Lesson and see if there's a hint of an answer to this question: what's important?

### DEVELOPMENT

Easter morning has now come and gone. A man, once dead, is now alive and showing up at different places and doing different things and saying things to His followers. Without announcement, He shows up by the Sea of Tiberias (John 21). His followers have gathered there and suddenly He is in their midst. The men are eating and Jesus turns to one known as Simon Peter and asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" Simon is somewhat surprised because his reply is so obvious.

"Yes, Lord...you know that I love you". And Jesus replies, "Feed my sheep". But the conversation doesn't end there. Again Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" And again, Peter's reply, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love You". Still Jesus says, "Tend my sheep."

The men grow quiet. More than a mere conversation is going on here. One Lord and one Disciple are not merely talking about casual things. Something is being taught at this moment, something is being revealed, maybe all of this is a new commandment. But one thing is certain. No one except Jesus and Simon Peter are talking. This is a profound and sacred moment.

A final time Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter begins to grieve, there are tears in his eyes. He begins to feel misunderstood. Perhaps he is thinking of the three denials of previous days. In a pleading manner, Peter says, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love You." And Jesus responds once again, "Feed My sheep. Follow Me."

One wonders...is there a more important dialogue between Jesus and His disciples in all the Gospels? Probably not. For here one senses that Jesus was cutting through-to-the-quick...getting to the heart of it all, summarizing what's important and passing it on to His followers. "Feed My sheep." "Follow Me."

#### PEOPLE ARE IMPORTANT

The first thing that Jesus is saying to us that people are important. He is not saying that hungry people are important, as compared to well-fed people. He is not saying that the poor people are important, as compared to those who are well-off. He is not saying that destitute people are important, as compared to people with means. He is not even suggesting that some people are important, as compared to other people. He is not "categorizing" people in any way. What He is saying is that people - all people - are important. What He is saying is that there is no such person who does not need feeding, in one way or another. What is important to Jesus are people.

At first glance I feel we're quick to agree with Him. But then, we know people only in terms of category. There are rich people and poor people; there are poor people and well-fed people. There are Republicans and there are Democrats; there are liberals and there are conservatives. There are Catholics and there are Protestants. There are Americans and Russians, Jews and Gentiles, honest and dishonest, deserving and undeserving, kind and cruel, friend and foe, religious and non-religious. We so easily tend to "categorize" people, but God - remember - does not. People everywhere are simply people anywhere in God's appraisal. Jesus is telling us that people are important when He says, "Feed My sheep".

Maxie Dunnam, in a recent news letter, says that the Church is big business. We hear that description from time to time. Some people speak it with a note of disdain in their voice. Others may use it as an argument to adopt business practices for running the Church, some of which simply do not fit. Others may use it negatively as a kind of excuse not to be a part of the Church. "It's a business" they say. They would have you believe the Church should bear no marks of this world in which we live.

"But all of this misses the point" Dr. Dunnam declares, and then he continues by telling a story about Rufus Jones, the great Quaker.

"One year he won the prestigious Bok Award for Humanitarian Service. He was famous for many things: preacher, educator, writer, Christian Statesman. At the banquet when he was presented with the award, he was introduced as a great businessman. Now that was a shock to the audience, for if there is one thing Rufus Jones had never been, they thought, it was a businessman. But the presenter went on to say this: 'There are two kinds of business: big business and little business. Little businesses use men to make money. Big businesses use money to make men, and heal them when they are broken'. The Church is big business."

Whatever hospitals, or schools of theology, or colleges and schools and retirement homes, or publishing companies, or whatever real estate the United Methodist Church owns is not important. And whatever ministries a Church offers is not the most important thing. However far you climb up the ladder of success, however much you realize your potential is not important. All these things, of course, have their place and their significance. But ultimately, these things are not what is really important. What is important is that we "heal them when they are broken." People are important. And so Jesus said to Peter that day and His words come down to us this day, "Feed My sheep".

AND: FOLLOW ME      The second thing that Jesus says is important is found in the 19th verse of today's Lesson. It reads, "And after this Jesus said to Peter, 'Follow Me'".

What is important, really important? Nothing less than following Jesus.

Your minister is not Jesus Christ. Your Church School class or study group is not Jesus Christ. Your wife, your husband is not Jesus Christ. Your boss at work is not Jesus Christ. Your parents, your son, your daughter are not Jesus Christ. Your lover is not Jesus Christ. You are not Jesus Christ. And your Church is not Jesus Christ. Be careful you don't make them into Jesus Christ.

You do not need your minister to follow Jesus Christ. You do not need your church school class or study group, or your wife or your husband, your boss or your parents, or your son or your daughter, or your lover to follow Jesus Christ. You need all the above to share Jesus Christ. But you need no one and no one else can help you follow Jesus Christ. The only person who can help you follow Jesus Christ is you. And you need to have your Bible in your hand, God's Word, to help you chart the course.

Earlier in His ministry, when Jesus initially called His Disciples, He would say these two words to them, "Follow Me". But at that time, He had taught no lesson, given no sermon, spoken no parables, pronounced no commandments. He had not yet suffered and had not died before them. But now the Disciples are aware of all these things. It is now a different place and a different time and a different story. But His words remain the same. "Follow Me." And as we follow Him today, we have the support of His words and the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us. Yes, "thank You, Jesus".

I don't know the name of this country-western song, but I heard it recently and I jotted down some lines of it as it spoke to my heart:

"You don't know love till it's chilled you to the bone, turned you inside out.  
You don't know love till you've watched it die,  
then you have to try again,  
No - you don't know love."

That's the kind of love these disciples had come to know. They had been chilled to the bone....turned inside out,,,and had watched it die. But now, Jesus comes and asks them to "try again". "Follow Me" He said to them.

No one can do that for you. You can talk about your love of Jesus with other people and you can certainly share your love for Jesus with them. In fact, you must do that because remember: people are important. But only you and you alone can decide to follow our Lord. No one can take your place in that decision. People need to be fed in many ways, but no one can follow Jesus for you. That is a personal and individual matter.

#### CLOSING STORY

I close with a fascinating little story about William Stringfellow. As some of you may remember, William Stringfellow was an attorney who held strong Christian convictions. He wrote several outstanding books and passed away about this time last year.

One day he was about to leave his apartment and drive to the airport. He was on his way to Boston to visit the Harvard Business School, where he was scheduled for a lecture. Stringfellow says that he was running late and just when he was about to leave, his phone rang. He decided to answer the phone and found that it was a minister who was calling him. The minister told him about a woman who needed help. She was late in paying her rent and was about to be evicted in the morning. The minister had called Stringfellow to find out what could be done to help this woman in need. What happened. Hear his words:

"By this time I was even more anxious about catching the plane and said to the minister, 'Well, sell one of your tapestries and pay the rent' and hung up and caught the plane. On the plane I thought the telephone conversation over and thought that perhaps I had been rude and too abrupt and I considered calling him back after longing to apologize. But by the time the plane landed I had rejected the idea.

My answer had not been rude or irresponsible. On the contrary, exactly what he and the people of his congregation (which does have several beautiful and valuable tapestries) must be free to do is to sell their tapestries to pay their rent - to pay somebody else's rent who can't pay their rent...

And then Stringfellow concludes by saying, 'If they have that freedom, then, but only then, does the tapestry have significance; only then does the tapestry enrich and contribute to and express and represent the concern and care which Christians have in the name of God for the ordinary life of the world.'

Now, you tell me what an Arkansas congregation should do with a \$500,000 offer

to move when it is presently caring for its neighborhood people. And you tell me what this Church must be doing, set here in this city...what should our goals and mission and purposes be all about. And furthermore, consider what you as a follower of Christ should do.

What's important? People are important. Following Christ is important. And what about all the tapestries we have and all those that other churches have hanging around. O Lord, Yes Jesus - we have our tapestries. Maybe what we need is a little less religion and a little more Christ. Amen. Amen.

PRAYER            Make us sensitive to your presence and nearness in these moments, dear Father...take our lives and work through them. Help us to "feed Your sheep" - and steady us to be good disciples and faithful followers of Jesus, Your Son. In His name we pray.