

"LIFE IN THE FAMILY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 19, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

One of our church publications carried a story recently about a rather strange event that took place at the Porter's Chapel Church near Erwin, North Carolina. It seems the devil was out front picketing the church one Sunday morning - startling sinners, frightening small children and exhorting all passers-by to stay away from the church.

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It later turned out that the "devil" behind all of this was actually the young pastor of the church in disguise. He told the authorities that he engineered the masquerade as an experiment in reverse psychology. He said something like this...."Now if you tell people not to do something, then they're going to do it".

And so the Reverend Floyd S. Turlington and a Sunday School teacher took turns playing the devil. What Turlington had not counted on was the panic that resulted. Switchboards at the Sheriff's Office and the Erwin Police Department flashed with frantic calls. However, there was one amusing sidelight. One passing motorist stopped his car and said to the pastor, dressed up as the devil.

"I just wanted to shake the devil's hand. You see, I've been married to his sister for a long time...."

We can appreciate that poor man's predicament. Living with the devil's sister. Some people can be so hard to live with. They can be so mean, but fortunately they're in the minority. On the other hand, there are other folks we just can't live without! "Life in the Family" is the title of today's sermon.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT

Let me tell you about Russell Dalby. He worked on an assembly line for a good many years. His job was very monotonous. The work was long and sometimes boring and often tiring. What made it all bearable, he said, was the people he worked with day in and day out. They became his friends. He experienced a sense of real community with the

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Russell Dalby told of his personal tragedies and the time he was embarrassed to go back to work. However, when he returned to work he discovered that his fellow workers were right there for him. One special co-worker by the name of Hazel helped him through some difficult times in his life, encouraging him when he was ready to give up. Now retired, he misses his co-workers a lot and still remembers their names, their birthdays. A special part of his life.

The relationships we have with other people are very important to us. As we begin a new season, we might think for a moment about some of the people we work with and how important they are to us. Let them know it. We might also give some thought to the relationships we have with each other in this church. The Church at its best is a community of love and of healing with persons helping one another, building each other up, praying for one another and sharing fellowship together.

SOMEBODY HAS TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Since we do not live in a perfect world, there are times when there are strains placed upon our relationships. Sometimes, unfortunately, it happens in a church. Harsh words get spoken. Feelings get bruised. A long-lasting friendship is threatened. It's at this point that Jesus offers us a practical suggestion or two.

The first suggestion is this: somebody has to take the first step. Jesus once said,

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A play titled "Construction" opens with a group of people gathered in an "other-world" kind of place. The actors do not know where they are, how they got there or what they're supposed to do. Someone asks, "Where are we?" Another joins in, "Why are we in this place?" Still, another asks, "What is our purpose in being here....what are we supposed to do?"

In the midst of all those unanswered questions, one of the actors notices some building materials. They come to the conclusion they were brought to this particular place to build something. But no one knows what. One of them wants to build a swimming pool, another wants to build a clubhouse.

Just then someone observes, "We're not alone here....other people are around" They pause to hear the sounds of other people off in the distance.

"We don't know who these others are or what they are like or what they are up to", one of them says with panic in her voice, "And we can't afford to take a chance. This is risky".

The group decides that they need a wall to protect themselves from these other unknown people. As they discuss the idea of building a wall to protect themselves, they become more frightened. And with urgency they begin to build a formidable barrier!

After they have worked on the wall for some time, they look up one day to see a stranger approaching them. He tells them he is a builder. This stranger has in his possession the blueprints that will show them what they are supposed

to build with the materials that have been provided. This stranger tells them they have it all wrong. They're not supposed to build a wall around themselves. What they are supposed to be building is a bridge - a bridge to bring people together, not a wall to shut them out. Walls or bridges...which will it be?

There are times when we need to build bridges. They are times when we need to climb walls. There are times when we need to take the first step, and there is a profound reason why this is true. The first step...even though it's risky.

WE NEED EACH OTHER We need each other. It's true in our families. It's true on the job. It's true in the life of the church family, too. Yes, it's true in the world family. Maxie Dunnam tells this story.

It was February 24, 1989. One hundred and fifty-five persons were flying home from Australia. A cargo door failed. A huge hole was ripped open in the side of the plane. Nine persons perished when the pressurized air inside the plane blew them into the thin, rarefied air at 24,000 feet.

Kerry Lappan, age 31, tells of sitting by the fateful hole that day. After the plane was safely on the ground, she described to reporters what happened.

"The whole plane is falling to pieces and I thought, 'This is it'....'There's this man in front of me."

Kerry did not know the man, but in her own words,

"He was...a wonderful, wonderful man. He held my hand" she said..."He comforted me. It was so loving and so comforting to have someone's hand to hold...."

In truth, that is what the church is all about. There are times when our world is coming apart...torn apart...and we need someone to hold our hand...and to listen to us and to pray for us....to be there for us.

The church at its best, I feel, fosters a sense of community among people who come from different backgrounds and who may even hold different beliefs. The people on that airplane that day did not choose each other. We in the church did not choose each other, but once someone enters our fellowship, this family, it is our responsibility to be a caring community. It's always comforting to have someone's hand to hold. We need one another. That is why we take the first step toward reconciliation. But there is one more matter to be considered in the remaining moments.

AS WE SEEK RECONCILIATION, JESUS IS IN OUR MIDST

When we earnestly seek reconciliation, Jesus is in our midst. I love the way this passage of Scripture concerning controversy in the church or wherever ends. The verse happens to be one of my favorites.

"For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them...."
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It's like this. A man is said to have lived in constant fear and bitterness for twenty-eight years. He could not sleep and would often wake up in the

middle of the night, screaming in a cold sweat. He had not laughed nor smiled for years. One day he told his pastor about what had happened to him many years ago while serving his country overseas during World War II. He had been a young officer and had charge for the lives of 33 men. They became trapped by enemy gunfire. With deep sorrow in his eyes, the man prayed desperately that God would somehow get them out of this mess. But it was not to be. Two by two, he sent his men out only to watch them get gunned down. In the early morning hours he was able to escape with six men, four of whom were seriously wounded. But from that experience, he felt that God was very far from him and as a result his heart was filled with bitterness, with guilt and often with rage.

One day his minister said something like this to him,

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And together they knelt in his study and quietly prayed for the Christ spirit to go back and walk through those twenty-eight years that day with him. "Please, Lord" prayed the pastor, "Please draw out the hurt and the hate and the sorrow and set this man free". He even asked that "peaceful sleep" be one of the evidences of God's healing work.

Some time the following week, the man and the minister met again and this time there was a sparkle and a brightness on his face. Something had happened and he said to his minister,

"You know ever since we met I've slept soundly through the night and have awakened with a hymn and a psalm in my mind, and I'm happy....happy for the first time in twenty-eight years".

It does happen. It can happen. There is healing in the power of prayer and my guess would be that his willingness to open himself up and to share it with his pastor and to pray together...it got the process started. There is healing in prayer. There is also healing in Christian fellowship...in Christian listening and sharing in Christian love. You've seen it happen, as I have. When we are in a proper relationship with one another, we sense that "someone" else is there as well. "Where two or three are gathered together in My name..."

CLOSING In her book, Up With Worship, Anne Ortlund puts it this way,

"Every congregation has a choice to be one of two things. You can choose to be a bag of marbles, single units that don't affect each other in collision. On Sunday morning you can choose to go to church or to sleep in. Who really cares whether there are 192 or 193 marbles in a bag?

Or, you can choose to be a bag of grapes. The juices begin to mingle and there is no way to extricate yourselves if you tried. Each is part of all. Part of the fragrance. Part of the 'stuff'".

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PRAYER Help us, O God, to remember these lessons about life in the family of Christ. Wrestle with each of us until we are conquered by Your grace. Send us out of here with a song in our hearts...let our juices mingle and add sparkle to all of life. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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(Matthew 18:20)

It's like this. A man is said to have lived in constant fear and bitterness for twenty-eight years. He could not sleep and would often wake up in the

middle of the night, screaming in a cold sweat. He had not laughed nor smiled for years. One day he told his pastor about what had happened to him many years ago while serving his country overseas during World War II. He had been a young officer and had charge for the lives of 33 men. They became trapped by enemy gunfire. With deep sorrow in his eyes, the man prayed desperately that God would somehow get them out of this mess. But it was not to be. Two by two, he sent his men out only to watch them get gunned down. In the early morning hours he was able to escape with six men, four of whom were seriously wounded. But from that experience, he felt that God was very far from him and as a result his heart was filled with bitterness, with guilt and often with rage.

One day his minister said something like this to him,

"Did you know that Christ...God's Son...who lives in the 'Eternal Now' can enter that old painful memory and heal it....touch it so that it will no longer control you?"

And together they knelt in his study and quietly prayed for the Christ spirit to go back and walk through those twenty-eight years that day with him. "Please, Lord" prayed the pastor, "Please draw out the hurt and the hate and the sorrow and set this man free". He even asked that "peaceful sleep" be one of the evidences of God's healing work.

Some time the following week, the man and the minister met again and this time there was a sparkle and a brightness on his face. Something had happened and he said to his minister,

"You know ever since we met I've slept soundly through the night and have awakened with a hymn and a psalm in my mind, and I'm happy....happy for the first time in twenty-eight years".

It does happen. It can happen. There is healing in the power of prayer and my guess would be that his willingness to open himself up and to share it with his pastor and to pray together...it got the process started. There is healing in prayer. There is also healing in Christian fellowship...in Christian listening and sharing in Christian love. You've seen it happen, as I have. When we are in a proper relationship with one another, we sense that "someone" else is there as well.

CLOSING

In her book, Up With Worship, Anne Ortlund puts it this way,

"Every congregation has a choice to be one of two things. You can choose to be a bag of marbles, single units that don't affect each other in collision. On Sunday morning you can choose to go to church or to sleep in. Who really cares whether there are 192 or 193 marbles in a bag?

Or, you can choose to be a bag of grapes. The juices begin to mingle and there is no way to extricate yourselves if you tried. Each is part of all. Part of the fragrance. Part of the 'stuff'".

I like that analogy. Grapes or marbles? Think about it.

If we understand ourselves to be like grapes, then we will appreciate the teaching of Christ that "YES"...He is the vine! We draw our life from Him. We are His people and His family. And that is why when there is strife or tension or disagreement in the family, someone must take the first step. Someone must climb the wall and someone must build the bridge...no walls. We need one another. And more important, we need to know and remember that He is in our midst.

PRAYER Help us, O God, to remember these lessons about life in the family of Christ. Wrestle with each of us until we are conquered by Your grace. Send us out of here with a song in our hearts...let our juices mingle and add sparkle to all of life. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.