

"HE ASKED FOR ALMS"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
Second Sunday After Christmas
January 5, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes in life we lose our perspective. Take for example the story about a little country Church that held a revival. The congregation wanted some souls to be saved, so it invited three ministers to come and preach three sermons three nights in a row. That's a lot of preaching for just one night and these services lasted three nights.

After each such worship, the same host family would feed the preachers. On the first night the three ministers were fed fried chicken. That always goes over well with preachers. On the second night the meal was baked chicken. And on the third night the meal was to be broiled chicken with mushrooms. The hostess asked her husband to go out into the timber and try to find some fresh mushrooms. He went out and found enough mushrooms for the meal. But then, just about the time the guests were to arrive, the husband remarked that he wasn't 100% sure the mushrooms were any good.

Too late to fix anything different, yet not wanting to serve a bad meal, they both had an idea. They would use their dog, Spot, as a guinea pig. If the dish of chicken and mushrooms did not make Spot sick, then surely the preachers would survive. Under their watchful eyes, Spot ate a hearty dish. After he finished, he licked his mouth, went to the back yard and laid down under a shade tree and went to sleep. He almost seemed to have a smile on his face. They knew the dish was fine.

The preachers came, gave the blessing and ate well. The couple's son came rushing into the house about the time for the dessert and exclaimed in a loud voice, "Spot's dead". The couple jumped up from the table, threw the three preachers into the pick-up truck and rushed them to the county hospital and told all what happened.

The hospital staff pumped preacher number one's stomach. They pumped preacher number two's stomach. Just when they were preparing to pump the stomach of the third preacher, the little boy came through the hospital corridor. He walked over to his mother and father, his head down, and in a low voice he cried, "And, mom, the car didn't even stop!"

Now I guarantee that if that same event happened in my home, more remorse would have been shown for the poor dog. But the truth of the matter is that we often do lose our perspective. We often fail to listen, to hear all the facts.

A BETTER KNOWN STORY

Let's take a close look at today's reading from the Scripture. This is one of the better known stories in the New Testament. Pentecost had come and gone and the Spirit of God was upon the hearts of the disciples. Peter and John were going about their regular religious routine. They were going to the temple to pray. They were stopped on their way by a man who had been lame for 40 years. He asked them for money. Peter looked at him and said,

"I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk...."

Peter took the man by the right hand and he went into the temple with them, walking...and leaping...and praising God. He had been healed!

Now, if we read the Bible carefully, we will find several instances where God's power is shown by simply knowing the proper "name". "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, WALK." said Peter. And all we can say with certainty about this miracle is that the very name of Jesus was enough for the healing.

But again, this is a story that clearly shows a wrong perspective.

A STORY ABOUT GOD This is not just a story about a lame man who began to walk. This is not just a story about two disciples who believed in the power of a certain name. No...such things are really secondary issues to the real point of this story.

First and foremost, this is a story about God. A name, any name, has no power without God. A disciples, even Peter, has no power without God. There is no mending, no healing, no miracle without God. There isn't even a true Messiah without God. There is no death on the cross without God. There is no empty tomb without God. There is no resurrection with God. There is no coming down of the Spirit without God. There is no power of the disciples without God. All there is without God is a crippled and lame man. This is a story about God. Believe it. The Trinitarian God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is God's story...God's healing...God's miracle. Give Him the glory, the praise, the credit. Peter, John and this lame man are but actors on a stage portraying God's story.

The crippled man did the same sort of thing you and I have done. He lost his perspective. The story reads,

"Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked for alms."

The man asked for money. All his life, he had asked for money. Somewhere along the line he had forgotten that there could be something else to ask for: things like wholeness of spirit, and wholeness of body.

And Peter gave him something that was not asked for. The lame man asked for money. Peter gave him walking, leaping, praising. Think of it. Peter gave him wholeness...a reason to live and a reason to be thankful. Peter gave this man not simply a restored and healthy body. Peter gave him God! This was a new perspective for the man. And so he did what any of us would have done. He began to talk. He began to leap. He began to praise. He began to praise God. When was the last time you praised God?

ATTENTION UPON GOD This story helps us focus our attention upon God. Don't get lost in wondering how the man was healed. Simply accept the fact that somehow he got up. Don't be put to shame by the fact that Peter's faith is more than your faith. Simply accept the fact that faith brings wholeness. Still again, don't go around too much and for too long walking and leaping and praising. There's surely a time for such things, but there's also a time for something more important. And you may ask, "What could possibly be more important...than walking and leaping and praising?"

Here's what's important. Here is God's story. Here is the right perspective. It is God who comes into the lameness of your life and my life and declares that it doesn't have to be this way any more!

We're not simply talking about a physical ailment here. We're also talking about those deceptions we've kept hidden to ourselves. We're talking about years of holding a resentment. We're talking about the excuses we've used for being sick or angry. We're talking about the injustice of our self-declared, justifiable gossip. We're talking about the hurt we feel when someone didn't accurately read our mind. We're talking about the you and the me that we haven't become, because we've expected someone else to change instead of ourselves. We're talking about all the times we've asked God for "silver and gold" because we were afraid to ask Him for what we really needed and wanted - to be made whole.

When the Spirit of God descended upon this world, a few of the people began to gain a new perspective, born again, if you will. Tennyson writes in his Ulysses:

"'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...
Tho' much is taken...much abides."

"Silver and gold" will not change the inside of us. Just re-read any part of any history recorded anywhere. We don't change much because of them. We aren't often healed. And it's seldom that we ever walk and leap and praise. But when we do, it's because we've heard an old message in a new way. I hope and pray that each one of us will hear the old message of God's love in a new way in the days ahead that will make us walk and leap and praise His name. It's a new year. With it comes some glorious opportunities - new experiences, new friendships, new challenges. But undergirding all these is the chance to hear the old message of faith, hope and love in a new way.

CLOSING G. K. Chesterton once contrasted The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam with the Gospel of Christ. Let me share it with you.

"Christ" he says, "made wine not a medicine but a sacrament, while Omar made it not a sacrament but a medicine. Omar drinks to drown his sorrow, Christ to celebrate His joy! Omar says, 'Drink, for you know not whence you came nor why. Drink, for you know not whence you go, nor where. Drink, because the stars are cruel and the world is as idle as a humming top. Drink, because there is nothing worth trusting, nothing worth fighting for.'

"Christ, by contrast says, 'Drink, for the whole world is as red as this wine, with the crimson of love and wrath of God. Drink, for the trumpets for blowing for battle, and this is the stirrup cup. Drink, for this is My Blood of the New Testament which is shed for you. Drink, for I know of whence you come and why. Drink, for I know of whence you go and where."

Communion is celebrated today - the joyful feast of the people of God. It is God's way of coming inside. I do not know you the way you know yourself. I do not know you the way God knows you inside and out. But what I do know is this and I believe it with all of my heart: when you come to the Lord's Table this hour with your needs, your wants, your hurts - it is God who comes into the lameness of your life and declares that it doesn't have to be this way any more!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to your presence and nearness in these moments, O God. And speak to each of us the word we need to hear. On this first Sunday of a new year, help us to be willing to let go of the past, and with faith in our hearts and in You, look to the future...to the days of a new year.

Some of us are held by inner chains, help us to break them. Some of us are weighed down with hurts and heartaches in the past, set us free with your Spirit to lead us and guide us. Some of us are held captive by a past that at times we really don't want to let go of. Fill us with your Holy Spirit. Help us to "tap" the power that is there...

Heal us. Help us. Melt us and mold us. Fill us and use us....that we may walk and leap and praise. All in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, in whom we see life's highest hope and its deepest meaning.

ANTHEM: "At the River"

"Shall we gather by the river, where bright angels feet have trod, with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God. Yes, we'll gather by the river, the beautiful river, gather with the saints by the river that flows by the throne of God. Soon we'll reach the shining river, soon our pilgrimage will cease, soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace."

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Wednesdays at 6:15 pm in the downstairs Choir Room.

A YEAR WITH THE BIBLE

Copies of the pamphlet, "A Year With the Bible" are available on the table in the Russell Room. Take a copy with you.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Education Committee will meet on Thursday evening at 7 pm in the Russell Room.

PICK UP YOUR COPY

Be sure to pick up your copy of the January issue of our parish news sheet, "A Word In Edgeways." Copies are by the door in the narthex as well as on the table in the downstairs Russell Room.

"HOUNDS OF HEAVEN"

The "Hounds of Heaven" study group will resume its regular Tuesday evening sessions this coming Tuesday, January 7th. The group meets at 6:30 in Fellowship Hall. George Leopold serves as leader and new friends are always welcome.

PLEDGE CARDS STILL BEING RECEIVED

Pledge cards are still being received in the Church office. To date, 199 pledges have been gratefully received toward the 1986 budget goal of 225 pledges and \$92,000.

WEEKLY ENVELOPE BOXES AVAILABLE

Boxes of 1986 weekly offering envelopes for those who requested them are on a table in the rear of the Russell Room.

A JANUARY RUMMAGE SALE

A January Rummage Sale is "in the works" for Saturday, January 25th. Contact Dianne Keller at 876-2307 (evenings) if you're free to lend a hand with the many preparations.

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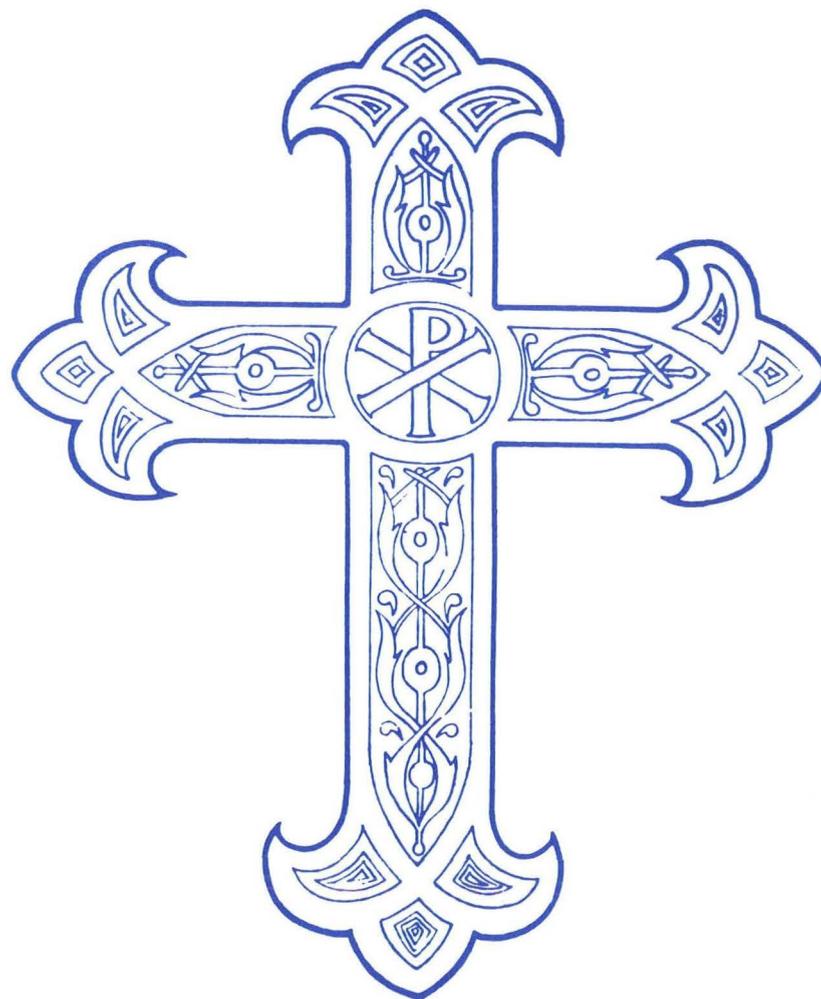
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