

"DON'T FORGET THE BATTERIES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 2, 1996**

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INTRODUCTION

A man at an airport was worried about missing his plane. He had no wristwatch and unable to locate a clock, he hurried up to a stranger and said, "Excuse me...could you please tell me the time?"

The stranger smiled and responded, "Sure". And setting down two large suitcases that he was carrying, he looked at his wristwatch and said,

"It's 6:08 and the temperature is 75. The barometric pressure is 30.19 and falling. Rain is predicated. In Madrid, the sky is clear and the temperature is 40 degrees, Celsius. In Istanbul, the weather is sultry and the moon is full."

"Your watch tells you all that?" interrupted the man. "Oh, yes...and much more" replied the stranger. "You see, I invented this watch and there is no other watch...no other timepiece like it in the world!" "I want to buy that watch!" said the man. "And I'll pay you \$ 2,000 for it right now!"

"No...it's not for sale" said the stranger as he bent over to pick up his heavy suitcases. "Wait! \$ 4,000. I'll pay you \$ 4,000 in cash" offered the man, reaching for his wallet.

"No, I can't" said the stranger. "You see, it has great sentimental value for me". "OK..listen" said the man. "I'll give you \$ 10,000. \$ 10,000 and I have the money right here...let me get it!"

With this the stranger hesitated...and paused and said, " \$ 10,000? Well.... OK...it's yours for \$ 10,000". The man was elated...absolutely elated...and he took out his wallet got the money and put it into the hands of this stranger. He then took the watch, snapped it on his wrist and with great enthusiasm said,

"Thanks...thanks so very much!" "Wait a moment" said the stranger. And with a big smile, he then handed the the two heavy suitcases to the man and added...."Don't forget the batteries...they're here in these suitcases".

A somewhat crazy story...."Don't forget the batteries". And this is the continuing temptation that confronts the Church....forgetting the batteries, the source, if you will, of our power....that we will leave behind the very thing that is essential to the ongoing life of the community of faith.

DEVELOPMENT

The running of the "Indianapolis 500" last week reminded me of something that happened a year ago last February at the Daytona 500 Auto Race. You may have read about it. The race had just started when on the beginning of the third lap, the \$250,000 machine driven by driver, Donny Allison, rolled to a stop on the infield side of the track. And when it was checked, it was found that no one had bothered to fill it with gas. Now that's mighty embarrassing. One of the top drivers in auto racing stalled because he

had run out of gas. But....that's apt to be where many churches are....and many individuals, too. Trying to operate without batteries, or trying to drive on an empty fuel tank.

THE SCRIPTURES REMIND US

The Scriptures remind us that ever since the Ascension of Christ that the disciples of our Lord and all of the followers of Jesus had been busy devoting themselves to prayer in the Upper Room. They had been busy preparing themselves to receive the Holy Spirit that Christ had promised them. Soon there came that Day of Pentecost and you'll perhaps remember that they were all together in one place and that suddenly, there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind and it filled the whole house.

And then they saw tongues of fire which seemed to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak with other tongues. Now, there were Jews living in Jerusalem from every nation on the face of the earth and when this sound occurred, a large multitude came together and they were bewildered because they were each one hearing the disciples speak in his own language. They asked,

"Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language? We hear them in our own tongues, speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (2:8)

Resting today as we do in the afterglow of Pentecost, looking back on that event, we would have to say that the Church that day had a full tank of fuel. We would have to say that its batteries were charged and connected up and this too: we need to ask ourselves what is it that we can learn from that experience, from their experience that will hopefully energize us in the Church in our time.

CHURCH'S POWER SOURCE IS THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Here is the first thing that we need to note and remember.

The source of the church's power is the spirit of God at work in the hearts and minds of its followers. And if we are going to have some of the joy and the energy of that early church, then we are going to have to pray for God's spirit to "fall afresh on us". Anytime that we try to substitute any other kind of power for God's power, we are edging into trouble.....and it makes no difference what that power may be.

It may be political power. The church has often in the past sought to exercise its political power. Sometimes this has had beneficial results and sometimes it has not. Our laws regarding the separation of church and state are good laws and most fortunate. They keep the state from meddling in church affairs and they also help the church resist the temptation of political power. Political power is no substitute for spiritual power.

Or, we might substitute what might be called celebrity power. Many churches that are labeled as "growing churches" now-a-days, as a central part of their ministry are bringing in celebrities - musicians and athletes and politicians - to share their faith. And, I suppose there's nothing wrong with that, as long as we remember that these celebrities are just people like the rest of us...they sin, too. Their weaknesses do not disappear just because they're in the public spotlight.

A church that builds its faith on the power of personality - even the personality of its pastor - is potentially in trouble. For people, you see, do have a way of letting us down. That is another form of power in our world today that makes its appeal to some. Call it, if you will, celebrity power.

And there is also a danger in what we might call "need-centered" power. One of the effective ways of growing churches in today's world is to focus on the needs of people and to begin and to build within the church groups to meet those needs. And so in many churches today you will find all kinds of recovery groups and support groups and 12-step groups. All of these are good and they are a vital part of the church's ministry....as long as we do not lose sight of our central reason for being.

You may have heard about a certain hen that won dozens of awards. She was really quite amazing. If you put a red quilt in front of her, she would lay red eggs. If you put a green quilt in front of her she would lay green eggs. A blue quilt - blue eggs. But one day someone accidentally put a plaid quilt in front of her.....and the poor bird died trying to deliver the goods! That can happen to us, in the church. We can be so busy trying to be all things to all people that we end up losing sight of our central reason for being.

Nothing in the church can substitute for God's spirit as the basic source of our power. If we ever become what God means for us to become, it will not be because of our programs, as effective as they may be. It will be because God's Spirit is lifting us!

ALBATROSS ANALOGY

One writer has used the analogy of an albatross. He has noted that the albatross has the longest wingspan of any living bird. It's 12 feet. He also notes that it is too heavy to fly. It cannot support itself in the air. In fact, in still air, it can't even take off. Yet the albatross is a marathon flier. Some speculate it can stay years at sea without returning to land. And scientists put a radio transmitter on one in order to track it. After thirty days and 9,000 miles, the battery gave out and the albatross was still "out there" over the ocean.

How can a bird that is too heavy to support itself be something of a marathon flier? The answer: it doesn't flap. It glides. It is a master at riding the winds. For example, it knows that slightly higher, the faster air currents provide greater speed. Then it dives, letting gravity give acceleration. Then it catches an updraft off the waves and the cycle starts all over again. The albatross not only survives winds of almost any force at sea, but it is not even blown off course. It can ride out the storms by reading the winds and circling and then when calm returns, it continues on its way.

You and I would do well to learn a lesson from the albatross. We need to ride the winds of God's spirit. That is the first thing we need to learn from Pentecost. The source of our power is God's spirit.

I believe,

"That a church that sets out to do the works of God, spreading into every area of life, yet neglecting the living center of belief, is doomed not to renewal, but decay. The passion to do the works of God must be inspired and controlled by a stronger and deeper belief"

WHERE GOD'S SPIRIT IS, THERE IS UNITY!

The second thing that we learn from the Day of Pentecost was

that where God's spirit is, there is unity.

People of differing backgrounds, differing social classes, differing skin colors, differing national origins....all heard the Gospel in their own tongue. And rather than fragmenting into tiny self-serving groups, they were drawn into a cohesive whole. And what a beautiful sight that must have been. One day I believe we shall come to see just how silly all those barriers we have erected between people really are.

There was a cartoon some time ago which showed two people staring at each other. One was a little man in a loincloth, looking very much like Mahatma Gandhi. The other was a stalwart man with a fully feathered headdress looking a lot like Chief Sitting Bull. Both are speaking simultaneously and the caption reads, "Funny....but you don't look Indian".

Amusing, but thought provoking. What an absurd world we have created. I once read that Ted Turner, head of Cable News Network fires any CNN Newscasters who use the word, "Foreign". As he sees it, we're all in this together. And how upsetting it is to read in the papers about this setting fire to churches in the South and other parts of our country where people of color come together to worship. Back in the nineteen sixties when Billy Graham held his historic Crusade in Montgomery, Alabama, he insisted on an integrated choir. One of the newspapers editorialized that Graham had come to Alabama and set the Church back a hundred years. Remember his classic answer:

"I intended to set it back two thousand years!"

Friends, where the Spirit of God is present, there is always unity. When the waters of God rise, the fences disappear. No longer is there male or female, Jew or Gentile, black or white. There are only precious souls for whom Christ died. We are "one in the spirit!"

And, of course, that is even more important when we apply it to the Church. A somewhat humorous story came across the Associated Press lines recently about two groups of firefighters in a small town down in Maryland that came to fight a fire and ended up fighting each other. Apparently both paid and volunteer firefighters got to the fire at the same time and proceeded to argue over who should be the first to carry a hose into a burning townhouse.

Eventually, they had to be separated by the County Police. And fortunately, the fire was put out before too much damage was done, but I couldn't help but think of the Church. Rather than fighting the fires of evil in this world, we would at times rather right each other. But not so with the Church in the aftermath of the events of Pentecost! They prayed together. They ate together. They even shared possessions with one another. Remember: the source of the Church's power is the Spirit of God and where the Spirit is, there is unity!

AND WHERE THE SPIRIT IS, THERE IS OUTREACH TO OTHERS

But there is one more thing to lift up and

it is this: where the spirit is, there is always outreach to others. Where the spirit of God is, people are concerned about sharing the "Good News" with others - family, friends, neighbors....the Church after Pentecost was a dynamic and a rapidly growing Church. Why? Because they were reaching out!

Richard Lederer is a writer and teacher who enjoys collecting such things are unintentionally funny headlines and signs. I'm sure you've seen some of them and have gotten a kick out of them, things like:

"HOME. \$ 199,500" read one such ad. "Great location. 2/3rds of an acre with 4 bedrooms, 2-baths, brick Cape. Built the way thy used to. Won't Last."

Or, here's another...

"For Sale: Bull Dog. Will eat anything. Loves Children"

And one of my favorites,

"Extremely independent male. 17 years old, needs to rent room. Call his mother at...."

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CLOSING

And friend, you and I know that that is perhaps the greatest danger for the Church....that we will experience something of God's electricity, but find no outlet for it. That we will experience God's power in a mighty way, but will then refuse to share that spark of power and of hope with others. That we will experience God's unity among ourselves in a place like this but shut others out and refuse to give it away. That we will have the joy of God's spirit, but not try to bring it to the rest of the world.

Do be careful that we don't end up forgetting the batteries. The source of the Church's power is God's spirit. And where the spirit is, there is unity and there is a genuine concern for reaching out to others.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness, O God, in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the deep corners of our hearts where fear and anxiety, doubt and despair may be lurking. For we believe that the deepest things with us are being stirred up in this time of worship and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is at work, striving to bring forth the highest and best that we are meant to be.

Hear, O God, our confession of confusion. And help us, by Your grace, to amend our lives that order might be brought out of the chaos of our confused thinking.

Minister to our personal needs. Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence.

Point out markers on the trail of life for those who are in danger of losing their way.

Our prayers this hour reach out to include:

Bobbie Heron, Eric de Freitas, Irene Kestanuk,
Daisy Herrick, Pertti Tervakallio, Marney Kliever,
Ruth Ferraro, soster of Janet Jacobson, Richard
Huntly, father of Kristin Raker, Sarah King, sister
of Frances Ellison. *BETTY STAGEMYER -*

The race is short, O God, even at its longest....and we, as followers of Christ,
would try to run it well and always to Your glory. Amen

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