

"GETTING THEIR ATTENTION"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York  
March 16, 1986  
Fifth Sunday in Lent, 1986

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### INTRODUCTION

Everybody in the television advertising field knows what a "zapper" is. A "zapper" is a TV remote control device that allows you to sit in your chair and "zap" the commercial. I have one and I enjoy using it. The zapper presents a challenge to the advertising business. The challenge is to get the viewer's attention before he zaps the commercial. That challenge is not new. Every communicator knows that you've got to get their attention up front or you'll lose them. Even preachers know this.

The man who taught preaching in my seminary days at Boston University was very good at getting attention up front in the sermon. He told us when he pastor of Broadway Congregational Church here in the city that he moved the pulpit to one side and put an overstuffed chair with an ottoman in its place. As the people gathered for Church, he came out in his pajamas and bathrobe and slippers, sat down in that chair, put his feet on the ottoman and started reading the Sunday papers. After a few minutes, he lowered his paper, looked at the congregation and said, "This is the way you prepare for worship". It got their attention. He commended that to us. I've never used it, however.

Nor have I ever emulated the example of Aimee Semple McPherson, who was probably the world's greatest attention-getter. One Sunday this woman evangelist rode onto the stage of the auditorium on a motorcycle, dressed as a Los Angeles policeman. She got off the motorcycle, held up her hand and said to the thousands present, "Stop! You are going to hell!" It got their attention.

### JESUS GOING TO JERUSALEM

It's in that same tradition that Jesus goes to Jerusalem, heads for the Temple, finds the money changers and those selling animals for the sacrifice, makes a whip of cords and drives them out of the Temple, overturns their tables, and pours their money out on the ground. It got their attention. So much so, according to Matthew, Luke and Mark, that in their recording of the cleansing of the Temple, it precipitated His arrest. In those Gospels it comes on Palm Sunday - at the end of His ministry.

But according to John's Gospel, the Cleansing of the Temple comes at the beginning of His ministry. In fact, it comes in the Second Chapter of John and it is not the cause of His arrest. In John there is no human cause for the arrest of Jesus because John believes that Jesus laid down His life voluntarily. He wasn't the victim of circumstances. He was in charge all the way, from beginning to end. That means in John's Gospel that the cleansing of the Temple scene is even more rhetorical. Deliberate. Planned. "Street theater" if you will. It's there to capture attention. And once He gets their attention He makes this point, "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up". They say, "But it took 46 years to build this Temple".

You see, they didn't get it. And so John drives it home. He writes this in case we don't get it either. "He spoke of the Temple of His body". That is, He is the Temple now. He is where God is revealing Himself now. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus will say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father". He is the Temple.

### TEMPLE IMPORTANCE

Jewish religion in those days was tied to the Temple. Judaism was a religion of place. Jerusalem was the Holy

City and the Temple was the holiest place in the Holy City. If you were a Jew in those days there was only one place that you could worship and that was the Temple in Jerusalem. Which is why there were so many pilgrims in Jerusalem, Jews coming from all over the world. They were there making their pilgrimage to the Temple, especially at Passover, the season in which this scene is set. The city is filled with pilgrims, which is why there are so many money changers present. The pilgrims had to buy animal sacrifices for the Temple. That was the Law; they had to do that. And many came with foreign currency, so they had to have money changers. It was legitimate. It was legal. It was all part of the proper functioning of the Temple and in the Temple.

And yet Jesus makes a whip of cords and send the money changers scurrying for cover - upset their tables and says, "You have made My house a house of trade". And Matthew, Mark and Luke, in their version of this scene, put it in stronger language. He says, "You have made My house a den of robbers." He got their attention. And John records it to get ours. Then he makes the point. He's the new Temple. If the Temple is where you come to be reconciled to God, you must go through Jesus because He is the Temple. Jesus is now the standard by which you measure the Temple and the Church.

#### IF JESUS WERE TO COME TO OUR CHURCH

John records this so we will be tempted to ask, what if Jesus were to come to our Church? Well...if you think about it...I don't think I'd volunteer to sell tickets or whatever we sell or promote some days of the year in our Church. I wouldn't feel comfortable if I knew He might be stopping by. A whip of cords can hurt. Ouch. Some of the overturned tables might fall on our toes, smashing them. I wouldn't do that. But we'll argue that we have to do that....that it's all legitimate. You have to sell tickets to a church supper or whatever it is we're having...a Fair or a Picnic. How can you run a Church without a supper? Have you ever known a Methodist Church that didn't eat? Or any Church for that matter. It's just one of the essential rituals of religion. Besides, at some of those tables we may be selling religious stuff as well - books, Bibles, sermons, pins, tapes. And besides - think of how much we do for others with the money we make from Bingo and other things. It's legitimate. Let's hurry right along now with our service, stand for the last hymn, and get on to the job of eating or promoting. Hello somebody.

#### HE GETS OUR ATTENTION

He gets our attention. Oh Jesus. Hallelujah. Jesus comes right into our sanctuary and says, "Destroy this sanctuary. In three days I'll build it up". How can that be? It took us three years to build back there in the mid twenties. Jesus says that He is the Church. As we sing, "The Church's One Foundation Is Jesus Christ, Her Lord". He is saying that He is the standard by which each Church is judged. Which means that we are to worship Him, and if we are not following Him we are not worshipping Him.

Dostoyevsky imagined what it would be like if Jese were to come back to the Church. He put it in the form of a fable, included as one of the chapters in The Brothers Karamazov, entitled, "The Grand Inquisitor". Set in Spain in the days of the Middle Ages of the infamous Spanish Inquisition, Jesus appears at the Cathedral of Seville. A funeral for a little girl is in process. The funeral procession starts up the steps of the Church. Jesus sees it, opens the casket, resurrects the girl, just as He did Lazarus, the pivotal story in the Gospel of John, to reveal that Jesus comes to bring us life - new life.

The Inquisitor sees this and refuses to let Jesus into the Cathedral. He has Him arrested. He confronts Jesus, saying:

"The people don't want you. They couldn't take you. You ask too much of them. They come to the Church with their needs. The Church gives them what they need. They need bread. You said, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'. They want someone to tell them what to believe and what to do. They want authority in their life; You said You came to set them free. They want miracles; You say, 'A generation that desires a sign is a wicked generation'. They want something tangible that will insure them of their salvation. You say, 'Trust in God alone for your salvation' That's asking too much of them, Jesus. They can't take you".

So he won't let Him in the Church. Now lest you think Dostoyevsky is talking just about the Roman Catholic Church of the Spanish Inquisition, let me ask you, what do you think the Church - this Church - is here for? I think you will say the Church is here for comfort and for support, and I believe that, too. That's why Jesus is called "Redeemer and Savior and Friend" because He comforts us and forgives us and strengthens and supports us. That's what we come here for. Praise God. Jesus is our Savior and Friend. He is those things, and He is something more to the Church. That's what John is saying. To the Church He is Lord. He owns it. And when the Church forgets that He does, then He comes as a Disturber.

#### THE DISTURBER

You notice in the Gospels that He goes to the Church twice? Oh, I know He goes to the synagogues and to the Temple, but we're supposed to read that as Church. He goes, in other words, to the religious community twice: in the first instance to the synagogues at Nazareth, and they stone Him and try to cast Him down the hill, and the second time, to the Temple at Jerusalem, and they have Him arrested. What is it about Jesus that is so disturbing to religious people?

We want Him only to be Redeemer, Savior and He keeps coming back to us as Lord, as if after He redeems us and saves us He asks something of us. So the Church that is simply content to sit around and be religious, He comes as the Disturber, upsetting the things that are peripheral and saying, "I am the MAIN thing, the MAIN SHOW. I own the Church. You worship Me by following Me". And that's tough for us to take.

I think John is trying to get those of us who call ourselves Christian to see that Jesus is our problem. There are times when we could say, "Jesus is my Friend", and times when we can say, "Jesus is my Savior", but if we are honest, there are also times when we have to say, "Jesus is my problem"...when we have to wrestle with Him and what He has taught us...when we have to come to terms with it...when we have to face the fact that not only has He done something for us, He asks something from us. That's my problem. That's your problem.

Wasn't it Mark Twain who was once asked if he had trouble with those passages in the Bible that he couldn't understand. And he said, "no...I have trouble with those passages in the Bible that I do understand." And they're there, you know. Like forgiving your enemies, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, feeding the hungry - all those deeds of love and compassion and service that I'm called to perform as a person in this world that is crying out in need. Because those are the persons that Jesus cared about and

and Jesus told His followers that they now must care for the people that He loved. Those passages are a problem for me, not because I don't understand them, but because I do understand them. Oh, Jesus...you ask so much because loving You with all our hearts and minds means doing Your will when we would rather follow our own.

JESUS: MY PROBLEM AND YOURS, TOO

And I'll tell you another one that really gets me. What He said about material things and faith...that if you really have faith you could let all that stuff go and just trust God the way He did.

You know...the older I get, the more I care about material things and the more material things I have, the more anxious I am about my future, and the more anxious I become about my future, the more paltry I see my faith is. I wasn't like that when I was young. I didn't worry about tomorrow when I was young. I didn't worry about tomorrow because I didn't have any money, any savings, and didn't own very much. I was poor when I was young. I had nothing to lose. Besides, who thinks about the future when they're in their twenties? Nobody who is young worries about their retirement. They can read the story of The Rich Young Ruler who comes to Jesus and asks, "Jesus...what is the secret of life?" And Jesus says, "Sell all that you have and come, follow Me." And they can read that story and say, "Right on, Jesus. Give it to 'em...sock it to 'em". I tell you, when you are older, you read that story differently. Why? Because when you read that story, that person is you!

Jesus is my Savior, and Jesus is my Friend, but I tell you, there are times when Jesus is my Problem, when He comes storming into my life, upsetting things that are peripheral and saying, "I am supposed to be the Center". "So who are you worshipping?" "Who is really Lord in your life?" He asks. "Destroy all of these things in your life and in three days I'll raise them up. Get rid of these things" He says, "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life". "Not all of this stuff...trust Me." You see, He's my problem. He reminds me that what should be peripheral in my life over the years has become the center in my life. Amen!

STORY OF A PAINTING

I close with a story of a painting. Back when I first started out in the ministry I came across a painting of Salvadore Dali's of Christ on the Cross. It's a powerful painting, stark and disturbing to me. I loved it. One day I bought a copy of it from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had it framed, put it up in my office here at the Church when it use to be on the fourth floor. I was young then, late twenties. But apparently it disturbed the people who came in to see me. So I took it down and put up a Currier and Ives print of Wesley preaching on his father's grave at Epworth. That was easier to take apparently. Anyway I took the painting to the apartment and put it right there in the living room. People stopped coming over to see me, or if they did come, they sat with their backs to the painting. So I put it in the bed room. One day my wife said, "Get that out of here". So I packed it up. I put it somewhere in one of the back closets and I think it is still there.

And I've thought about that. Sometimes I thin....oh well, perhaps it was just bad art. I should never have bought it in the first place. But I own it now, and I can't get rid of it. I mean you can't put Jesus out for the White Elephant table at the Fair or give it to Goodwill or the Salvation Army - not if you're a preacher. And other times I think, maybe it's good art. Maybe it's too good, too engaging. It draws you into the picture. It makes demands of the persons who view the painting.

I don't know. I don't know if it's good art or bad art. All I know is that I wish I hadn't bought it. But it's mine. It's my problem. I don't want it, but neither can I get rid of it. This Jesus, you see, is my problem. And I wonder about the journey that painting has taken. Does it say something about me, or you, and Jesus? The painting has gone from the place I work, then to the place where I live, to the place where I won't have to see it. And what is central becomes peripheral. And what should be peripheral, like my security, becomes central. When that happens, sometimes Jesus has to come BARGING into our lives...upsetting things - in our work, in our Church, in our homes, trying to get our attention, so that we will get our priorities straight and somehow get things right - for Him.

CLOSING Holy Week approaches. And the Christ that we will be thinking about in these coming days makes great demands upon us. Schedules must be cleared and priority given to our spiritual concerns and convictions. God grant each of us the strength to respond, and to follow Him as He comes into the City - into our City - once again in order to gain our attention and seek our response. Amen. Amen.

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