

"LIVING IN SPITE HOUSE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 23, 1990

"LIVING IN SPITE HOUSE"

INTRODUCTION

Ron Lee Davis in his book, Mistreated, tells about a millionaire who owned a lot in a very exclusive residential area of a large city. This lot that he owned presented an unusual problem. It was only a couple of yards wide by nearly a hundred feet long. There was really nothing he could do with such an oddly proportioned piece of real estate but sell it to one of his neighbors on either side. He went first to the neighbor on the east side of the lot and asked if he was interested in buying it.

The neighbor said, "Well...only as a favor" and offered him a very low price for it. The millionaire exploded, "Why, that's not even one-tenth of what the lot is worth!"

He stormed out and went to see the neighbor on the west side. To his dismay, this neighbor on the west side bettered the previous offer by only a few dollars.

"Look" this neighbor said smugly, "I've got you over a barrel. You can't sell that lot to anyone else and you can't build on it. So there's my offer. Take it or leave it!"

The millionaire was filled with rage. Within a few days, he hired an architect and a contractor to build one of the strangest houses ever conceived. Only five feet wide and running the full length of his property, his house was little more than a row of tiny rooms, each barely able to accommodate a piece of furniture. The neighbors complained that this bizarre structure would blight the neighborhood, but city officials could find no code or regulation on the books to disallow it.

And when it was finished, the millionaire moved into his uncomfortable and impractical house. And there he stayed until his death. The house, which became known in the neighborhood as "Spite House" still stands as a monument to one man's ill-will, malice, grudge and greed.

DEVELOPMENT

I wonder how many people today are living a part of their lives in "Spite House"? Are you? A couple in Switzerland certainly live there. Let me tell you about them. In a real life parallel to that recent movie, War of the Roses, this couple waged a battle of mayhem. It all began when the husband cancelled one vacation trip too many for his wife. She expressed her disappointment by pouring some bicarbonate of soda into the fish tank, wiping out his rare tropical fish. A long argument followed.

Finally, he grabbed a selection of his wife's diamond jewelry and threw it into the garbage disposal. She responded by flinging all his stereo equipment into the swimming pool. He then doused her \$200,000 ward robe - fur coats, designer gowns and all - with liquid bleach.

Then things really began to go downhill. She poured a gallon of paint all over his \$70,000 Ferrari. So he kicked a hole in her \$180,000 Picasso original she loved. She had just opened the sea cocks of his 38 foot yacht, causing it to sink at its dock when the couple's daughter came home and saw what had been going on. She called the police, but they were powerless to do anything. It

was not illegal for the couple to destroy their own property. Eventually the family lawyer managed to arrange a truce. This sort of thing happens and not just in unhappy marriages. How do we get out of these houses of spite that we get ourselves in to? How do we let go? How do we keep our resentment and our anger from destroying us and hurting innocent lives?

Simon Peter once came up to Jesus and asked Him,

"Lord...how many times must I forgive my brother?
Seven times?"

This is certainly a relevant question. Do I keep submitting myself to someone else's abuse in order to maintain a relationship? For how long? It may be an important question for some present this morning. But more than that I want us to think about a slightly different question and that is: when someone has done me a grievous wrong, why is it necessary for me to forgive and how?

NECESSARY TO FORGIVE FOR THE PEACE OF OUR OWN SOUL

First of all, I believe it is necessary for us

to forgive for the very peace of our own soul.

When we forgive someone, it is not for their sake, but for our own. Comedian Buddy Hackett once said about nurturing resentment that "while you're home sulking, they're out dancing". And there's truth in that. When we say, I'll forgive, but I'll never forget, somehow we think our resentment is hurting the other person, when generally speaking, it is only devouring us.

I know there is something appealing about nurturing resentment. Richard W. DeHaan tells the story of a little boy who had a fight with his brother. As the day passed, he refused to speak to his brother. At bedtime, their mother said,

"Don't you think you should forgive your brother before you go to sleep? The Bible says we 'should not let the sun go down on our wrath'".

After some reflection, the boy replied, "But how can I keep the sun from going down?" I think we all appreciate what he is saying, but the truth is that nurtured resentment always hurts most the one who is nurturing it.

When the poet, Edwin Markham reached the age of retirement, he discovered that his banker had defrauded him. Markham was ready to retire but was penniless. He was also bitter. He was so bitter that he could no longer write poetry. He was obsessed with the evil perpetrated against him by a man he had thought was a friend.

One day he was sitting at his desk doodling...not writing poetry but only thinking of the man who had wronged him. Markham later testified that the Holy Spirit spoke quietly to him in those moments saying something like this,

"Markham, if you do not deal with this thing, it is going to ruin you. You cannot afford the price you are paying. You must forgive that man."

The poet prayed, "Lord, I will and I do freely forgive". A miracle occurred.

The resentment disappeared and the poetry now flowed. He then penned perhaps his most famous poem and one of my all-time favorites,

"He drew a circle that shut me out -
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But LOVE and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle that took him in."

We forgive in the first place because it is in our best interest to do so. Our resentment is poisoning our own hearts and in some cases it just may be poisoning our relationships with others some of whom have been close friends.

WE FORGIVE BECAUSE THE PAST IS PAST

In the second place, we forgive because the past is past. Nothing is more pitiful than the person who is continually living in the past. The past is gone. Why allow it to ruin the present and the future.

A recent newspaper story told of how a fatal stabbing took place. It seems that two men had been shooting pool and had a \$1.00 bet going. An argument developed over the bet, and the two continued it outside. As the disagreement escalated, six people were eventually involved. One of the two pool players held a nightstick while the other had a knife. The man with the knife won.

It's unlikely that either man would tell you that he would be willing to kill or die over a dollar bet. However, as their anger built and things were said in the heat of the moment, one did kill and one did die - over a dollar bet.

You and I are unlikely to kill anybody. Nevertheless, unresolved anger will sometimes erupt into ugly and destructive actions. People say and do things they might never say and do otherwise. And why allow the possibility of something that is over and done with bringing us heartache in the future. Forgiveness allows the opportunity for a new beginning.

A dentist moved into a new house. He soon found neighborhood teenagers littering his yard and riding their bicycles over his lawn. One night the leader of the teenage group had a bad toothache. The boy's mother sent him to the dentist to be examined. The dentist found the tooth in need of some expensive repair and offered to take care of it, but the boy refused. He said his family couldn't afford it. The dentist persuaded the boy to let him do the repairs.

The dentist didn't send the boy a bill. And soon he forgot the incident. That Summer the dentist left town for an extended vacation. When he returned, he found that his lawn had been well cared for during all that time by the same teenager whose tooth he had repaired several months before. The boy just smiled and said, "A tooth for a tooth".

When that dentist first had trouble with the neighborhood kids riding across his lawn, he could have harbored some real resentment. What good would it have done? Instead, the dentist was kind and reaped the benefits.

We forgive for our own peace of soul. We forgive because the past is past. Only today and tomorrow count. We want to sow all the good we can. Yes, a tooth for a tooth.

WE FORGIVE BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN

Finally, we forgive because we have been forgiven.

In order to fully answer Simon Peter's question, Jesus told a parable about a servant who owed his master 10,000 talents. This debt amounted to more than fifteen years of laborer's wage. The servant could not pay it. His master forgave the debt and the servant was greatly relieved.

Now this servant, in turn, had a man who owed him a hundred denarii. This amounted to about a day's wages. The servant refused to let this man out of the debt. When he heard it, the master was furious. This wicked servant had been forgiven for fifteen years worth of wages but he would not forgive someone else a day's worth of wages. The point of Jesus was quite clear. The Master is God and we are the servants. We forgive because we have been forgiven.

Dwight L. Moody once said that Peter did not seem to think that he was in danger of falling into sin. His question was, "How often should I forgive my brother?" But very soon we hear that Peter has fallen.

"I can imagine that when he did fall", said Moody, "the sweet thought came to him of what the master had said".

Peter was forgiven for denying the Master. Could he not forgive those who sinned against him?

Maybe this is why Jesus recommended that we become like little children. A nine year old was on his way out the door to get his younger brother a Christmas present when he discovered that that very younger brother had just broken one of his own favorite toys. He flew into a rage. He vowed that his brother could never play with his toys again and that furthermore not to expect a Christmas present from him this year.

A moment later he returned to the kitchen and slipped on his coat. "I'm going, Mom" he said with no hint of his anger of the moment before. "Going where" his mother asked. "To buy the present", the nine year old older brother answered. Well, his mother couldn't hide the look of surprise. "Well...he is my brother, isn't he" said the boy. Yes, yes he is. Out of the mouths of babes!

CLOSING Remember these three points. It is necessary for us to forgive in order to have peace in our souls. It is necessary for us to forgive in order that the past might be past, and we can experience only the best in the present and future. It is necessary for us to forgive because we have been forgiven and, after all, he or she, is our brother or sister.

So, how about it? Are you still living in the "House of Spite"? It's so much nicer out here in the fresh air of forgiveness. Why not ask God here this morning to help you let go of those feelings of anger and resentment that may be lurking in the dark corners of your heart. Do it today. Do it now.

PRAYER Open our hearts, O God, that we may love those who do not love us. Help us to restrain our natural tendency to resent the wrongs that people have done to us in other days and places, and to take offense easily and quickly, to nurse our grudges and grievances tenderly. Let this hour be a turning point for us that a new love may come into our hearts as we move into the future. In the name of the Good Shepherd who gently brings us home to Himself, we pray. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 23, 1990

GOD, OUR FATHER, we come again in to Your Presence...as we are -

With our feelings of failure,
With our frustrations,
our guilt,
our loneliness,
our depression,
our fear.

We do not need to confess whatever feelings are going through us in these moments of worship. You already know them and we believe that You understand them.

But we do confess our slowness to acknowledge and to deal with the feelings that pull us down in life. We permit layer and layer of frustration to pile up in our lives until we just don't know where to begin in finding solutions. We feel so weighed down by the load we are carrying, the burdens upon us!

HELP US, LORD, in our worship to sort out the tangled problems of our lives until we can see them more clearly.

Through the meditations of our minds,
enable us to see beneath the symptoms
to the causes. Then, Lord, give us guidance
to make those changes which will remove the
causes of destructive moods and negative
attitudes.

WE ARE SEPARATE, YET WE ARE JOINED IN THESE MOMENTS THROUGH OUR PRAYERS.

You have called us to be ONE BODY. Enable us to see ourselves more than a gathering of individuals. Give us a vision of our being the Church of Jesus Christ - joined into One Body - for our mission of service in the world.

And make us aware of those sitting near us in Church...of their needs and problems.

We pray for the needs of others. We pray for those held captive by life's experiences...for their loved ones...that they may be strengthened to live with renewed hope and uncertainty. We pray for the refugees of our world, for those fleeing political persecution. We pray for the hungry and the homeless.

LORD, we have come here believing that worship can make a difference in our lives and also in the life of our world. Therefore, make us receptive to new insights that will help us, new inspiration that can motivate us, new understanding that can bring change to our lives.

All this we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN: Sunday, September 23, 1990

INTRODUCTION Boys and girls, we're pleased you're here. I trust you had a good Summer. Some of you look taller to me than you did the last time we were together!

Today is HOMECOMING SUNDAY. It's good to be "home" again here in our church that we love so much and means so much to us.

SPECIAL I want to show you something. It's our new Bible for our Church. It's been given in loving memory of a wonderful woman by the name of Mrs. Wm. Herman Smith. She died last February and she was the mother of one of our former resident members...Peggy Carey. Her daughter, Peggy and son-in-law, Raye, have given our church this Bible in memory of Mrs. Smith.

A lovely gift and we start reading the scriptures from it today. It's the NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION OF THE BIBLE...recently published. And we shall read the WORD OF GOD from it for many years to come. The one that it is replacing has been here more than 25 years. I would hope that we can take the old one upstairs and use it up there for your "mini" services on a Sunday.

Look at it. Touch it. Smell it. Just think...when some of you are thirty years of age, we may still be using this Bible here in the Church. So, boys and girls, remember this day and this Bible. We have a little placque that we are going to put on the lectern now...this morning...here it is....see what it says.

INVITE CHILDREN TO COME UP HERE WHILE...

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, September 23, 1990 / HOMECOMING SUNDAY

GREETING / VISITORS

We take this moment to greet the visitors to our Church. Delighted you're here with us...and we hope that we'll have the opportunity to greet you....door or downstairs in the Russell Room at the coffee hour. Be free in the sharing of you name. Take a moment to fill out a visitor card...or to sign...Worship with us on other Sundays. Come and work with us, too, in the programs of outreach.

Doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner since 1837. Our roots are deep...We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet all of you...visitors and members alike with this added word to the members: be sure to wear your name tag at the coffee hour and make some new friends for your church!

PARISH CONCERNS

Parish concerns are there in the bulletin for you... review them on your own, noting the spiritual growth opportunities offered during the week: "Hounds" (Tuesday evening), and "Aldersgate Class" (Wednesday evening, 7:30 pm). New friends are always most welcome.

Workers are being enlisted for the Fall Rummage Sale, scheduled for Saturday October 13th. And workers are already at work for the November 17th Church Fair. We have some busy weeks ahead as we begin a new season today in our church. Opportunities for service both in the church and outside in the community. Take a job and have some fun with it...remembering "the more you put into something, the more you're going to get out of it". Be a participant and remember that Wesley said, "There's no such thing as solitary religion".

Each year at this time we publish a new church directory. We like to have it out by HOMECOMING SUNDAY...today...it's almost ready, but one thing we need are those changes of address, telephone numbers. If you have moved recently, let us know so that our directory's up to date. Some "CHANGE FORMS" are on the table downstairs in the Russell Room. Fill it out and put it in the poor box or mail it to the church office.

Remember the HYMN SING of next Sunday morning, 10:30...with Gary Klein and Julie Klein leading it...third floor by the piano...sing some of the old tunes and try out a couple of new hymns. Today, the Adult Fellowship Coordinating Committee will meet in the choir room from 12:45 to 1:30. Making plans for future events. Memorial Service for Marian Busk - November 4th. NY Candlelight Vigil...World Summit for Children...5:30...7:15...1st Ave. 47th St.

OFFERING

"Show us, Lord, how to give out of our substance and not just out of our abundance".

These words spoken by Pope John on a trip to our city a few years back are in keeping with the spirit of the word of Jesus that "It is more blessed to give than to receive". Let us worship God with our morning offering.

TEA SERVICE

Mention...former member, Phyllis Balk, living in Katonah, NY... heard of our need for a new silver service...for coffee hour... in memory of her mother, Alma Munter...grandmother of Laraine and Diane...(2 pots, 1 stand, creamer, sugar, waste bowl) Lovely gift...the one we had was stolen last Spring.

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN: Sunday, September 23, 1990

INTRODUCTION

Boys and girls, we're pleased you're here. I trust you had a good Summer. Some of you look taller to me than you did the last time we were together!

Today is HOMECOMING SUNDAY. It's good to be "home" again here in our church that we love so much and means so much to us.

SPECIAL

I want to show you something. It's our new Bible for our Church. It's been given in loving memory of a wonderful woman by the name of Mrs. Wm. Herman Smith. She died last February and she was the mother of one of our former resident members...Peggy Carey. Her daughter, Peggy and son-in-law, Raye, have given our church this Bible in memory of Mrs. Smith.

A lovely gift and we start reading the scriptures from it today. It's the NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION OF THE BIBLE...recently published. And we shall read the WORD OF GOD from it for many years to come. The one that it is replacing has been here more than 25 years. I would hope that we can take the old one upstairs and use it up there for your "mini" services on a Sunday.

Look at it. Touch it. Smell it. Just think...when some of you are thirty years of age, we may still be using this Bible here in the Church. So, boys and girls, remember this day and this Bible. We have a little plaque that we are going to put on the lectern now...this morning...here it is....see what it says.

INVITE CHILDREN TO COME UP HERE WHILE...

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 23, 1990

GOD, OUR FATHER, we come again in to Your Presence...as we are -

With our feelings of failure,
With our frustrations,
our guilt,
our loneliness,
our depression,
our fear.

We do not need to confess whatever feelings are going through us in these moments of worship. You already know them and we believe that You understand them.

But we do confess our slowness to acknowledge and to deal with the feelings that pull us down in life. We permit layer and layer of frustration to pile up in our lives until we just don't know where to begin in finding solutions. We feel so weighed down by the load we are carrying, the burdens upon us!

HELP US, LORD, in our worship to sort out the tangled problems of our lives until we can see them more clearly.

Through the meditations of our minds,
enable us to see beneath the symptoms
to the causes. Then, Lord, give us guidance
to make those changes which will remove the
causes of destructive moods and negative
attitudes.

WE ARE SEPARATE, YET WE ARE JOINED IN THESE MOMENTS THROUGH OUR PRAYERS.

You have called us to be ONE BODY. Enable us to see ourselves more than a gathering of individuals. Give us a vision of our being the Church of Jesus Christ - joined into One Body - for our mission of service in the world.

And make us aware of those sitting near us in Church...of their needs and problems.

We pray for the needs of others. We pray for those held captive by life's experiences...for their loved ones...that they may be strengthened to live with renewed hope and uncertainty. We pray for the refugees of our world, for those fleeing political persecution. We pray for the hungry and the homeless.

LORD, we have come here believing that worship can make a difference in our lives and also in the life of our world. Therefore, make us receptive to new insights that will help us, new inspiration that can motivate us, new understanding that can bring change to our lives.

All this we ask in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.