

"ABOUT OTHER DENOMINATIONS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

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"The METHODISTS gathered in corner and prayed.
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The ROMAN CATHOLICS passed a plate to cover damages.
The JEWS posted symbols on the doors hoping that the fire would pass by.
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The EPISCOPALIANS formed a procession in colorful robes and proceeded to march out to a stirring hymn.
The CHRISTIAN SCIENTISTS concluded that there was no fire at all.
The PRESBYTERIANS appointed a chairperson to appoint a committee to study the matter and then to bring in a written report to the next meeting of the presbytery.
The UNITARIANS said, "Let's think about this...."

And the SECRETARY who brought in the news of the fire into the building grabbed the nearest fire extinguisher and quickly put out the fire!

It's amazing how many different groups there are....all calling themselves Christian. And each one, of course, feels that it has a corner on all of God's truth. And God must be getting a good laugh out of it all.

DEVELOPMENT

But this is not a new problem. This kind of specialism has existed since the day when Christ Himself walked the dusty roads of Palestine and saw His very own disciples tempted or enticed by exclusiveness. There was that day when John came up to Jesus and said,

"Teacher....we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to stop him, because...he was not one of us!"

(Mark 9: 38)

Obviously it was upsetting to the disciples that someone else was using the name of Jesus who wasn't a part of their group or a member of their team. They felt that they had a privilege that no one else could have.

It must have been one of those occasions that made Jesus smile....sadly.... shake His head. Remember how He responded and what He said,

"Do not stop him....for no one who does a deed of power in My name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me."

It must have been a bit of a blow to the collective ego of His disciples for they wanted Jesus to affirm them as His only representatives. And I'm sure they lusted to know that they owned His trademark and that others were infringing on what was rightfully theirs. But instead Jesus here told them to let that man do what he would. You see, Jesus here was trying to expand their definition of what it meant to follow Him. He was wanting them to accept people who didn't express their faith in the same way that they did.

Let's face it. There are times when we too have a hard time accepting other people. We have a tendency to think that our way is the best way....and therefore everyone who is a Christian must be exactly like we are. We all don't speak the same faith language.

Dr. Jim Moore tells of a conference that he attended several summers ago out in Singapore. There was one evening when some fifty local children all dressed in costumes were waiting to go inside to sing. The children were six or seven years of age. Their leader was busy giving them last minute instructions and they were listening carefully when suddenly the worship service got under way inside the hall with everyone singing "Amazing Grace."

When the boys and girls heard the singing coming from inside, they became so excited that they began to sing along even though they were still out in the hallway. But they knew every word in English and they sang with so much gusto and spirit that all the director could do was smile and join in.....

For Dr. Moore sharing the experience....it was for him a special moment as he thought of all the many people whose lives have been touched by that song and he thought, too, of the spiritual healing that God's amazing grace has brought to people in,

"Every nation and every race and every culture and every age....all across the face of this earth...millions..."

When will we realize that Jesus is just too big to restrict to one denomination or one culture or one nationality? There are people of every circumstance and every ethnic origin who now bear the name of Christian. "All of God's truth is one" as someone has put it. And just think of how small and how petty we must appear when we try to restrict Jesus to only those people who look and think like we do. Truth is always bigger than one person's or one's denominations grasp of it.

Like too many people today, the disciples had a narrow definition of who were the real followers of Jesus. Jesus was appealing to them to have a bit of elbow room or elasticity in their outlook and He said to them,

"For, truly I tell you whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

(Mark 9: 41)

A KIND DEED MORE IMPORTANT THAN DOCTRINAL PURITY

Now...this is a very interesting statement.

It seems to be suggesting to us that a kind deed done in His name is far more important than "doctrinal purity".

At first it comes across as a radical statement....almost as radical as that of St. Paul's powerful declaration in Corinthians 13 that love is superior to even faith! Now there are some Christians who have a hard time accepting that idea. They're apt to be the ones who would rather sit over in their little corner, looking down at the world and saying "Christ belongs to us" rather than "we belong to Him". One way of thinking excludes whereas the other includes.

John Sherrill was on assignment in Europe a number of years ago, working as a free-lance writer. He tells us that during his sixteen months abroad he experienced the downside of currency fluctuations. In other words, the money he had brought along with him was worth less and less as the weeks and months went by. As his cost of living increased, so, too, did his anxiety.

There was the morning when he pulled into a self-service station - a gas station - some here in Germany. The value of the dollar had decreased once again and a gallon of gas now cost the equivalent of three dollars a gallon. As the amount was recorded on the dial-spin he became more and more troubled and depressed.

He happened to notice a young man walking up the street in his direction. There was something, he said, rather odd about this young man...dressed in stained corduroy trousers with a torn sweater. He stood near by watching John fill up his gas tank. At first John thought he was probably looking for a ride, but then before he could offer him a ride, the young man pulled a change purse out of his pocket and fumbled around with it and then emptied several coins into his hand and selected a couple of them and handed them to John with these words, "For you...."

John couldn't believe it. A complete stranger. Why was this man giving him money? He really didn't need it, but then he stopped cold. That very morning he had been feeling down...that he needed something....though he was unsure of what it might be. Anyway, later on, John said,

"I stood there with the gasoline hose in one hand....the little copper coins in the other, watching God's spokesman wander off down the street of that little German town...."

John Sherrill later was to say that that unsolicited act of kindness spoke much to him about God. When you come right down to it, does it matter whether his benefactor was Lutheran or Roman Catholic or a Quaker or perhaps a non-Christian....a Jew, or a Muslim....or a member of no group at all. Not to Sherrill. All that mattered at that moment was that this young German saw another human being in need and reached out and responded in a gesture of love and concern.

Now Jesus is calling us to expand our knowledge of His grace and His love. Christ, we believe, is the Lord of all the world and wherever people offer one another a cup of cold water in His name, He is there. They may not even know His name, but He is there. And this brings us to our particular task as followers of The Christ and let me put it to you in these words: we are called to introduce people to the Lord of "kindness" - and this is crucial!

INTRODUCE PEOPLE TO THE LORD OF KINDNESS

I've often had the feeling that when people are doing what they consider to be "evangelism", that they do so from a feeling of superiority. They tend to feel that the person who is the "target" of their evangelistic effort is inferior to them....distasteful, perhaps deplorable. I think they fail to realize that Christ is already at work in the life of that other person through acts of kindness and deeds of decency and concern. The only thing they really need is a name for that redeeming work that is already going on in their lives and our role is to help them interpret what it is that God is already doing.

And, of course, the best way to witness to the Lord of kindness is through our own acts of compassion and love. "Preach the Gospel at all times" said St. Francis, "and when necessary use words."

Texas preacher, William Hinson, shares a story with us that's worth reflecting on. He was in South India some time back and heard about an old man who was a Hindu. This old man had lived all of his life in a small rural village with a polluted well. The people of that village were always sick...it seemed that no one enjoyed robust health. In time, some Christians missionaries passed through that village and while there, as is proper, they showed concern for both personal and social well-being of the people. In addition to the words they spoke about Christ, they dug a well - a good well - for the people of that village.

Shortly after the missionaries left, some Hindu government officials came into that village and made inquiries about the influence of the missionaries who had been there. They happened to ask this old man who lived alone in a shanty if the missionaries had tried to convert him to Christ. The old man responded that they had not. The officials were about to leave when one of them happened to notice on the wall of the shanty a newspaper picture of Jesus. Upon seeing the picture of Christ, they again repeated their question to the old man, saying:

"What do you mean they didn't try to convert you?
Why do you have the picture of Jesus on your wall?"

The old man explained that he had gone into the village to buy some fish a few days earlier and the merchant who had sold him the fish had wrapped it up for him in an old newspaper that contained the picture of Jesus. When the old man had seen the picture, he had put it on his wall. Again, the officials asked him why the picture was there if he wasn't a Christian. Why did he insist on keeping it there. The old man quietly said to the officials,

"I had to put it there. It was because of that man that I was given clean water to drink...."

To me and I'm sure you agree: that's good evangelism...effective. It's the sort of thing that doesn't depend on labels or formal affiliations for validation. It's offering a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus to any who are in need. And it's recognizing that when someone offers us a cup of cold water, Christ is already at work....in that person's life whether they're able to name the name or not. Anytime anyone...regardless of their denominational tag or label is out there in the world seeking to help another - you can be sure that Christ is there! This is the bottom line of what it's all about.

CLOSING

They say that an old man had lived a good life as a farmer for many years. One day an evangelist came to the community in which he lived and in the course of his visit, he came by to see Calvin, the old man. In the midst of their visit, the evangelist asked,

"Calvin....what denomination do you belong to?"

Calvin replied,

"Well.....I can best answer that question like this. When my grain gets ready for selling...when I've planted and cared for it...watered it...harvested it....and got it all ready to take to the market in town.....I can go by any one of three roads: the RIVER ROAD, or the old DIRT ROAD, or the HIGHWAY.

But when I get my grain to town and go to the buyer to sell him what I have, he never looks at me and asks, 'Calvin....which road did you take to get your grain to town?' All he does is look at me real hard and ask, 'Calvin....is your grain GOOD?'"

Friend...is your grain good? - that is, the grain of your discipleship? That's the bottom line, really...that's all that matters. You know, one day when we get to heaven we might find some Roman Catholics and some Baptists and some Presbyterian and some Lutherans up there. Why, we may find some Jews and some Muslims, too.....chances are they will be just as surprised to see us up there as we will be to see them up there...but there we will all belong to one fellowship and we'll call it the fellowship of COLD WATER. The price of admission will have to do with acts of kindness to others, in the name of Christ, our Lord. To me, that's the bottom line and I hope in the weeks and months ahead...you all will carry that thought along with you.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, dear God, to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments of worship on this September Sunday. Wrestle with us in the corners of our hearts where hardness of heart and indifference to the needs of others may be lurking.

Move in our hearts here this hour. And visit our sick with the quiet assurance or Your care...those whom we mention by name in these moments.

Encircle the bereaved with Your warming and healing presence. And Point our markers along the trail for those who are in danger of losing their way. Douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision. For the race is short, O God... even at its longest and we would try to run it well....always to Your glory and in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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"What do you mean they didn't try to convert you?
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