

"FEAR OF FLYING"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
June 16, 1996

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### INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that we've been told that we're safer flying in a plane than travelling in a car, there are still a lot of people who get nervous about flying. If you're among them, then you may find yourself in complete agreement with George S. Kaufman who once said,

"I like TERRA FIRMA...the more FIRMA...the less TERRA!"

Some time back a science-fiction writer by the name of Bradbury won an award for a Life magazine article he wrote in praise of space exploration, but he chose not to attend the Awards' Meeting in Florida because he didn't like to fly...from LA to Miami.

There are many famous people who have a phobia about planes and flying but who nevertheless keep flying. Andre Previn, Joanne Woodward, Bob Newhart and the late Jackie Gleason...just to name a few. And even former President Reagan doesn't enjoy flying. Someone once asked Ronald Reagan on Air Force One if he had overcome his fear of flying. He answered the reporter,

"Overcome it? I'm holding this plane up by sheer will power!" Perhaps you can relate to that....

### FEAR: AN EMOTION THAT AFFECTS US ALL

But put this down as the first point of today's sermon that fear is an emotion that affects us all. You're not alone in your fears....whatever it may be. Everyone's afraid of something and some folks have fears that are almost pathological.

Go back 35 years and those of you who are movie buffs will remember that classic horror film, Psycho, with Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh. After viewing that famous shower scene in which she was stabbed repeatedly, Janet Leigh tells us that she was siezed with terror and down to this day she still won't take a shower....only a bath.

In fact, when she stays in a hotel or at a friend's home where only a shower is available, she says she panics....and always makes sure the doors and windows of the house are locked....and leave the bathroom door open and the shower curtain open and always faces the door....watching. Hard to believe that a scene in a movie can make someone that afraid, but it's true. People have all kinds of fear. So be careful about what movies or television programs you watch. And, of course, the scariest program on TV is apt to be the Six O'Clock News.

Have any of you ever heard of the name of JOE ANCIS. Chances are, you haven't. And if you haven't, the reason you haven't is due to fear. Back in the late forties, Buddy Hackett and Rodney Dangerfield and Lenny Bruce and other young hopeful comics here in the city all hung out at Hansons, a luncheonette on Broadway. Joe Ancis, the original "sick comic" would crack everybody up at the time. Some say that Lenny Bruce learned what he knew from Joe Ancis. The other comedians even went so far as to dub Joe Ancis as "The Funniest Man in the World".

But Ancis, they say, was terrified of audiences. He could "rap" with the "pros" at Hansons, but he found it difficult to perform in public which he only did nnce in

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FEAR LIMITS US

And then put this down as the second point: fear limits us. I titled this sermon, The Fear of Flying, but it's not really about flying on airplanes, although it could be. According to an article in last Sunday's NY Times, this fear of flying in an airplane is a big deal for a lot of people.

I remember back in the mid-sixties that Red Auerbach, the legendary coach of the Boston Celtics, learned this the hard way. Back then, Red Auerbach, was involved in scouting and signing basketball players for the Celtics. He had his eye on Billy Green, a player from Colorado State, who was the Number One Draft Choice of the Celtics. The kid looked great in training camp, but when he came into Auerbach's office just before the start of the season, he dropped a bomb shell in Auerbach's lap.

Billy Green didn't fly and he wanted to discuss with Red Auerbach his special "travel arrangements". And when Auerbach, puffing on his famous cigar, recovered... he realized too late that Billy Green had thought he could travel by train from city to city and be there to meet the team when they came into that city to play. Auerbach found he couldn't talk Billy Green into flying...that the young man's fear was too great. Auerbach had no choice but to cut Green from the team. Although the Celtics ended up blowing a Number One Draft Choice, Auerbach once said he learned from it. Later on he remarked,

"When a scout or an ex-player told me about a kid who could 'FLY'....I always made sure he did it both on the court and off the court!"

Fear of flying on a plane certainly limited Billy Green, but that's not the kind of flying I'm talking about here this morning. I'm talking about the imagery we find in Scripture of taking "wings" and flying "like an eagle". God, you see, has placed so many possibilities before us and within each one of us. God has given us so many opportunities and the only thing holding some of us back is our fear!

I love those television channels and programs that open up to us the great animals of the world. A favorite animal for me is the giraffe; I recently read that this is one of the favorite attractions in any zoo....the giraffe compound. And usually these magnificent animals are enclosed in a natural habitat. They're tall and so graceful and far more massive and muscular than one expects them to be. Tall somehow seems to imply thin, but these great animals are anything but skinny. Their necks are thicker and their legs shorter than one anticipates and it's not difficult to see why one kick would send an ambitious lion packing.

And yet, these massive, stately animals are enclosed in a small compound that seems far too restricting for their size and power, but no cage contains them. And there are no bars or walls.....nothing but a simple, waterless moat, no deeper than the knees of the animal that circles the compound. Freedom is not more than a step or two away, but they are trapped...all of them are....for not one of them will take the risk of stepping down and across for fear of breaking its neck!

I wonder....how many of us are limited like that by our fears. Fear of rejection. Fear of failure. Or, the fear of looking foolish. Fear of being hurt. Fear of being alone. Fear of intimacy. The fear of being taken advantage of. Fear of change. Fear of being criticized. The list goes on....and I wonder...do you recognize any of those fears as belonging to you?

If so, then listen carefully to the Good News, to the message for today. It's there in the tenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, verses thirty and thirty-one.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet, not one of them will fall to the ground apart without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore....for you are of more value than many sparrows."

"Fear not" says Jesus. Here truly is Good News! You and I don't need to be afraid. And let me suggest some reasons we don't need to be afraid. One of them comes from common sense and a couple of them come from Christ, Himself.

#### FEARS ARE OUT OF PROPORTION TO ANY REAL THREAT

to any real threat. That's the common sense of the matter.

First of all, many of our fears are out of proportion

Many of us live in constant dread that is unjustified by the facts. Yes, we face threatened layoffs at work and we're faced with drugs and weapons in our schools and the bizarre behavior of our kids. We have every right to be a bit fearful, right? Then again...maybe not.

Douglas Rumford in his book, Scared To Life, cites a study that explains why we shouldn't allow fear to take over and rule our lives. He writes,

"Sixty per-cent of our fears are totally unfounded, according to this study. 20% are already behind us. 10% are so petty they don't make any difference. 4 to 5% of the remaining 10% are real, but we can't do anything about them. And that means that only 5% are real fears that we can do something about".

That's worth remembering. To me, that's worth writing down and taking out of here with us. I don't know just how accurate those figures are, but my guess would be that for some of us, they understate the problem. I think we have a tendency to blow our fears out of proportion to our real life situations. I think that at times we tend to complicate our lives unnecessarily because of our anxieties. Now, why do we do this? And here is where the words of Christ come into play and are so welcome to our ears. Let me cite or offer two reasons why many of us are afraid.

#### DOUBTS ABOUT OURSELVES

One is because we have doubts about ourselves.

In Robert Schuller's book, Power Thoughts, he tells us of a woman called Sweet Alice. At the age of twelve, we find Sweet Alice in jail. At the age of thirteen, she is pregnant and is homeless by the age of fifteen and has attempted suicide. Sweet Alice is convinced that she had ruined her chances....all of her chances in life and that she will never amount to anything or make anything out of her life.

Schuller's point is that it would have been easy for Alice to give in to her fears and to settle for a life of complete and quiet failure, but then, one day she ran into a Jewish woman by the name of Anne Cohn and Anne Cohn told her that she had a "million dollar smile" and that people needed to see that smile. Anne assured Sweet Alice that she had great potential. Now, on one had ever spoken to Sweet Alice that way before and she desperately needed to hear it!

Sweet Alice began to take some action...some steps forward in her life. In 1965, the Watts riots flamed up in LA. Sweet Alice formed a group called POW - Parents of Watts. These parents worked together to improve their community. Recently, they shut down the business of a vendor in a Watts neighborhood who was selling T-Shirts with objectionable, inflammatory messages. Sweet Alice also gave away her own house to start a program for the homeless and since then, she's added nine more houses to the program. Amazing, really.

She is convinced that God rewarded her giving by giving her more to do. In 1993, Sweet Alice received a "Hero Award" and Essence magazine's "Essence Award" for her work with POW and with the homeless. She was recognized some time back alongside of Senators, artists and Olympic athletes for her contributions to society. And all of this because one person noticed her "million dollar smile".

Some of us are ruled by our fears because we lack confidence in ourselves. That lack of confidence is a tremendous barrier to our achieving what God has called us to do and to achieve and we need to listen to those words of Jesus:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore. You are of more value than many sparrows."

And it is true! We are of inestimable worth.

#### AND DOUBTS ABOUT GOD

We have doubts about ourselves. And then, too, we also have doubts about God. Many followers of Jesus really don't trust God. We may be afraid of success because we think we don't deserve it and that God will swat us down if we try to achieve it. And maybe it all comes down to that age old question upon which everything is hinged: do we live in a friendly universe? Is it a friendly universe. For many of us it is not. It is filled with a God of anger, a God who is always judging us, a God who intervenes "Willy-nilly" to punish some and to reward others. And so...even if we never verbalize this as a problem in our lives....it is...really it is.

For some, the problem is our own guilt...guilt over our own sins may keep us from trusting God and looking up. Guilt is responsible for more anxiety than any of us imagine. Oh, we may cry out, "I don't feel guilty"...but still we are just a bit uneasy. Or, still, we may feel unworthy. And still, we are afraid. We need to know ourselves as those forgiven by a God who loves us with an unimaginable love. Listen again to the words of our Lord, Jesus:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart without your Father's will."

We are under the watchful eye of a loving God who says to us, "Fear not". Fear not. Those are words we all need to hear. So, depart from here...believing in yourself. You are a child of God. You have all kinds of potential. All you have to do is to release that potential. Fear not. Believe in yourself and believe in God. Jesus told us that we are so important to this loving God that even the hairs of our head are numbered. In other words, we're pretty important people. We live in a friendly universe. So, go forth....stretching those wings of yours. Be involved. Take risks. Don't be afraid to fly!

It was Minnie Louise Haskins who wrote those memorable lines with which I close:

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year....'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safe than a known way!'"

PRAYER      Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your abiding presence once again, O God.....and wrestle with us in the dark and shadowy corners of our lives where fear persists. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love. Help us to amend our lives and by the Spirit renew with us the heart of grace and a trust to walk without fear and anxiety in our lives. Help us now to hear Your voice speaking to each of us....reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to victorious living. In the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.

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PRAYER