

"FOREVER ONE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 21, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

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Then President Kennedy spoke, "God, do you think there will be peace one day between the blacks and the whites in our land and around the world?" "Yes" replied God, "But not in your lifetime, Mr. Kennedy."

Then it was the Israeli leader's turn. "God" she asked, "Do you think there will ever be peace between the Jews and the Arabs?" "Yes" said God, "But not in My lifetime". I often find myself thinking of that story.

Do you ever have that feeling that if there is a third World War that it will not be over politics or economics, but rather it will be over religion?

DEVELOPMENT

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Every religion I know of sees itself as a "beacon of light" for the rest of the world. And what a terrible shadow has been cast across the centuries, however, by religious conflict and persecution. Each claims to have "the truth".

And don't say that we are beyond such problems in this land. I think we'd be shocked if we were to discover the number of country clubs in our enlightened land who still do not allow Jews as members. They may not say so publicly, but those unwritten laws unfortunately remain and are not easy to erase.

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If ever the world needed to hear the Gospel, it is now. A lawyer one day long ago asked Jesus a question...to test Him. He said,

"Master...which is the great commandment?" And Jesus answered him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like unto it.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets".

Thus Jesus forever joined love for God and for persons. Forever one! Let this one truth be clear.

Tell it to the Ayatollah in Iran and the militant Christians in Northern Ireland and the Israel government and the PLO and tell it to every other misguided soul upon this earth - including those of us who might someday make the same grave error. There is no such thing as a Holy War. The two words are a contradiction in terms. Love of God and love for neighbor are oars of the same boat. Whenever you try to separate the two, you are usually ineffective and sometimes downright dangerous. The writer of First John put it so eloquently:

"How can you say you love God whom you have not seen, if you cannot love your brother whom you have seen." (I John 4: 20)

Love of God and love of neighbor. Forever one.

LOVE OF GOD IS PRIMARY It is very important for us to note that love of God is primary. Without love of God, love of neighbor is unlikely. Without God, why should I love my neighbor? Have you noticed that as our culture has become more secular that we have drawn more and more into ourselves? "Me - myself - mine" - these seem to be the important words in many a person's vocabulary. And why not, if there is no God? Why not look out for NO. I? That's what happens when faith wanes.

The most natural thing in the world is for us to love ourselves and those who are an extension of ourselves - that is, our family, or clan, or tribe - and to ignore or even despise the rest of the world. Somewhere I once read that among many tribal peoples, the word for human being is also the name of the tribe. Therefore, members of a different tribe are by definition not human beings. It's no coincidence that among many of the head-hunting tribes of the Amazon, killing a fellow tribesman is murder, whereas killing someone else is simply "hunting". That's the way primitive people tend to think. Any hint of that in your thinking?

I guess "primitive" is after all not the right word. Yes, after all, it was less than a century ago that the Governor of one of our Western states could publicly suggest the extermination of Indians. After all, they were "savages", according to his way of thinking, something less than human.

One comedian said it best. He said that historians have recently found the very first Treaty the United States government ever signed with the Indians. The treaty said that the Indians could keep their lands,

"For as long as the river runs clear, as long as the buffalo roam, as long as the grass grows tall, and as long as the mountains stand proud - or 90 days - whichever comes first!"

That's the natural way for human beings to behave. To love their own and to despise the foreigner, the stranger, the outsider. It is the natural way, but it is not the way of those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. For God has reached down into our lives. He has loved us with an everlasting love, even

though we are unworthy. And He has called us to share that love with others. And those "others" - need I remind you - are not limited to our family, our community, our city, our nation, our faith, our color.

Every great act of self-giving love that I know of or read about was, first of all, inspired by love for God. It was love for God that drove Albert Schweitzer into the jungles of Africa. Schweitzer was a man of dazzling intellect and enormous gifts. He wrote a book entitled, The Quest For the Historical Jesus. The research for that book brought him face to face with the claims of God upon his life. When it was finished, he gave up all of his academic degrees and distinguished posts and went to Africa to serve as a missionary physician. For he had somewhere read the story of Jesus about Lazarus and the Rich Man and it touched his heart. So when his patients awakened in that little hospital in Lambarene the first words they heard were the old doctor's:

"The reason you have no more pain is because the Lord Jesus told me to come to the banks of the Ogowe".

Would you say that was love for God or love for neighbor? They cannot be split asunder. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Forever one.

LOVE FOR NEIGHBOR IS OUR RESPONSE

Love for God is primary. And love for our neighbor is our response to God's great love. It's our "offering" of praise and thanksgiving. It's the primary characteristic that separates us from the unredeemed.

In the last of Tolstoy's, Twenty-Three Tales, he tells the story of a king who is searching for the answers to three questions. They are:

First: "How can I do the right thing at the right time?"

Second: "How do I know whose advice to trust?"

Third: "And what things are most important and require my first attention?"

His search took him to the hut of a wise old hermit. Dressed in pauper's clothes, the king visited the hermit who lived deep in the forest. As he approached the hermit, he saw that the hermit was on the verge of collapse. So the king took the spade the hermit had been working with and he proceeded to finish the job of digging his garden. The hermit rested and regained his strength.

Along about sundown, a bearded man with a terrible stomach wound staggered to the hermit's yard. Unknown to the king, the man's wound had been dealt by the king's own guards who were keeping watch in the forest. Gently, the king cleaned the wound, bandaged it and stopped the bleeding. Night fell and the king slept on the threshold of the hut.

When he awoke, he tended to the bearded man's wound and checked on the hermit. The wounded man, overcome by his guilt, made a confession to the king. He had been lying in wait for the king to return from the hermit's hut so he could kill him. He was seeking revenge for a judgement the king had made against him some time in the past. The king listened intently and then promised to send his own doctor to tend the man's wound. Then he prepared to take his leave.

Remembering his own mission, the king asked the hermit once again the answers to the three questions. This is what the hermit told him.

The hermit patiently explained that the king had received his answers on the previous day. When the king had come upon the sickly hermit, he had finished digging his garden for him. This was both the right thing at the right time and the most important thing at hand. Had the king chosen instead to leave, he would have been killed by his enemy in the forest. Secondly, he helped the wounded man, which was again, the right thing at the right time. The hermit continued:

"Remember them, there is only one time that is important.
NOW!"

Then he added,

"The most necessary man is he with whom you are...and the most important thing is to do him good - because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life!"

Friend, there is quite a kernel of truth in that little story. There is only one time and that is now. And there is only one reason for life and that is to do good. And the object of that good is anyone with whom you or I happen to have contact.

AND YOU DO IT UNTO CHRIST

Tolstoy would have been the first to have given assent to this one final truth: remember whenever you do an act of love to another, you do it unto Christ. That is the Gospel in its totality. God loves us through Christ. We love God through our neighbor. And to try it any other way does not work.

In our nation's archives there's an account of two ladies from Tennessee who came before President Lincoln at the end of the Civil War. They were asking him for the release of their husbands held as prisoners of war at Johnson's Island. Lincoln put them off 'til Friday, when they came again. Again, the President put them off until Saturday. At each of the interviews, one of the ladies stressed to Lincoln that her husband was a religious man. After the Saturday interview the President ordered the release of the prisoners and then he turned to this lady and said,

"You say your husband is a religious man. Tell him, when you meet him, that I say I am not much of a judge of religion. In my opinion, however, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government....so that they can eat their bread on the sweat of other men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven."

To me, Lincoln was a pretty good judge of religion. Any religion that tells me that I can hate or exploit or mistreat any person regardless of their race, nationality or religion is not the kind of religion upon which people "get to heaven". Tell that to the Ayatollah, will you, and to Ian Paisley and the IRA and Mr. Shamir and the PLO. And in case I forget, remind me too from time to time. For it's so easy to forget in this world of ours. But forget we must not. Love for God. Love for neighbor. They must be forever one. That's what Jesus was saying that day long ago when the lawyer put that question to him.

PRAYER

Lord, in the quiet of this hour before You, we would pause to ask for a surer knowledge of who we are and what we are all about in life.

If we can recall a time when we loved You more, restore. If we have become good friends with some favorite sin, rebuke. If the flame of our commitment to the world's great need flickers dimly, rekindle. If along the way a relationship once cherished stands endangered through some wrong, real or imagined, reunite.

And show us the relevance of Christ and His Word for the life we live within and the world we make for others, that we may no longer live to ourselves but unto Him whom we call Saviour, Lord, Teacher and Friend. Amen.

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ask for a surer knowledge of who we are and what we are all
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or imagined, reunite.

And show us the relevance of Christ and His Word for the life we live
within and the world we make for others, that we may no longer live to our-
selves but unto Him whom we call Saviour, Lord, Teacher and Friend. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: October 21, 1990

O GOD, OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD us with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word that we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our lives.

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of Your word, - in all of these may we feel that deep and abiding assurance of Your Eternal and Abiding Truth.

THOU GOD OF COMFORT, be near to those who may be feeling the burden of age, the pain of illness, the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, the inner turmoil of uncertainty.

WORK through nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and government officials...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life together in this land.

OUR PRAYERS this day reach out to include loved ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning - those to our left, those to our right.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with that perspective of "higher ground" that worship can provide.

LORD, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that the influence of another Sunday may be strong in our land, and that all who worship You this day may be given strong hearts to bear their burdens, willing hearts to bear the burdens of others.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us our sins. And make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow His way. In His name and spirit we pray.

(choral Amen)

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched : Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that who-soever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| 1. <u>Jane Brown, mother of Edward</u> | 2. <u>Louise Williams, mother of Ann</u> | 3. <u>Karen Oldham</u> |
| 4. <u>Cynthia Shannon</u> | 5. <u>Mary Lewis</u> | 6. <u>Daisy Herrick</u> 7. <u>Ada Kinney</u> |

8. Kathryn Ernst, mother of Jan.
...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to _____ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation...a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

III. CHURCH OFFERING

- A. Jesus said: It is more blessed to give than to receive. In this spirit let us worship God...

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, October 21, 1990

I. VISITORS / GREETING

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors in today's congregation. Pleased you're here...hope that we'll have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way...either at door or downstairs in Russell Room where coffee will be available.
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out a visitor card or sign one of the guest books. Come, worship with us... Work with us, too....
- C. Roots are deep in the soil...doing the Lord's work here since 1837. Minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit....
- D. Members, remember to wear your name tags. Helps. Make two new friends. Visitors, if you're interested in learning more about the many good things that go on around here...chancel steps following postlude and one or two of our members...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns summarized in the bulletin. Review them on your own noting the adult study groups that meet during the week...."Hounds of Heaven". "Aldersgate Class". We also have an Adult Bible Class on Sunday mornings at 9:30.
- B. Adult Fellowship has a number of interesting programs coming along...briefly described for you along with the contact person or coordinator. Football game. Halloween Party. Party for children, too.
- C. Church Fair. Christmas Cards on sale....downstairs in Fellowship Hall. Remember we have a "pick up" service for Fair donations.
- D. Gifts for the special October appeal called Fellowship of Service and Suffering are still being received. Use the envelope in pew. Still need another \$150 to reach our goal.
- E. This afternoon at 4 pm at Christ Church UM...reception and service of installation for our new DS, Rev. George T. Johnson. Those attending share word with me...travel down together to Park and 60th.
- F. Our 1991 Financial Canvass is ready to begin...present to share with you the plans for the coming weeks and the goals we have adopted as a church is this year's Canvass Chairperson: Gordon Bryant. Grateful to Gordon for providing us with leadership in this tough area of our church life. Bring us up to date.

(over)

PASTORAL PRAYER: October 21, 1990

O GOD, OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD us with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word that we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our lives.

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of Your word, - in all of these may we feel that deep and abiding assurance of Your Eternal and Abiding Truth.

THOU GOD OF COMFORT, be near to those who may be feeling the burden of age, the pain of illness, the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, the inner turmoil of uncertainty.

WORK through nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and government officials...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life together in this land.

OUR PRAYERS this day reach out to include loved ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning - those to our left, those to our right.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with that perspective of "higher ground" that worship can provide.

LORD, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that the influence of another Sunday may be strong in our land, and that all who worship You this day may be given strong hearts to bear their burdens, willing hearts to bear the burdens of others.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us our sins. And make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow His way. In His name and spirit we pray.

(choral Amen)