

"HOPE FOR THOSE WHOM LIFE HAS CHEATED"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 29, 1995**

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INTRODUCTION

According to Victor Borge, the composer George Bizet was the original "hard-luck" man. You and I have lived long enough to know that there are people like that....people who are always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Apparently Bizet was like that. He once stayed up night after night...for weeks on end...to complete an opera by the given deadline only to find out afterwards that the entire production had been postponed for a year. We're told that there was the time he composed a symphony and then misplaced the entire manuscript before anyone could play one note of it. Then, too, there was the time that he entered a contest with only one other competitor and came in second. And once he went to visit his girl friend and tapped on her window at the precise moment her mother was emptying a chamber-pot from the room directly above his head. For some people, life...just...isn't fair, is it?

There was a man over here in New Jersey by the name of Micofsky....John Micofsky....who was convinced he would be better off once he separated from his wife. His dream came true on January 20th, 1993 when his divorce from Mary Ann Kulpa was finalized. The very next day....January 21st....would you believe this that she claimed the ten million, two hundred thousand dollar jackpot in the New Jersey Pick-Six Lottery. When the press asked about John Micofsky's condition, Attorney Thomas Kline spoke for his client, saying:

"He's very upset...every upset. I think that's the word I would use to describe how he's feeling".

DEVELOPMENT

I think we can relate to that. Life is not fair. Some people get the gold mine, says a popular song....while others get the shaft.

The English writer, C. S. Lewis, felt that our feeling of revulsion when we see an incident of unfairness occur is a signpost pointing to God. Maybe so. For example, when we see a movie, we want to see justice done. That's what a happy ending is all about. We want to see wrong righted. We want to see the good guy win. And we feel cheated if virtue doesn't have its hour, its victory. Feelings like that are so universal that C. S. Lewis felt that they are evidence that we are created in the image of God.

The Hebrew Bible is obsessed with the idea of the justice of God. Remember Abraham's argument with God concerning Sodom. The Lord had revealed to Abraham that Sodom would be destroyed because of its great wickedness. Abraham would ask rather boldly,

"What if there were fifty righteous people in the city....would you still destroy the city?"

Then Abraham argues God down to ten righteous people, but at the heart of the argument is a question that resounds throughout the entire Old Testament, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" And the answer is affirmed by both the Law and the Prophets that,

"Above all else, God is a righteous and just God!"

When we turn the page and come over into the New Testament, we think of Jesus....and when we do we think of God's mercy and of God's grace. But Jesus, too, affirmed the principle of God's righteousness. Jesus, here in the 18th chapter of Luke's Gospel, tells us about a woman who has a problem. She's a widow and someone is treating her in an unkind and an unjust manner. She goes to a judge who feared neither "God nor man"...and hopes to get some relief, but the judge ignores her plea and turns a deaf ear on her. Some people would have stopped right there, but not this woman! She "rejects the judge's rejection of her" and she hounds him at every opportunity to give her justice and finally...finally this stubborn and obstinate judge gives in and justice prevails.

And then Jesus adds a touch of His own to this parable, asking his listener,

"And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?" He reminds us that God is a just God!

BUT WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT AT TIMES SEEM SO UNJUST

Let's dig in right here and acknowledge

that we live in a world that is sometimes very unjust. We learned early on in our discipleship days that whatever a person sows....that, he or she also reaps. Yes, but the truth of the matter is that we sometimes reap things that we did not sow.

I always admired Arthur Ashe and there was a wonderful article about him in the New York Times in late August which I clipped which had to do with the proposed monument in his memory down in Richmond, Virginia where he grew up. It was entitled, A Monumental Man on Monument Avenue.

Some will remember that US Tennis Champion, Arthur Ashe, underwent heart-by-pass surgery in 1983. At that time, hospitals were not checking blood samples for HIV - the virus that causes AIDS. Through a blood transfusion, Arthur Ashe contracted that much dreaded disease. He did not suspect that he was infected until 1988 when he had to have brain surgery after his right arm became paralyzed. The surgery at that time revealed a parasitic infection that quickly led to the diagnosis of AIDS. Ashe had not planned to reveal his illness until the time came when he would be noticeably changed by the disease physically. But USA TODAY, as I recall, demanded that he confirm or deny the rumor that he had AIDS back in 1992. This tennis star, ranked 7th in the world before he was forced to retire, held a press conference and bravely announced that he was indeed an AIDS victim.

Like anyone else, Arthur Ashe was tempted to aim his rage at God, but he conquered the temptation. Speaking at a College function, in the Fall of 1992, he said something that touched me and which I clipped and share with you. He was speaking to the students about the place that his faith had in his life.

I've had a religious faith....growing up in the South and black and having the church as a focal point in my life. And I was reminded of something that Jesus said on the cross, 'My God, My God...why hast Thou forsaken Me?' Remember.... Jesus was poor and humble and of a despised minority. I wasn't poor in that my father was a policeman, but we certainly were not rich....

And Jesus asked the question, in effect, of WHY must the innocent suffer. And I'm not so innocent....I mean, I'm hardly a perfect human being, but you ask yourself, 'Why me?' and I think, 'Why not me? And why should I be spared what some others have been inflicted with' he continued.

And I have to think of all the good of my life...of having a great wife....and daughter and family and friends...and winning Wimbledon and the US Open and playing for and coaching the Davis Cup Team and getting a free scholarship to UCLA....al kinds of good things. You could also ask about this....'Why me?'....sometimes there are no explanations for things....especially for the bad things."

To me....that's a solid word, an extraordinary testimony. There are no explanations for so many of the bad things that happen....at least no explanation understandable by our limited brains and limited intelligence. But we need to admit that sometimes...many times....innocent people do suffer. Life is...and life can be, at times....very unfair.

SUFFERING CAN BE REDEMPITIVE

But let's move on....to a second insight, a second thought to reflect upon. Sometimes suffering can be redemptive. Not all the time, to be sure. There are events in life that seem to have no redemptive characteristics, at least from our perspective. But there is truth to the expression that,

"What does not kill me makes me a bit stronger..."

You've heard me speak of Dave Dravecky before and to me, this is one of the things that Dave Dravecky has learned in his battle with cancer. You'll perhaps remember that Dravecky was a major league pitcher with the San Francisco Giants. Then he was diagnosed with cancer in his pitching arm. He underwent treatments and after a heroic comeback attempt he lost his arm to the disease. He said this:

"From spending so much time in hospitals, I've learned that when we walk through someone's door who is suffering, we have to respect the sanctity of that room....."

During his frequent stays in the hospitals, Dave has spoken with many other patients. They share their stories and encourage each other. He offers this observation....."that something sacred happens when a person is suffering". It is when persons suffer that they turn to God for assurance, for answers, for comfort and strength. And spending time in hospitals gives persons a lot of time to think about what is really important and to reflect on their lives. Dave Dravecky says,

"God doesn't promise us a life full of mountain-top experiences. We will also experience valleys in our lives as well.....dark valleys...disorienting valleys, valleys of doubt, of depression and of despair....."

Dave Dravecky has learned that God does not give us a map to detour those valleys of life either. But rather God will be with us. He will walk with us...beside us during those valleys. Someone present may need to hear this....

"When we emerge from those experiences, we look back and realize that that is where the growth is. It isn't on the mountaintops above the timeline. It there ...down in the valleys..."

Certainly a wise and helpful analysis of the place of suffering in our lives.

George Matheson, the great poet, developed that same kind of wisdom. You may remember that when Matheson's eyesight vanished, so, too, did his fiancée. Twenty years later he wrote that immortal hymn, "O Love, That Wilt Not Let Me Go". But he also penned some very meaningful words that sometimes have been overlooked. Let me read them to you.

"My God....I have never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses....but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross: but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross. Teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow."

Rather beautiful and moving. "Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.... show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain." Not everyone can thank God for the thorns. Some people are in too much pain. But sometimes the most dreaded situations of life can lead us to a deeper and a more profound relationship with God. There are some of you present who have experienced that in your own life. And that brings us to the final truth which I wish to lift up and leave with you this morning.

JUSTICE WILL BE DONE

And that is that justice will be done. You can mark that one down and underline it. Justice will be done. Write it in indelible ink. Justice will be done. As sure as there is a God, the innocent shall not suffer.

During the last days of the Soviet Empire...I believe it was in Prague...a demonstration occurred that sparked the Czech revolution in November six years ago. Students began chanting to the Communist Party leadership, "You have lost already. You have lost already"....though the ultimate victory was still months away....down the road in the future...one of the young demonstrators cried out, "We know that we can win....this is unstoppable!"

And he was right. There is "something" in this world of ours that is "unstoppable". Call it, if you will, the justice of God. Tell it to any who would oppress God's people. God's justice will prevail. Hold on to it like a piece of driftwood when you are about to sink from the raging floods of life's heartaches. God's justice will prevail. Teach that to your children when it appears that evil is in control, when justice has been denied. God's justice will prevail. Live your life and conduct your business with that as the guiding principle. God's justice will prevail. And when you think of letting go and giving in....and going over to the other side....discipline your thoughts with this sure warning,

"God's justice will prevail. It will prevail!"

There was a bit of poetic justice in something that happened last year in Berlin, Germany. Those of you who follow professional football may remember that the Forty-niners were playing the San Diego Chargers in an exhibition game in Berlin, in the Olympic Stadium. There was, to me, a rather interesting side event to this particular athletic event.

Marty Glickman's seat for the game was in the exact same box that was built for Adolph Hitler to view the 1936 Olympics. Glickman, a broadcaster and one-time world class sprinter, was not allowed to run on the American 400 meter relay team back there in 1936, primarily because of Hitler's hatred of the Jews. But now Hitler is dead, the victim of his own hand and of the evil, insane policies that he fanatically pursued. Now Hitler's former viewing stand was Marty Glickman's viewing stand. Glickman commenting on all of this, remarked:

"It was weird sitting there...it made me remember marching into the stadium and looking up to the box and seeing him there...in the stand, people saluting him....."

Hitler has gone the way that all tyrants will eventually go. Why? Because God's Justice will prevail. One day all of God's people will live in freedom and dignity and justice. You can be sure of that. That is the premise of the Scriptures - both Old and New Testaments. Long ago Abraham asked,

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?" asked Jesus.

Both Abraham and Jesus knew the answer. It may not happen as quickly as we might like it to happen, but it will happen. You can bet your life on that. You can build your life on that. Yes - God's justice will prevail. It's a moral universe, my friend. There's meaning woven into its very fabric. God is a just God!

PRAYER

PASTORAL PRAYER: October 29, 1995

ETERNAL GOD, Our Father, help us in these moments of prayer to forget the style of our dress, our plans for later today, the lust or the loneliness of a Saturday night in this city - and any momentary affliction that would make us more conscious of self than of You - to the end that we may pray with singleness of mind and from the very depths of our being.

LORD, we thank You for all that keeps us believing that our years on earth are full of meaning -

That a knowing, caring and guiding hand is at the helm.
That the resounding fury of the nations is not the final sound.
That love endures...even when tongues have ceased and prophecies have failed.

FOR AGES PAST, and for ages still to come, we thank You.

For the wisdom of Scripture, the means of Grace,
the strong bonds of fellowship within this Church.

For the faith in which we stand.

For the hope that springs eternal from the heart of the universe and fills us with the courage, the hope, the peace and the power that keeps us at it.

WE THANK YOU, LORD!

OUR NAMES AND OUR NEEDS are known to You, Lord, even before we wait on You in our worship. Behind our Sunday clothes and Sunday manners lie some unruly kingdoms of fierce ambition, shameful pride, lusty passion, hurtful prejudice that we hope and pray will never see the light of day.

GIVE TO EACH of us, Lord, an eye for beauty and kindness, an ear for truth, a heart sensitive to those who have been hurt and crushed by life...for those who have never had a chance in life.

AND LET THAT MIND be in us which was in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, that relationships may matter more to us than our possessions, and Your Kingdom count for more than loyalty to the kingdoms of this world.

MOVE IN OUR HEARTS this hour, O God. Disturb us as well as comfort us. And confirm within us the deep certainties we are feeling. Send us out from here with that "right spirit within us". For we offer our prayers in deep faith and total trust, aware that You are loving and merciful in all Your ways. In the spirit and the strong name of Christ, we pray.

1. Marney Kliever.
2. Coralie Bailey.
3. Alberta Williams.
4. Eric De Freitas.
5. David Herbert.
6. Grace Oldham, mother of Karen.
7. Daisy Herrick.
8. Pertti Tervakallio.
9. Carmen Henriques.

"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 whosoever 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:

- | | | |
|---|-------------|--------------------------------|
| 10. Jerry, husband of
Cynthia Westermann-Clark | 2. Ann Rapp | 3. Dan, brother of Donna Furni |
| 4. _____ | 5. _____ | 6. _____ 7. _____ |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to Phil and _____ 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. Tina Vasan...dether of Phil's father on Friday of this week.

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."

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"What if there were fifty righteous people in the city....would you still destroy the city?"

Then Abraham argues God down to ten righteous people, but at the heart of the argument is a question that resounds throughout the entire Old Testament, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" And the answer is affirmed by both the Law and the Prophets that,

"Above all else, God is a righteous and just God!"

When we turn the page and come over into the New Testament, we think of Jesus....and when we do we think of God's mercy and of God's grace. But Jesus, too, affirmed the principle of God's righteousness. Jesus, here in the 18th chapter of Luke's Gospel, tells us about a woman who has a problem. She's a widow and someone is treating her in an unkind and an unjust manner. She goes to a judge who feared neither "God nor man"...and hopes to get some relief, but the judge ignores her plea and turns a deaf ear on her. Some people would have stopped right there, but not this woman! She "rejects the judge's rejection of her" and she hounds him at every opportunity to give her justice and finally...finally this stubborn and obstinate judge gives in and justice prevails.

And then Jesus adds a touch of His own to this parable, asking his listener,

"And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?" He reminds us that God is a just God!

BUT WE LIVE IN A WORLD THAT AT TIMES SEEM SO UNJUST

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I always admired Arthur Ashe and there was a wonderful article about him in the New York Times in late August which I clipped which had to do with the proposed monument in his memory down in Richmond, Virginia where he grew up. It was entitled, A Monumental Man on Monument Avenue.

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I've had a religious faith....growing up in the South and black and having the church as a focal point in my life. And I was reminded of something that Jesus said on the cross, 'My God, My God...why hast Thou forsaken Me?' Remember.... Jesus was poor and humble and of a despised minority. I wasn't poor in that my father was a policeman, but we certainly were not rich....

And Jesus asked the question, in effect, of WHY must the innocent suffer. And I'm not so innocent....I mean, I'm hardly a perfect human being, but you ask yourself, 'Why me?' and I think, 'Why not me? And why should I be spared what some others have been inflicted with' he continued.

And I have to think of all the good of my life...of having a great wife....and daughter and family and friends...and winning Wimbledon and the US Open and playing for and coaching the Davis Cup Team and getting a free scholarship to UCLA....al kinds of good things. You could also ask about this....'Why me?'....sometimes there are no explanations for things....especially for the bad things."

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"What does not kill me makes me a bit stronger..."

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"It was weird sitting there...it made me remember marching into the stadium and looking up to the box and seeing him there...in the stand, people saluting him....."

Hitler has gone the way that all tyrants will eventually go. Why? Because God's justice will prevail. One day all of God's people will live in freedom and dignity and justice. You can be sure of that. That is the promise of the Scriptures - both Old and New Testaments. Long ago Abraham asked,

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?" asked Jesus.

Both Abraham and Jesus knew the answer. It may not happen as quickly as we might like it to happen, but it will happen. You can bet your life on that. You can build your life on that. Yes - God's justice will prevail. It's a moral universe, my friend. There's meaning woven into its very fabric. God is a just God!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive now, O God, to Your presence and to Your nearness. Wrestle with us, in the deep places of our lives, where doubt and despair sometimes lurk. Increase our faith in You, O God, and in Your eternal purposes. And when we're tempted to feel that life is unfair and that there is no justice, remind us of the Law and the Prophets who declared You to be a righteous and just God. Help us to find meaning in our moments of suffering... help such times to lead us to a deeper and more profound relationship with You. In the name and spirit of Jesus who would remind us that You are a just and a caring God. In His name we pray. Amen.