

"IT'S HARD TO BE NUMBER TWO"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
January 14, 1996

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### INTRODUCTION

One day during the High School lunch hour, Bob Laurent was standing around with a group of guys. Suddenly, the only girl in the entire school who could "steam up" the corneas of Bob's eyes came right up to him and said rather seductively...almost musically..."Hi, Bob". Now Bob wasn't quite ready for this warm greeting and he recalls that the entire left side of his face started twitching and he stuttered out, "Uhhh-hh-h...Hi, Doris".

Moments later the bell rang and Doris moved toward Bob to say goodbye and in so doing she put her hand on his right arm and instinctively...Bob's arm went into a rigid flex and Doris exclaimed,

"Wow....you've really got a muscle there..." Bob quickly replied, "Yeh...well you oughta feel it when I flex!"

With Bob's friends all looking on, he proceeded to take this a step or two further and tightening up his abdomen as solid as he could, he said through clenched teeth (with the bell ringing in the background)...

"C'mon, Dorrie...hit me in the stomach as hard as you want...it won't even hurt me..." And a crowd began to gather....to watch for the next move.

"Are you serious, Bob?" Doris asked. "I can hit you as hard as I want?" "No problem" he replied...with a touch of cockiness in his voice.

Bob thought he caught a wild glimmer in Doris' eye as she reared back, wound up and then buried her fist in his mid-section. She pulled back waiting for him to fold. (And she wasn't the only one.) Bob's friends looked somewhat silly with their mouths open, standing there. Bob looked at Doris as straight as he could with somewhat crossed eyes and repeated, "NO PROBLEM"! Then he politely took his leave, walked around the corner to where his locker was, opened it...and then lost everything he had just had for his lunch! Recalling this incident from his youth, Bob Laurent concludes in his book, A World of Difference,

"I don't believe I've ever really gained anything by trying to impress people....it's a game for losers and as far as I'm concerned...the world can keep it."

### DEVELOPMENT

Is there anyone here today who hasn't wanted to impress someone somewhere along the way? Maybe it was a member of the opposite sex...or perhaps it was your friends. And why talk in the past tense? There are people you and I enjoy impressing right now. Peers on the job. I can tell you that pastors like to impress one another...and I suspect that doctors and lawyers and teachers also like to. Most of us want to impress someone. We want to be recognized as important, special, someone to be reckoned with. It's a universal instinct, isn't it? We like to look good in the eyes of others and what happens, then, when someone comes along who is just a little bit smarter, a little bit more talented...a little bit more attractive than we are? Has that ever happened to anyone here in this gathering? You don't have to raise a hand...just nod your head. I'm sure it has.

You're a soloist in the school choir. You've always gotten all the choice parts...but then a new guy comes into the school and right away you get the feeling that this new classmate is going to be the "star"...and it's tough. Or, perhaps you've worked your way up through the company and you're feeling comfortable, but the company has hired a new "hot-shot MBA"...and you know, she's got all the energy and enthusiasm and the fresh ideas you once had. What do you do when someone comes along who "shines" just a bit brighter than you do?

IT HAPPENED TO JOHN THE BAPTIST

You know this very thing happened to John the Baptist. "Rough-cut" though he was in his animal skins and living on a rather bizarre diet, John was a most successful spokesman for God. He was getting a lot of attention...big crowds gathered wherever he preached, and John did not mince his words. "Repent" he proclaimed, "for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" And people did repent. And they were even baptized. Hundreds. Perhaps thousands. We don't know but we do know that John was enjoying having a significant impact on the religious scene of that day.

And then, one day...while John is out there preaching and baptizing and having all kinds of success, out of the crowd steps Jesus. And John knows. What does he know, you ask? He knows that here is ONE who is gifted in the ways of God far beyond his own crucial gifts. Why John is so impressed by Jesus that he is reluctant to even baptize Him. I wonder how John felt? You know, we've turned Biblical persons into people so holy and so virtuous...remote from our lives...that we don't think of them as having real feelings. Let's face it...it's not easy when you take pride in what you do to be around someone who does it so much better. I wonder how John really felt...way down inside.

E. B. Meyer was a British Baptist preacher known around the world in his day...a great preacher, but then one day he discovered a demon within himself. It happened at a conference where he and another gifted preacher of that day, Campbell Morgan, were both preaching. Morgan was drawing larger crowds than Meyer...Meyer wasn't used to that. How did he deal with this "demon" within?

"The only way I can conquer my feelings" Meyer confessed...."is to pray for Morgan daily...which I do!"

What do you do when someone comes along who shines more brightly than you, yourself do? Do you pray for them? Do you encourage them? I doubt it...most of us let envy and fear and that little "green demon" of jealousy take hold.

THEY'RE GETTING AHEAD OF YOU

Pamela Pettler in her little book, The Joy of Stress, tells us about a young man who one day went berserk in the research library of the University of California at Berkeley. This was in the late sixties. He ran wildly through the quiet library, shouting hysterically at his fellow students, "STOP...STOP...YOU'RE GETTING AHEAD OF ME!" Well, they arrested him. According to Ms. Pettler, this young man's only crime was being born in the wrong decade. He was living in the "laid-back" sixties. It was not until the "stress filled" eighties, she says, that we became obsessed that others might be out there getting ahead of us. She writes,

"Simply stated...people ARE getting ahead of you. All the time. While you're at your desk, people working out at the gym are getting ahead of you. While you're at the

gym, your co-workers are getting ahead of you. If a friend gets a promotion at work, she has gotten ahead of you. If a colleague reads a book you haven't read, he has gotten ahead of you....while you're reading this book," she writes, "EVERYONE is getting ahead of you!"

I'm sure that some present can relate to this. The concept can be applied across the board, anywhere. If you always have to be the best at everything you do, if you have to be the fastest or the smartest or the prettiest...you've got problems. Because sooner or later you're going to run into someone who does it better. You're going to run into someone who is farther along than you are. As someone has put it,

"Just when you start winning the rat race, you run into some faster rats...."

I believe it takes a real man...a real woman...to deal positively with such a situation...to look into the eyes of a potential rival and see not an adversary, but a friend. It takes a really mature person...a person with a real sense of security not to be threatened by the person who "shines" just a little bit brighter.

OUR COMPETITIVE NATURE MAKES IT HARD TO BE NUMBER TWO

Most of us have a pretty healthy competitive nature that makes it difficult for us to be number two. We can see that competitive nature breaking through and revealing itself all the time.

For instance, back in the nineteen-twenties, a famous battle was waged here in our city between the owners of the Chrysler Building and the owners of the Bank of Manhattan Building. Competing architects and owners kept revising their plans to ensure that their structure would be the tallest building in the world. The Bank of Manhattan builders thought they had the thing all wrapped up when they added a lantern and a 50-foot flagpole on their structure, making it the taller of the two structures. However, as soon as the bank was completed, the architect of the Chrysler Building revealed that their building was not yet complete. And a 185 foot spire had been hidden inside the building's fire shaft. And when put into place, the spire made the Chrysler Building the tallest building in the world...for a little while.

When you really come down to it, what difference does it really make who has the tallest building or the best football team in the land, or the prettiest dress at the party? You and I know that it does make a big difference to some people!

There's a fascinating story that comes to us from the days following World War II. Once Hitler was known to be dead, no Nazi was hunted more doggedly than Gestapo Chief, Heinrich Himmler. After German's fall, he and two of his adjutants did their best to "melt away"...disguising themselves as members of the Secret Field Police. Himmler's disguise was a good one...shaving off his mustache and wearing a black eyepatch...but Herr Himmler's vanity proved to be his undoing. He could not bear to dress himself in the uniform of a mere private and chose instead to be a sergeant. Allied forces had instructions to arrest all members of the Secret Field Police, beginning with the rank of sergeant. But for his vanity, Himmler might have escaped but he could not bear being only a private. What difference does it make if you are a private or a sergeant? For some people it makes all the difference in the world. There is that competitive part of our nature that simply does not enjoy being Number Two!

IT TAKES A SPECIAL PERSON NOT TO BE THREATENED WHEN...

And let's admit something else,

and that is that it does take a very special person not to be threatened when someone else comes along who shines a little bit brighter.

Take John the Baptist. He could have reacted entirely differently when Jesus came up to him to be baptized. Why, he could have ignored Jesus - put Him down....shut Him out...ignore Him. You and I have seen such things happen, haven't we? But John the Baptist....John, to me, was a big man...big enough to be supportive of someone who might turn out to be his rival.

John Sculley, former head of Apple Computer, tells about his first encounter with Tom Watson, the man who made IBM into one of the world's great corporations.

Sculley left Pepsi Cola to take the presidency of Apple. It was not an easy transition. During a time of tremendous pressure, Sculley received an invitation from Watson to come to Watson's home. During the weekend, Sculley was most impressed by Watson on many levels, but particularly by his modesty and by how genuinely interested he really was in Apple. Watson seemed confident that Sculley's company would get over their problems. Watson even told Sculley,

"As long as Apple can continue to innovate and hold together the things it believes in, it will pull through."

Sculley later said that it was that word of encouragement that he needed coming from a man he greatly admired.

Yes, it takes a remarkable man or woman to offer encouragement and support to a potential rival. Are we "up" to doing that? Can you offer that word of encouragement to that new kid at school or that new member of your team at work, or that new member of your church who might one day just end shining a bit brighter than you, yourself now do?

OUR FAITH COMES INTO PLAY HERE

You can, I believe, if you are a person of faith, for our faith comes into play here and it tells us two things that can help us in such a situation.

First of all, our faith would remind us that each of us is a person of significant worth. That you and I don't have to prove anything to anybody. Remember that. We are already very special people. We are so important that the very Son of God...this same Jesus who came to John to be baptized....gave His very life for us. That is the first thing our faith would tell us.

And secondly, it tells us that God is a God of abundance. If we do our very best, there is plenty of glory to go around. Remember that. Stephen R. Covey, in his book, Principle - Centered Leadership, talks about people with an abundance mentality and people with a scarcity mentality. People with a scarcity mentality tend to see life as a "finite pie"...in other words, if someone gets a big piece of the pie, it means less for them. People with this scarcity mentality have a tough time sharing recognition, credit, power or profit. They also have a tough time being genuinely happy for the success of other people...even, and sometimes, especially, members of their own family or close friends. Why...it's almost as if something were being taken away from them when someone else receives special recognition or success.

Have you ever seen that happen? I think we all have! You can recognize people with this scarcity mentality by the disparaging remarks they make following someone else's success. Let's face it: it is a sad situation when other people's happiness somehow diminishes your own, but that's the scarcity mentality.

On the other hand, the abundance mentality says that there is enough glory, enough credit, enough honor in this world for everybody - that our God is a God of abundance and not of scarcity. Go back with me momentarily to the first book of the Bible to that haunting story of Cain and Abel. God had regard for Abel's offering, but not for Cain's and Cain is furious. But remember God's words to Cain. God asked Cain why he was so angry and then God asked him that question:

"If you do well...will you not be accepted?"  
(Genesis 4: 7)

CLOSING I think that is God's word to us, too. If you do well, will you not be accepted? Think about it. You and I are not in competition with anyone else. The only competition going on is within our own lives.

It is the competition between darkness and light, anger and joy, envy and love. We need to read the story of John the Baptist very carefully. Even though he had a very special place in the plan of God, he could not be sure who Jesus was. He was walking BY FAITH...even as we are. Remember, how in prison, John even sent a message to Jesus asking if He indeed was the One they had been waiting for. My point is that even though he was uncertain about Jesus, he - John - nevertheless was able to rise above any threat he may have felt to his ministry. He was able to offer encouragement and support to One more talented than he was. Jesus, later on, would say of John: "There has never been a greater man than John, the Baptist". (Matthew 11: 11).

Yes, it does take a special person to rise above the threat of a person more talented, more gifted, more attractive. I wonder...ask yourself: do you have what it takes to do that? Remember, you are a special child of God. So, relax. Go from here...willing to live by faith...to live in the light of that love of an abundant God and do not ever be afraid to share that love with anyone....even that person who may one day be your rival.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your presence and nearness in these quiet moments, O God....that now come at the end of this service. Confirm the feelings and the intentions and resolutions that may be "at work" in our hearts....wrestle with us in those shadowy corners of our lives where indecision and narrowness and jealousy and lack of faith sometimes take hold. Remind us that we are indeed most special in Your sight....all of this in the spirit of Christ we now pray. Amen.

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PRAYER