

"LETTING GO OF YOUR BALLOON"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
May 18, 1997

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### INTRODUCTION

A spiritual renewal service was being held in a large cathedral-like Presbyterian Church in Omaha, Nebraska some time ago. As the people came in to the church they were given a balloon filled with helium and were told to release it as some point in the service when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts - perhaps during the singing of a hymn or an anthem or a prayer or even a sermon.

Since they were Presbyterians, they were not free to say "Amen", or "Praise the Lord". Letting go of the balloon would represent praise going up to God and so all through the service, brightly colored balloons were rising up to the ceiling of this cathedral-like church....visual signs of praise to the Lord. But oddly enough, when the service was over, it was noted that over a third of those bright balloons had not been released. Those Presbyterian worshippers either felt no joy or feeling it, could not bring themselves to express it.

### DEVELOPMENT

Now I don't want you to think I'm picking on the Presbyterians. I know of Christians in just about every denomination across the ecclesiastical spectrum who are not able to loosen up and express the joy of their faith. And there's nothing new or extraordinary about that for people are different. People respond in different ways to the same event or to the same set of circumstances.

There are some people who will release their balloon at the slightest provocation. There are others who will look around slowly and cautiously and then perhaps release their balloons when they think it's appropriate. And then, of course, there are those who will hold on to their balloon to the very end. Three kinds of responses. And we can see those differing responses in the persons who witnessed the extraordinary events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost as recorded for us in the Book of Acts, Chapter two.

There we read that the disciples were gathered in one place when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began speaking in foreign languages. And a great crowd gathered to hear what was going on. It was a crowd that consisted of persons from all over the world who had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Jewish festival of Pentecost. People in that crowd were amazed to hear these Christians speaking in a language that they, the listener, could understand...regardless of what their language might be.

And then Peter preached a powerful sermon in which he proclaimed Christ's coming into the world - His death upon the cross and His resurrection from the dead. And then this: three thousand people were added to the rolls of the Church that day. And what a day it was. And that in a nutshell is what happened on that day called Pentecost that we celebrate today. Pentecost - one of the three great days of the Church...the other two being Christmas and Easter.

### SPECTATORS

But not everybody who heard Peter's sermon and the testimony of the disciples were touched and moved by it. In that crowd there were at least three kinds of people. Some of them were mere spectators. We read that three thousand people were added to the rolls of the early Church and surely at least twice that number paused for a moment and then moved on. They were attracted by the spectacle, but were not moved by the Spirit. They did not let go of their balloons. Some people are like that.

They remind me of the shy fellow who had his first date with a young woman who seemed to take things a little faster than he was prepared to. After taking her to the movies, he walked her up to her door. She obviously was expecting a goodnight kiss and as he was about to leave, she closed her eyes and puckered her lips. He said, "Good night, Brenda" and leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. "A little lower...please" she responded. And so he said with a much deeper pitch to his voice, "Good night, Brenda".

Some people are just not ready to move into action. They're not ready to take the plunge. Oh...maybe a toe or perhaps an ankle....but let's not be too hasty. Actually, the majority of people fall into this category and that's why change - even positive change - is so difficult whether it is in society or in the church. A majority of people don't want to change. Most people are comfortable just as they are...they'd rather stick with what they know, even if it's not at all that satisfying....than to take the risk associated with change. As someone has said, "It's takes more than facts to change a person's mind...it takes time!"

In the eyes, of course, of some of the spectators at the first Pentecost, these disciples were a group of "wild-eyed" extremists. They were letting things get out of hand. Fanatics...that's what they were. When you study the "root" of this word, "fanatic", you find it comes from the Latin word, fanuum, which means "temple". It referred to someone so devoted to a particular deity that they lived in the temple of that deity practically all the time. Such people were eventually called "fanatics" - "temple dwellers".

Now few people today want to be thought of as fanatics. Some people shy away from making a commitment to Christ and to His Church for this very reason.... they like the Church, but they just don't want to live there. These people tend to ignore the fact that Jesus was a very worldly man. He loved the synagogue, but He didn't live there....He lived His faith out in the world and that's where we are called to live our faith - out there in the world.

Christ is not asking us to become fanatics, but He does call us to be more than spectators. This is the first group present there at this Festival of Pentecost. The spectators. But let's move on to a second group that was there.

SCOFFERS Then there were the scoffers. These were people who were not afraid to get involved. They simply jumped in on the opposite side. These were those undoubtedly who ridiculed the disciples and said that they were intoxicated. In response, Peter was obliged to point out that it was too early in the day for them to be drunk.

Rather, he said this was the fulfillment of what was spoken by the prophet, Joel, that God's spirit would be poured out on all flesh. I've often wondered and I don't know if Peter made any headway at all with these folks...the scoffers. I doubt it, for there are always people who mock the faith...people who try to break believers through a bit of ridicule and we continually provide them with good ammunition.

There's a group of scholars at work today pouring over ancient Biblical texts with the intention of discerning what is reliable in those texts and what is not. They call themselves The Jesus Seminar. You may have read about them.

People who are not well-grounded in the faith may at times be sorely distressed and uncomfortable with these Jesus scholars. These scholars are expert at pointing out what we have known for at least a hundred years...that the Gospels are so overlaid with the thinking of the First Century church that the original likeness of Jesus is somewhat difficult to recover. All reputable New Testament scholars agree on that.

In the Gospels we do not so much see Jesus directly...rather we see Him as He impressed and influenced those first disciples and followers. We have to look at Him through their eyes and understand Him in terms of what He did to them. But, even taking the indirect nature of their testimony into account, that record is astounding. Jesus had an undeniable impact on the people who encountered Him. He literally changed the lives of people.

Now...whose face was it that "launched a thousand ships"? Raise a hand if you know. Helen of Troy. She was so beautiful that the Greeks and the Trojans fought a long war because of her. Yet, read Homer's Iliad through and you will find no direct description of what Helen actually looked like. Scarcely a single word! All we know about Helen's beauty is put in terms of the way she affected people around her. Her beauty was so great that she apparently caused a lot of civic turmoil.

As Harry Emerson Fosdick pointed out more than half a century ago in his wonderful book, What Is Vital In Religion, that is the way that the greatness of Jesus is presented in the four Gospels....in terms of what He did to people.

"His influence" he writes...."fell on Peter, James and John, plain fishermen, or on some woman taken in adultery and see what happened! Reading the Gospels is like watching the sun rise, not by looking at the sun, but by seeing the way it lights up everything it shines upon, transfiguring with glory the commonest bush it touches.

One knows from what happens to the landscape that it cannot be an ordinary lamp. It must be the sun. So one sees Jesus in the Gospels as He transfigures the lives upon whom His influence falls...."

So do not be discouraged or put off by the "nit-picking of the scholars". No one needs to defend Jesus from either the scholars or the scoffers. His touch of divinity is everywhere present in the record left by men and women who encountered Him and whose lives He touched. And ever more remarkable, to my way of thinking, than the impact He had on the lives of people in the First Century is the impact Christ is still have on individual lives in our own time, in our own century...more than 1900 years later.

How many of you remember Pearl Harbor? ...that traumatic day more than fifty years ago...and the outrage that followed in this country....chances are you don't know the name of the pilot who led that attack on Pearl Harbor. His name was Captain Mitsuo Fuebida. After the war he came to this country to train to be a Christian missionary. And after completing his training here, he went back to preach the Gospel news to his own people. Who would ever have expected such a thing. Christ is still changing lives...even today!

THOSE WHO RESPONDED

Spectators. Scoffers. Both were there on that first Pentecost, but there was also, fortunately, a third group there that day.

There were those who responded to the testimony of the disciples and who then committed themselves to a life of faith. We read that three thousand of them made a decision that day to take on a new way of life. It was a new way of life that would estrange many of them from their families and friends and eventually endanger their own lives, but they let go of their balloons and came forward and followed....followed, yes...even at a great risk. Such changes are...

Time magazine carried an interesting story last August....the account of Thomas Leyden. I doubt if the name means anything to you or if you read the story. I was moved by it. Leyden, apparently, had recently left the neo-Nazi, skinhead lifestyle that had been his passion for 15 years. And even though he now lives with constant threats from his old group, he refuses to go back.

He drifted into the skin-head moved at the age of fifteen, after his parents divorced. Lonely, angry, confused, he was open and vulnerable to the influence of local racist groups. Recruiters look for such a kid, someone who needs to belong, and who needs to channel his anger. Dropping out of school and adopting local skinhead fashions, he would gather with his new friends to drink, swap stories...talk and share ideas. Fighting and beating up on minorities became a regular pastime.

His parents were sickened by his new beliefs and attitude and tried to talk him out of the group. His mother held on to the hope that one day Thomas would return to the values he had learned as a child, but he seemed to fall deeper and deeper into the lifestyle of his new friends. He joined the Marines and began net-working with more neo-Nazis. Tom Metzger, head of the White Aryan Resistance Group, encouraged Tom to recruit other Marines into their organization. Leyden's skinhead activities became too blatant for the Marine Corps to ignore, and so he was discharged from the Marine Corps.

His skinhead friends found him a girl-friend who later became his wife. Her name was Nicole. She was a hardcore racist who encouraged Thomas in his recruiting. Soon he was passing out literature at Junior High Schools and trying to incite fights between black and white students. Nicole, rarely left the house in order to avoid encountering people of other races.

But slowly....Thomas' eyes began to open to the evil he was living in. His skinhead friends joked about killing cops. His brother was a police officer. His friends referred to disabled people as "surplus whites" and Thomas recalled how his own mother suffered with a limp from childhood days because of polio. But the moment that really changed Thomas completely was when he heard his three year old son use a racial insult in reference to a television shoe he liked. Thomas suddenly saw that he was turning his toddler son into a hard-core neo-Nazi and he knew he didn't want that future for his child.

In June of last summer he entered the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and there, he gave up his neo-Nazi life and offered valuable inside information on the skinhead movement. Today he is locked in a custody battle with Nicole for custody of his two boys so he can raise them without the taint of racism. He is living with his mother until he gets his life

back together. She always believe he would come back to the values she had tried to teach him as a growing child.

Thomas Leyden made a radical change in his life. Such changes are always possible. Millions of people across 20 centuries of Christian life have been making changes like that. It begins with a simple decision on the part of a person to no longer be a spectator or a scoffer, but to make and move toward a positive comment to Him who is the Christ - Lord, Savior, Master....whatever word touches you.

CLOSING

In closing this up then, let me ask you where you find yourself this morning. Among the spectators. Some in this congregation are. They show up at special times to enjoy a bit of a "spectacular". Good people, but they have never made a real commitment to the workd of Christ. Thank God, we don't have amny sooffers...unless you include those who stand on the sidelines and criticize those who are doing their best to serve Christ.

What we need in all of our churches - whether they be of the Methodist, or the Lutheran, or the Presbyterian brand....or other parts of Christ's big family.....we need people who are willing to let go of their balloon and join the company of the really committed folks. Where are you this day of Pentecost. To which group do you put yourself in to. Be thinking about and let the spirit of God move you... let it have a "go" in your life. Let loose of your balloon and give it a real "Amen".

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God....as we remember how the Holy Spirit...Your Holy Spirit touched the lives of so many on that first Pentecost that we celebrate this day....setting lives "on f re" for You.....and help us to trust Your power and Your love, remembering always that wherever two or three are gathered together in Your name, that even there you are present to bless, to uphold, to strengthen, to heal...to lift and to love....in the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

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PRAYER

VISITORS: Sunday, June 9, 1996

Weather: Hot. Sunny - 85 degrees. Puerto Rican Parade Day.

Attendance: 140 Adults and 20 children. TOTAL: 160.

25 YEAR COMPARISION FIGURES

1995: 142	1987: 110	1978: 83
1994: 148	1986: 117	1977: 63
1993: 186	1985: 127	1976: 50
1992: 172	1984: 154	1975: 66
1991: 144	1983: 140	1974: 45
1990: 152	1982: 150	1973: 50
1989: 149	1981: 139	1972: 77
1988: 129	1980: 110	1971: 61
	1979: 120	

I. IT Mr. and Mrs. Bruce (Beth) DiCicco 31-60 33rd Street #40  
Astoria, NY 11106  
Telephone:

Pink card. Signed guest book. Greeted at door by PC and Nicole Miller. PC remembers him as tall..6'2 plus. In their early thirties.

II. OT. Mrs. Nona Zillman P.O. Box 109  
Winona, MS 38907

Out of town note. Called at 10 am re: hour of worship. PC greeted her at 10:30 in sanctuary. Here in the city in business. Back home active in UM Church.

III. IT Mr. and Mrs. Joey (Lisa) Ford no address insufficient information

Pink card. Greeted by PC at door as they were leaving. African-American young copule.

IV. OT. J. Eduardo Sylvester San Paulo  
Brazil

Out of town. Here in city for a visit. Methodist from Sao Paulo. Staying at the Beacon Hotel, New York City.

(cont.)

BACK AGAIN:

1. Chris Haridopolis (coffee hour)
2. Millicent Demini
3. Bill Swenson
4. Lillie Rkein
5. Luis and Yolanda Souza
6. Oliver Bloomfield
7. Deborah Wheeler
8. Kristen Johnson
9. Charles and Dorothy Scardino
10. Rachel Bard Henry
11. Maria Chona Denusta
12. Mrs. Clara Reinnam 124 East 91 Street #3D  
New York, NY 10128

Last time here 2 weeks ago. First started coming with Charlotte Juchter. PC will send her a note.

BAPTISM REQUEST:

Chona and family. July 13th, 1996 (Saturday)  
674-5151 x 746 PC to call her.

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