

"GAMBLING ON GOD"

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

There's a rather ridiculous story about a hunter named Ned who bet another hunter, named Fred, that he could leave the cabin, go out into the woods and come back within the hour with a bearskin. They bet ten dollars and Ned went off into the forest. Sixty minutes went by quickly and there was no Ned. Then two hours went by - nothing. No Ned. Three hours later a loud pounding on the door of the cabin was heard. Fred went to the door, opened it and standing there in front of him was a huge brown bear.

"Your name Fred?" asked the bear. "Why, yes" stammered the surprised hunter. "You know a guy named Ned?" "Yes, I do" said Fred. "Well", said the bear. "He owes you ten dollars."

Now I don't know if that is a story about the dangers of gambling, or the dangers of messing with big brown bears, but I do know, that some forms of gambling can be hazardous to your well-being.

### DEVELOPMENT

There was an article in the Associated Press sometime back about a Frenchman by the name of Andre Francois Raffray, who felt he had made a shrewd deal 31 years ago. He agreed to pay a 90 year-old woman \$ 500 a month until she died as a way of purchasing her apartment. Now this, I understand, is a common practice in France.

The elderly owner enjoys a monthly income from the buyer, who in turn gets a real-estate bargain....provided, of course, that the owner dies sooner rather than later. Unfortunately it was Raffray who died "sooner"...having paid more than \$ 184,000 for an apartment in which he never got to live. Raffray, aged 77 when he died, had the misfortune of arranging a deal 31 years ago with Jeanne Calment, who is now 121. The Guinness Book of Records has her listed as the world's oldest person. To add a bit of insult to injury, Raffray's widow is obligated to keep sending those monthly checks and should Calment outlive her, Raffray's children will have to pick up the payments. The lesson here is that some gambles simply do not turn out for the best.

Gambling is becoming a serious issue in our society - recreational gambling, that is. When I was growing up it was pretty well restricted to Las Vegas and Atlantic City, but now its presence is commonplace on cruise ships, on Indian reservations and even in local convenience stores in some communities through fast-spreading state lotteries and even though it's acknowledged that recreational gambling takes money from the very people in our society who can least afford it and usually brings in its wake an element of unsavory behavior, many people continue to see it as a painless way to support schools and to fund some other desirable governmental activities.

It has become part of the "quick-fix", no fault, minimum commitment mentality that grips our society and it's sad. Most intelligent people recognize that gambling is for losers. No one beats the odds forever. As one man put it,

"I went to Las Vegas recently. I lost my car. I lost my watch. I lost my money....I lost everything...but my good-luck charm!"

Gambling can turn into a deadly disease that hurts and destroys families as well as individuals, so it may disturb us to see the disciples of Jesus coming together to cast lots to see who would succeed Judas. They might have flipped a coin or drawn cards or rolled some dice. The method really is not that important. The point is that this seems to be a strange way to make an important decision about who would join the inner circle, the governing body.

NOT  
BARABBAS

We can understand that they wanted someone to take the place of Judas in their fellowship. The disciples had two pretty good candidates for his replacement - Barsabbas (whose surname was Justus) and Matthias. Both men had been witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Both were men of solid character. We're not told why the disciples couldn't choose both of them... perhaps there was something significant and symbolical about the number 12. Anyway, 12 seemed like the right number for them.

Whatever the motivation, they felt they must choose between the two candidates and so they prayed MIGHTILY for God's guidance and then they cast lots to make their selection. In their defense I might offer two observations. First, both candidates met all the qualifications; they were not taking a wild risk in the matter or manner of their selection. And secondly, they had a great trust in God. They believed that God would lead them to make the right choice. Thus, this casting of lots seemed to be a practical way of seeking God's guidance. They weren't gambling for any selfish gain. They were gambling on God.

#### CERTAIN GAMBLES WE MUST TAKE IN LIFE

There are certain gambles that all of us must take in life. Do you agree? Today is Mother's Day - a very special day. It is not easy being a mother in today's world....right?

A woman who was celebrating her 40th birthday received a very extravagant and expensive "wrinkle removing" cream from her teenage daughter. "And what did she give you last year?" a friend asked this 40-year old woman. Her reply, without any moment of hesitation was "the WRINKLES!"

A young woman named Mary Lou was encouraging her mother to die her hair. Her mother said to her,

"I hope you're not serious, Mary Lou! Why, I cherish my gray head of hair. It's like the mantle of experience. See the gray hair, Mary Lou? This one is from the time that nice young doctor proposed to you, but you declined because his speciality was dermatology and yours was that clarinet player.....and this gray hair is from your sweet sixteen party when that motor cycle gang came and crashed the party, and how ~~come~~ they asked for you, personally? And this one I got the day you said you wanted to share an apartment with three responsible roommates...whose names were Tom, Dick and Harry....and this one...."

By this time a stunned Mary Lou walked out of the house, and bumping into a friend, remarks,

"I just found out how mothers keep score!"

Who was it who said: "Wrinkles should indicate where smiles have been!" Not fears.

It's not easy being a mother. Most working mothers don't get enough sleep, according to a recent study. These same mothers were asked if there was an extra hour in the day, how would they like to spend it. Their answers:

"Forty-four percent said they would spend the extra hour with their children. Twenty-eight percent said they would spend the extra hour for personal time. Fifteen percent said sleeping." It's not easy being a mother!

BRINGING A CHILD INTO THE WORLD IS A GREAT GAMBLE

But here is the main point for today's sermon

on this Mother's Day.

There is no greater gamble than bringing a child into the world. We worry even before the child is born. Will he or she be healthy...normal? And then we watch over all the scrapes and the bruises of childhood. And when we ponder all the dangers that await our young, we marvel - do we not - that any of them make it to adulthood.

I remember rather vividly when my son, David, who next year celebrates his 40th, was about 5 years old and proceeded to plug an extension cord in the balcony of our church that was connected up to some floodlights used to light the balcony lights back there in 1963....David first plugged the cord into a 220 volt opening in my 2nd floor study and then went down to the balcony and turned on the lights. A minor explosion and lots of smoke and then silence. "David...David... David"....I thought to myself...he's electrocuted himself...then a weak, soft boy's whisper... "Yes, Dad?" "David...are you OK?" Oh, how he loved to tinker with wires..

And then there are those terrible choices that come in the late teens and those young adult years....choices such as vocation and life partner. And we hold our breath and we say a few prayers along the way.

And some pray far more fervently than did those disciples when they chose between Barsabbas and Matthias. Those disciples didn't know what gambling was, not unless they had raised some kids themselves.

Raise a hand if you're old enough to remember the Korean War and the place called Heartbreak Ridge...a mountain range between North and South Korea which figured prominently in the battles of that War, hence the appropriate name, Heartbreak Ridge.

There's a story about a battle that has come down to us that took place one night on that ridge. The North Koreans seemed to be in a perfect position for controlling the fighting and keeping the Americans at bay. An American soldier, inching his way toward the North Korean camp lines, was shot badly and seriously injured. Screaming for help, his comrades were unable to get to him safely. Time passed and he continued to call and cry for help. Both sides knew that anyone venturing near the wounded soldier would be "easy pickings".

But there was one young American soldier, deep inside a foxhole, who kept lifting his wrist out of the hole to catch some light from exploding flares all around him. Suddenly, he leaped from the foxhole and ran out into the open area where the wounded soldier lay. He grabbed hold of the soldier and pulled him out of danger's path and back into his foxhole. Not long after, a sergeant found his way into that foxhole and demanded an explanation for this young soldier's risky action.

This young soldier explained that he had just been waiting and checking his watch until he knew it was nine o'clock in the morning back in Kansas, his home state. The soldier's mother had promised him that she would lift him up in her prayers every morning at nine o'clock, every day of the week. And when he knew for sure it was nine back in Kansas, then he knew he would be safe in going out to rescue his buddy...wounded and dying. You and I might say that this young soldier's theology is open to question, but certainly not his faith. He was gambling on his mother's prayers and his mother, in turn, was gambling on God's providence. Both, yes...indeed, were taking enormous risks.

#### GAMBLING ON GOD

I believe that any person who seriously follows Jesus is a bit of a gambler - gambling on God. Think about it.

There's no hard evidence that there is a loving God who watches over us, no evidence that would stand up to scientific scrutiny. When you decide to put your life into the hands of God, God does not provide you with some kind of a written contract or air-tight guarantee of safe conduct all the way. That's what it means to walk by faith. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews put it long ago,

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things not seen....."

And if we knew beyond all certainty about what lies ahead for us, then we are not living by faith. Faith is the courage to follow God's leading even though the way ahead be uncertain and treacherous. You and I worship in this church today because of some men and women like ourselves were "holy gamblers" and who believed in God and trusted in God and gave of their time and their talent and a portion, too, of their material blessings....some of them were great "factories of faith"....but they did it with only an assurance of things "hoped for and a conviction of things unseen".

Those lines of G. A. Studdert-Kennedy come to mind,

"He was a gambler, too, my Christ,  
He took His life and threw it for a world  
redeemed.  
And ere His agony was done,  
Before the westering sun went down,  
Crowning that day with crimson crown,  
He knew that He had won."

#### A CLOSING ACCOUNT

In recent days I have come across the name of Charles Petit McIlvaine and I doubt if any of you have ever heard of him. He was born in Burlington, New Jersey in the year 1799 - grandson of the first governor of Pennsylvania and the son of a United States Senator. Early in his life he was the Episcopal chaplain up at West Point and he and his wife, Emily Coxe, from a prominent colonial family were quite happy. After several years at West Point, he accepted a call to be the rector of an elite NYC parish. And everything in McIlvaine's background - his patrician roots, his somewhat fragile health, his conservative Anglican evangelical theology all were pointing to a comfortable, reclusive life as a scholarly churchman with a wife and four children. But then, it was as if God suddenly got into the act...

In 1831, at the age of 32, he was - much to his surprise - elected the Bishop of Ohio. This was in spite of his unfamiliarity with and his lack of interest in an untamed, unrefined backwoods "outpost" totally foreign to his sensibilities. He, afterwards...one day would write,

"My sinful heart rebelled against it...it was not what I would have chosen....Ohio!....."

But he accepted this assignment as a good churchman as the will of God for his life and he went on to serve doggedly for the next forty years....riding in his vestments along the back roads, baptizing in out of the way towns and villages and preaching through the rural countryside of Ohio....in something of the manner of a 19th century John Wesley.

✓ But to make a long story short, McIlvaine went on to become successful preacher of his time. In the 1860's, President Lincoln asked him to travel over to England as a special envoy during the Civil War. While there he received honorary degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford and became an overseas delegate for the American Bible Society. His travels were quite extensive. In fact, he died in 1873 in a hotel room in Florence...alone and at the age of 74. His last message sent to his wife back in the States just before his death carried the message,

"Tell her....my peace is perfect." His peace was perfect.

In other words, he had gambled on God and he had won. I believe that anyone who sincerely and seriously follows Jesus takes a risk. Maybe that is why so many of us are so anemic in our discipleship. I think we tend to hedge our bets just in case it is all a mirage. And I think that because we do not cast our lot fully with Christ, we never really come to enjoy the peace that Bishop McIlvaine experienced,

That measure of peace that "passes all human understanding...." and that comes from God!

A partial gamble simply will not do, and that is the temptation that plagues us all.

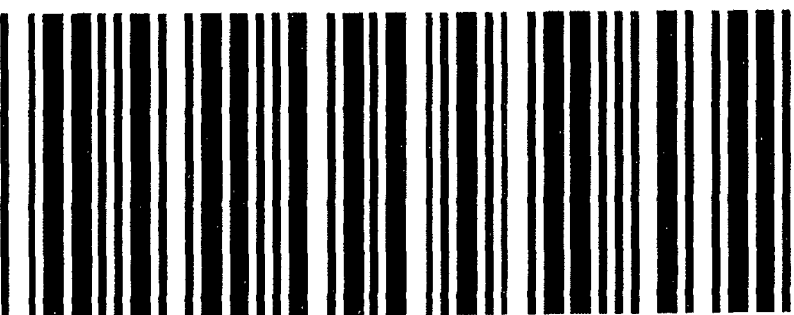
Really...God is the greatest gambler of all. That's what the cross is all about. God gave His Son gambling that by Christ's death you and I would come to know and follow the path that leads to our salvation. It was God, really, who first stepped into the great unknown, creating us with the freedom to accept or to reject that great love that sent Christ into the world. Oh, friend...it is a dangerous thing to gamble. Dangerous for God. For Jesus, too. And even more dangerous is the temptation to so trivialize our lives by taking small everyday risks while ignoring the one great gamble each of us must take at some time and some point and at some place in our lives - to bet our all on God!

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where indecision and uncertainty sometimes have taken hold. Gift us the gift of an adventurous faith that we may risk following in the steps of Your Son, Jesus, in whose name we now pray. Amen.

I happened to read in yesterday's NY Times about a FURRY HAZARD...a SHAGGY BEAR....at the 15th hole of a Golf Course...not far from Bloomingdales, near the edge of White Plains. That could upset one's putting....a bear, down from the Catskills for a weekend of fun in civilization.

Imagine for a moment if that happened at this summer's US Open at Winged Foot...Westchester... a TIGER and a BEAR on the green together....

Which reminds me of a bear story which helps to launch today's sermon...



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