

"CALLED TO BE DISCIPLES"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 19, 1989

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### INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon begins with a question: to what is your life committed? I think for a multitude of people it could be summed up in one word - money. Even Christian people are bowing before the god - mammon. We do this even though we know we can't take it with us.

I came across a story recently that helps to illustrate that truth. It's about a Methodist minister in a small town in Texas who needed a dark suit to wear to a funeral. His funds were limited so he went to the local pawn shop in search of a bargain. And much to his amazement they had a solid black suit that fit him perfectly...at a very reasonable price. As he paid for the suit, he inquired how they could possibly sell such nice suits so cheaply. The pawn-broker smiled and said that the suits on the rack had once been owned by the local mortuary. They had used them on deceased persons for funerals, and then removed them before the burial.

Well, the minister felt a little uncomfortable wearing a dark suit that had been on a corpse, but since no one else would ever know, and he really did need a dark suit badly, why not? Everything went fine until about midway through the sermon. While he was talking he casually started to put his hands into the pockets of his new suit. It was then that he discovered that his pants had no pockets. They hadn't told him that. And while he was talking the truth came home to him. Why would a dead man need pockets? We leave it all behind.

Let me ask the question again. To what or to whom is your life committed? Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel is about a group of men who were called by Jesus to be His disciples. It's about Simon and Peter, about James and John, four fishermen, but it is also about you and men, because we, too, have been called to be disciples as well. We have been called to be committed to something that is eternal, something that is ennobling, that is "earth-shaking". What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ. Let me offer three things in answer to that question.

### HOW ORDINARY THESE FOUR MEN WERE

Notice, first of all, how ordinary these four men were. They had no formal education that we know of. Neither did they possess any particular attractiveness or extraordinary talent of which we are aware. They were just ordinary fishermen. And this I think is a common mistake that we often make...to assume that God calls only the most impressive, the most gifted, the most talent people. Indeed, that seems to be the exact opposite of what God does.

God, you'll recall, came to Moses with the summons to go tell Pharoah to "let my people go". And Moses responded, "Who am I that I should go to the Pharoah". Later on Moses protested that he was too "slow of speech" to carry out such a mission. God came to Gideon who would later be a great leader of God's people but Gideon responded, "My clan is the weakest in Mannaseh, and I am the least in my family". Even that most successful of all Israel's Kings, David, was flabbergasted by God's call, "I'm only a poor man and little known". And St. Paul tells us over in First Corinthians, chapter one, that God has deliberately chosen what the world considers foolish. Friends...he is talking about the Church. God chooses ordinary people to do His work so that they will depend on His power and not their own. For this reason, says St. Paul, no one will ever be able to "boast in the presence of God".

John McKay, the former coach of the University of South California Trojans once said that it is not the superstars who win most football games, but average players giving it their very best. In the play, Green Pastures, God asks Gabriel to recruit a leader and Gabriel asks in return, "Do you want the brainiest or do you want the holiest?" God answers, "Get me the holiest. I'll make him the brainiest."

In a little town in the Swiss Alps there's a monument with two figures on it. One is a cultured scientist, the author of many books. The other is a poor Swiss peasant, an Alpine guide. Together they had conquered a great mountain. The scientist's name made all of the newspapers, but the monument contains both figures because the great scientist could never have made the climb without the humble guide.

Beginning with the crude manger of Bethlehem no message is clearer in the New Testament than this one - Christian faith is the celebration of ordinary people who come to possess a very extraordinary power. When you are asked to serve God in some capacity, don't talk yourself out of a great opportunity by saying, "I'm too old", or "I don't have enough education", or some other personal put-down. Remember: God can give you the ability. What He can't give you is the faithfulness. That must come from within. And that is why God always prefers the holiest to the brainiest. The first disciples that Jesus called were quite ordinary folks.

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were called to do. They were called to spend the next three years of their lives in the presence of Jesus.

A disciple is one who studies with a great teacher. It is implied that those who follow Jesus need to grow. We do not blossom overnight into mature spiritual giants. As Dr. Dwayne Dyer put it in his book, Your Erroneous Zones,

"How do you distinguish between a flower that is alive and one that is dead? The one that is growing is alive. The only evidence of life is growth?"

So it is with the life of the spirit.

One prominent evangelist has complained that despite the burgeoning statistics, the church today is not growing. It is merely "getting fat". That is, persons are coming into the Church but they are remaining spiritual babes. They are not growing. "We are simply multiplying spiritual babies" he charges. To be alive is to grow. Peter encourages us to "grow in grace, and in knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ." (II Peter 3: 18)

Andrew, Peter, James and John could not have done that outside the fellowship of the company Jesus had called and neither can we. The place where most of us encounter Christ and learn about Him and grow in our spiritual walk is within these walls. The cry of a few years ago, "Jesus - yes. The Church - no" simply is an illusion. Follow-up studies on persons involved in Christian groups not related to a local church over the past two decades back that up. It simply does not last. The ember removed from the fire soon grows cold and soon the fire goes out.

Like every pastor I am puzzled and troubled at times by the casual attitude that many people have about their responsibilities to the Church. At times I feel a bit like the orchestra conductor who was quite upset over the fact that at every rehearsal at least one member of the orchestra was absent. At the last rehearsal, he announced, "I would like to thank our first trumpet player. He was the only member of this orchestra who did not miss a rehearsal". The first trumpet player stood and bowed as the other members of the orchestra all applauded politely. Then he quietly said, "It was really the least I could do, considering I won't be able to be at the concert tonight."

I know how that orchestra conductor must have felt at that moment. Every pastor does. The work of the Church is so important. Our ministry to children and to young people and to adults is so vital to the work of the Kingdom. This is a place where the disciples hopefully grow. This is where we get equipped for the work that Christ has given us to do. This is where we get our Kingdom "marching orders". I believe the Church deserves our best loyalty and service.

An orchestra was giving a concert in a large church hall in England. The place was jam-packed. Afterwards a casual member of that church very flippantly asked the pastor of the Church when the hall would ever be filled like that for a Sunday morning worship service. The pastor answered quietly,

"It will be filled when like that conductor I have 80 well trained, committed and disciplined men and women to work with me."

How the Church needs that today.

A man was given the nickname, "Honest John". It embarrassed him and he protested, that he did not deserve it. "Couldn't you call me, 'Fairly Honest John?'" he asked. That sounds like many of us, doesn't it? We want to be thought of as being "fairly committed" in our service to Christ, "fairly committed" in our loyalty to the Church - the worship and the Sunday School, "fairly committed" to making our Church what God has called it to be. We're a bit like the brother that Adlai Stevenson once spoke of who was stirred up at a prayer meeting in his church and prayed, "Use me, Lord. Use me, Lord. Use me in an advisory capacity". Yes, we're good at giving advice. Jesus called those original followers to spend three years in His presence as disciples, learners, students. They needed to grow. So, too, do we.

#### FROM DISCIPLES TO APOSTLES

This brings us to the last thing to be said. These disciples were most ordinary people just as we were. They were called not only to go with Jesus, but also to grow with Him...just as we are as well.

And here is the final thing. There would come a time when they would no longer be called Disciples, but Apostles. Disciples are those called to grow. Apostles are called to go. There needs to come a time when we move from being followers to being leaders. Our church should never have any difficulty finding persons to teach Sunday School, or to work with the youth, or to sing in the choir, to take leadership positions, or serve in our stewardship drive or to make contacts in our community.

There comes a time when mature Christian believers realize that it is time to move from being "ministered unto" to the work of ministry itself. And perhaps this is part of the reason why Jesus couldn't remain with His disciples physically. He wanted them to understand that now they had the privilege and the responsibility of carrying on the work of God. Jesus asked Simon Peter three times in His last appearance to Him, "Simon, do you love Me?" And each time He instructed Simon Peter to "feed My sheep". That is the final step in following Christ. It is to feed Christ's sheep. We need to appreciate that in the Church today as we mature from being "ministered unto" to "ministering to others".

One of the most monumental works in all the world is the Great Wall of China. The mammoth man-made structure stretches eighteen hundred miles over plains and deserts. The Chinese built it to keep out barbarians, but for the Chinese themselves it became a barrier to progress. Isolated behind that wall from others they quit progressing as a people.

That can happen to us as individuals or as a Church. Great things happen within the walls of the Church. But if we never see ourselves as the APOSTOLI, those sent out in ministry to the world, we will stagnate and die in our own spiritual pilgrimage.

Yes, these were four ordinary men but God did extraordinary things through them. The first part of their pilgrimage was spent in the fellowship of Christ and other believers in order that they might grow and strengthen in their spiritual maturity. But there came a time when in order to continue their growth they discovered that they must become teachers, and missionaries, and leaders of local churches, and servants both of the Word and the world.

#### CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

An imaginary conversation between Jesus and the angel, Gabriel, after the Ascension, describes Gabriel as asking the Master what plans He had made for completing His work of telling everyone about God's love. Jesus answered:

"I asked Peter and James and John, and some more of them on earth, to make it the business of their lives to tell others. And the others are to tell others, and the others still others until every man has heard the message and had his life transformed by it."

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"Yes...but Master, suppose after a while Peter forgets and John loses his enthusiasm. And what if their successors, down in the 20th century get so busy or so timid that they do not have the time or the courage to tell others. What will you do then?"

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PRAYER      Make us faithful, O God, that we may not disappoint Your hopes and expectations of us.    And keep us from becoming so taken up with other endeavors that we forget that our chief occupation is to live as Your followers - disciples and apostles.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: February

ETERNAL GOD - creator of the universe and father of our spirits - in reverence, we have come here this day seeking Your presence.

SPEAK TO US in this hour of eternal things, that through faith and trust, through the comfort and the reassurance of the Scriptures, we may have hope and be lifted above our own private concerns and anxieties into the light and the peace of Your abiding presence.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, because we have minds that seek to understand the ultimate meanings of life. For we find it difficult to simply believe that life is blind process, without purpose and meaning, without order and intelligence - a creation without a Creator. Only when we find in You the power that is behind all, the purpose that crowns all, do our restless and searching spirits find their rest in You.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, seeking forgiveness...well aware of our shortcomings, our sins of the body, of the disposition. Deep in our hearts we know there have been times when we have failed You, failed to live up to the highest and the best we know, times when we have let trivial things crowd you out of the picture. Cleanse us, and renew a right spirit within us.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, because we have suffered. Hardship, grief, illness, loneliness have touched our lives. We cry for the comfort of your nearness, the warmth of your love, for your word that "all things do work together for good" and that "all things are possible"/

GRANT EACH OF US the vision to understand,  
the patience to endure,  
the strength to resist temptation,  
the power to bear our burdens,  
the willingness to help carry the burdens of others.

WE COME TO YOU, O GOD, because we are co-workers with you for the common good, for the improvement of life for all your children.

AND HERE ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT, we would make our own silent rededication of our lives to Christ, to those causes we believe in as followers of the Christ. Confirm within us the feelings of these moments, the certainties, resolutions and decisions. We pray that your spirit may work in us and through us that others may know who we are and to whom we belong. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.

Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 21, 1988

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in the congregation...delighted to have you with us...and we hope that the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more personal way...
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name...take a moment to fill out a visitor...to sign one of the Guest Books... Join us on other Sunday. Work with us...
- C. You worship in a Church that next month will be celebrating its 151st birthday....We've been at this busy corner of God's kingdom since 1837. 4th building. Neighborhood church... minister in the name of Christ...greet you in His loving...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns listed for you in bulletin...review them on your own....
- B. Be sure to pick up a copy of the February issue of our monthly news sheet...also a copy of The Sanctuary for your Lenten devotional reading. I always look forward to Maxie Dunham's writings and illustrations...and get a lift from his thoughts and prayers....it helps to set the tone of my day. Copies are by the door...
- C. March is approaching. A busy month. Be sure to get your notes and notices in to Lucy Dinnes by next Sunday for the March 6th issue of our monthly news sheet.
- D. Looking ahead to March: the laity of our Metropolitan District will be meeting with the Bishop here on Monday evening, March 7th. Our Annual Meeting is on Sunday, the 13th of March - 3 weeks from today. March 20th - "Each One Bring One Sunday" as well as a pot luck supper sponsored by our Outreach Committee with a special program "in the works".

OFFERING

- A. The special envelopes remain in the pews for our Human Relations Day emphasis. "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

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Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS: February 19, 1989

I. VISITORS / GREETING

- A. A word of warm welcome to the visitors....delighted to have you with us. Make yourself known to us. Be free in the sharing of your name. Sign a visitor card...guest book.
- B. Join us downstairs for coffee. Worship with us on other Sundays. Work with us in the programs of service...
- C. You worship in a Church whose roots are deep in the soil of this part of NY City...a Methodist Church that has been ministering here since 1837. 152 years old next month. A Church that has an international, interracial and interdenominational flavor. We minister in the name of Christ...and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you.

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are listed for you in the bulletin. Please review them on your own before departing...
- B. Note the paragraph about next Sunday evening's Pizza and Penny Rolling Party. 6:30 in Fellowship Hall. Join with Church friends for a meal together.
- C. Also, note the word regarding Adult Fellowship activities. Ice Skating party and the Movie party.

III. OFFERING

- A. "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.

IV. OTHER



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