

"JESUS AND HIS FIRST SERMON"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

A bit of a scandal is brewing in the hallowed halls of learning. Apparently it has to do with the test scores given to our young people. A West Virginia doctor noted some time back that all fifty states are claiming that their students are scoring above average on standardized test scores. Now that, of course, is impossible...for everyone to be above average. And someone has given this scandal a thoughtful name. They're calling it the Lake Wobegon effect. As you know, Lake Wobegon is author Garrison Keillor's mythical town where,

"All the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average."

By definition obviously it is impossible for everyone to be "above average". Average is what most people are. But nobody really wants to admit it.

In a GE survey some time ago, the average person surveyed placed themselves in the 77th percentile. That is their view was that their performance on the job exceeded that of 76 percent of their associates. In fact, only two percent of the respondents placed themselves as below average. Everybody is in the "top half" of the class. Everyone's a star. Interesting...this Lake Wobegon effect.

WHAT HAS JESUS TO DO WITH THIS

carefully...

What has Jesus got to do with this Lake Wobegon effect? Just this and listen

How can I look across this congregation - we who have so much, who are so well-fed, so well-clothed and surrounded by so many of the good things of life - how can I look across this congregation and tell you that Jesus came "to save the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed?" That's not us. We're the winners. We're the stars. We're all above average, aren't we? This is a text you can skip over, preacher. It's not for us; it's for someone else.

Still, it's there and perhaps we ought to stay "tuned" and hear it again,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

What, if anything, is Christ saying to us in these words from Luke's Gospel that He borrowed from Isaiah and then used in His first sermon to the hometown folks.

MAYBE...WE ARE POORER THAN WE THINK

saying "You can say that again". A friend of mine said recently that he's so heavily in debt that he's known as the "Leaning Tower of Visa".

Maybe we are poorer than we think. Someone sitting here may silently be

A secretary lunching in a local restaurant noticed a friend at a nearby table nibbling on a cottage cheese salad. "Trying to lose weight?" she asked. "No" the friend replied, "I'm on a low salary diet". Some of you know all about "low salary diets". But we're not poor....or are we?

Mother Teresa thinks so. She's been in a West Coast hospital recently and her name has been in the news. She was once asked about the "materialism" of the West and she commented (in an article in Time),

"The more you have, the more you are occupied. But the less you have the more free you are. Poverty is for us a freedom. It is a joyful freedom. There is no television here, no this...no that. This is the only fan in the whole house, and it is for the guests. But we are happy!"

She continues,

"I find the rich poorer. Sometimes they are more lonely inside. The hunger for love is much more difficult to fill than the hunger for bread. The real poor know what is joy".

And then when asked about her plans for the future, she offered up this reply,

"I just take one day. Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not come. We have only today to love Jesus."

Is there anyone in this room as rich as Mother Teresa?

A lay leader of a large suburban church stood to give her testimony. It went like this,

"My husband and I had it all....all the good things that our society values. Good jobs, a nice home, vacations in the Bahamas. I now realize though, how shallow and inadequate our faith was. I can remember when I picked out a church for us because it had beautiful chancelliers. But then it happened. Both of us lost our jobs. For over a year we struggled. It was during this time that we both came to know the goodness of God".

Did you hear that...catch that? It was in the midst of their struggle that they discovered the goodness of God! Surely, God's hand was more apparent during the times of plenty. That's not how it works, is it? And this is why Jesus warned us of the dangers of wealth. Wealth deludes us into thinking that our strength is sufficient. At such times we are a bit like General Custer at Little Bighorn.

One of Custer's scouts warned him they were in for a fight. He estimated there were enough Sioux to keep them busy for two or three days. General Custer replied rather smugly, "I guess we'll get through with them in one day!"

He even declined help from the 7th Calvary or the aid of Gatling guns. Well, Custer was right about one thing. One day was all it took. And so it is with us when we think that our resources can carry us through. We are "poorer" than we think. Think about. But let's move on to a second thought.

AND MAYBE...WE ARE NOT AS FREE AS WE THINK

And then maybe...we are not as free as we think.

Bob Bartlett, an arctic explorer, tells about a summer expedition where he

and his party brought together a selection of native birds. These birds were well caged and well cared for during the long voyage across the ocean, but one day a particularly restless bird managed to escape from its cage and took off in flight over the ocean. "Well...that bird is gone...lost" thought the crew. But before the end of that day - much to their surprise - they saw that same bird flying back towards the ship at a rapid pace. Looking spent and somewhat breathless, the bird dropped upon the deck of the ship and "surrendered" itself. It no longer saw the ship as a prison, but as a refuge. The ship was the only way to get across that vast expanse of deep ocean.

Freedom is a bit of a paradox. There comes that time in life when we want to throw off the chains that have bound us...chains of parental supervision, chains of religious instruction and guidance....chains of conventional moral behavior. We want to be free! And that's all a part of the maturing process. But later on we begin to notice a profound hunger for those things that are lasting, things that are good, things that build us up rather than tear us down. And we exercise our greatest act of freedom - the freedom to return home. I think this is the story of the radicals of the sixties and seventies...but to a lesser extent, it is the story of us all.

This is not to say that even at home there are not new boundaries to cross for there are.

An ambitious 40 year old executive from Nashville sat in a seminar in Charlotte, North Carolina. The participants were being challenged in this seminar to view life from a higher plain and to explore new ideas and to expand their horizons. This particular man was becoming increasingly agitated. He had come to the seminar to learn some specific "How To's"...not some abstract philosophy. By the end of the second day, he was ready to pack it in and leave and just chalk up the whole experience on the minus side of the ledger.

But he didn't. He went for a jog instead. He felt the need for some exercise and some time away from the seminar...to work out or work off a bit of tension. He chose a back road near the motel where he was staying.

While jogging along this remote road, he suddenly heard a tremendous growl and barking. The hair on his neck stood on end. There...growing behind a thin wire fence about three feet high was a huge, young and hyper Doberman Pinscher...eyes blazing and teeth bared. The dog was about as high as the fence and without much effort could jump the fence. The man knew he was in a bit of trouble and stood still for a moment to see how he could get safely away.

But then, he reports...an amazing thing happened. The dog barked and barked, jumped up and down and growled and ran back and forth, but did not jump over the skimpy fence. In a flash of insight, the man realized that the dog had been conditioned to stay within the boundary of the fence. Despite his capacity to run and jump for freedom, the dog stayed just where he was, gnashing his teeth and running back and forth in angry circles. The next day the man raised his hand in the seminar and asked to say a few words. He told his story of the encounter with the dog quietly and elegantly. He said,

"In that moment I knew I was just like that dog....."

The man from Nashville had come to see that each of us lives behind self-

imposed fences. He could not be free until he acknowledged that he was a captive. And neither can we. First, we may be poorer than we think. Second, we may not be as free as we think. Move with me to a third point.

MAYBE...WE ARE BLIND AS WELL

Maybe we are blind as well. Marcel Proust once observed,

"The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes".

Once there was a celebrated French writer named Colette. Colette attributed her success as a writer to two words that her mother had constantly repeated to her as she grew up doing farm chores. "Look! Loo!" And with those two words echoing in her ears, she developed her powers of observation. In 1954, Colette died in her beloved Paris during one of the worst thunderstorms the city had ever had and as she lay on her deathbed, she pointed toward the window through which she could see the flashing lightning and the torrential rain and said, "Look! Look!"

Jesus once asked His disciples this question,

"Having eyes, do you not see, and having ears, do you not hear?"

(Mark 8: 18)

The rich man did not see Lazarus at the gate. The Pharisees did not see that their attention to keeping the Law was separating them from the rest of God's children. And even the disciples of Jesus did not see that the Kingdom was not about power but about love and service.

And there are many among us who do not see. Husbands and wives who do not see the needs of their spouses and parents who do not see the loneliness of their children and successful people who do not see that their success has been won at the cost of their values...people whose prejudices blind them from greater truths and other people...church members, too, who are blind to the responsibilities of membership in a church. Blind people everywhere. Until that day when Christ comes into their lives - yes, into our lives - and helps us to see. We may be poorer than we think and not as free as we think and more blind than we thought.

AND WE ARE OPPRESSED

And finally and briefly, a fourth point to think about. We are oppressed. We may be oppressed by our inability to free ourselves from the burden of sin, from things in our past...and anyone who has ever had to struggle with a habit that has resisted breaking, or anyone who has left some good resolutions behind...unkept, or anyone who has been cruel when he could have been kind, or lazy when he should have been industrious, and short-tempered when she should have been patient - any such person knows the oppressive power of sin. And there is only one remedy for such oppression. It is to accept the free and unlimited gift of God's grace.

Wrote the hymn writer,

"Come....every soul by sin oppressed...there's mercy with the Lord!"

Yes, "amazing grace"...and how amazing it is. Grace, I believe, must always come before greatness in the life of any one of us. Christ's word then is for us - for in a very real sense we are the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed. We are those for whom Christ gave His life.

Some of us may prefer to think that Christ died for someone else..not for us. We may be tempted to say, "Who me? I don't need a Saviour!" I'm above average, in the upper-half of the class. But, don't be fooled...dear friend. We all need a Saviour...and those who think they don't may be in even greater need. So be careful and heed His message and put it in that place in your life where you keep the things that are most important...to be taken out and looked at from time to time.

One more thought to share. I've often wondered how the hometown folks felt and reacted when they heard Him offer as His text on that Sabbath long ago,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me. Because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners...and recovery of sight for the blind...and to release the oppressed...to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

We know how they responded. They didn't like it...didn't want to hear it and,

"They rose up and put Him out of their city and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down - headlong!"

"But He passed through them and went away".

But He came back another day...to challenge their hopes, to probe their consciences, to stir their spirits, to allay their fears. He came back, even as He does today.

PRAYER

Move in our hearts, once again, dear Lord. Wrestle with each of us in the deep and dark places of our lives. As we turn the spotlight inward, let its light bring Your cleansing love into our lives. Make us new within. Send us out with courage and conviction, captives of your Love. Amen

"No horse gets anywhere till he is harnessed. No steam or gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. And no life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated and disciplined"

Harry Emerson Fosdick



PARK



AVENUE METHODIST CHURCH

AT 9-6997

106 East Eighty-Sixth Street, New York, New York 10028

Dear Friend,

We'll be holding our **ANNUAL MEETING** on Sunday, the 25th of March. After a light lunch and a bit of birthday cake (we'll be 153 years old), we'll come together around 1:00 pm in the Russell Room. If the speeches are short and all behave, we'll be on our way home by 2:30.

A good turnout always helps to generate enthusiasm and stirs up interest. Let's shoot to have 100 people here for it. Put a hold on this Sunday for the Church and plan to come. All good wishes,

Philip Clarke
Minister