

"LOOK OUT FOR PROUD WORDS"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
January 11, 1987

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### INTRODUCTION

There's a story about a knight who wanted to impress his king. He appeared before the king beat up, bloody, wounded and his shield badly dented. The King said, "What happened to you?" The knight replied, "Your Majesty, I have been laboring mightily in your service. I've been robbing, pillaging, burning, slaughtering your enemies to the west". The king said, "But I have no enemies to the west". The knight said, "I think you do now, Sire".

How many times in life do we go off half-cocked, thinking we're doing the right thing only to find out that we were wrong, that it was not that way at all, not the way we thought it was. For instance, something happens in our neighborhood, or at the office, and we know who did it. We're sure we know who did it. Later on someone says, "Did you hear what happened?" We quickly respond, "Yes, and I know who did it, too. Of course, I have no proof, but it's the kind of thing that person would do". You've made up your mind. And then weeks later you learn that he didn't do it, but the damage has already been done.

### DEVELOPMENT

That's the risk of certainty. You may be wrong. Certainty is not an attribute possessed by human beings. If we claim it, we're boasting. To be human is to "see through a glass darkly". That's what Paul says in our scripture reading for this morning, in the King James Version. The Revised Standard Version says, "through a mirror dimly". In a glass darkly, we see in part. We don't see the whole of things.

And Paul suggests to admit that is a sign of maturity. "When I was a child I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became mature, I put away childish things". Now what does that mean? We know what it means by the context. Look at what precedes it and what comes after it. The prior verse reads, "For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect". Then that sentence about speaking like a child. Then, "for we see in a mirror dimly".

Paul ties maturity with humility about what we can be certain about in this life. Derek Bok, the President of Harvard University, said in a speech that one of the goals of higher education was to teach a "tolerance for ambiguity". That's a marvelous phrase. "A tolerance for ambiguity". If education does its job, it ought to teach us how little we know and teach us how to live with something less than certainty in this life. "A tolerance for ambiguity".

I'd go beyond that and say that it ought to teach us to be wary of anyone who claims to have the absolute truth about anything. I think that we will be better citizens in a democracy if we realize that ambiguity is the human condition. As citizens we are called to vote. As voting citizens we need information. A democracy works best that has an informed electorate. Democracies that have an uninformed electorate nurture demagogues, exploit fear, selfishness, the basest of human emotions, presenting only the evidence that supports their side. To protect democracy, somebody has to ask, "what about the other side?"

And there's always another side. It's always there. There's always another point of view. The First Amendment guarantees the right to ask, "what about the other side?" Because we see in part. We don't see the whole. We see as in a mirror dimly. If we don't hear the other side of any issue, there's the danger of somebody mounting a crusade against the king's enemies in the west, only to

discover too late, that the king doesn't have any enemies in the west.

The title of this sermon comes from Carl Sandberg's poem, "Primer Lesson". It goes like this:

"Look out how you use proud words.  
When you let proud words go, it is  
not easy to call them back.  
They wear long boots, hard boots;  
They walk off proud; they can't hear  
you calling.  
Look out how you use proud words."

#### PAUL'S SITUATION

That was the situation Paul found in Corinth, lots of proud words, wearing hard boots, long boots, tramping over other people's feelings, barreling over whoever stood in their way. The particular issue in Corinth was spiritual gifts. Some were boasting that they were better than other people because they were so obviously more blessed than other people. They believed God had put His favor upon them and given them special status, and with special status they believed they had no obligation to anybody else. They were favored. They were to be served, not serve. So Corinth was a divided, loveless, compassionless congregation. That's what Paul addressed in this thirteenth chapter. It's the culmination of a long section on gifts, addressed to those who speak in tongues and those who prophesy.

And so he writes,

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so as to move mountains, and if I give away all that I have, and even give my body to be burned, and have not love, then I gain nothing."

That's the danger. That special gifts will blind you to your human condition, and then blind you to your oneness with other human beings. Thinking that you are given special status distorts the way you see things, leads you to believe that your point of view is infallible. So Paul says that if your knowledge separates you from other human beings, it's worthless.

I remember reading about the Indians in the Pacific northwest. They had what are called "long houses", central meeting houses, where the elders met to deliberate the business of the tribe. In the center of the room there was a pole that held up the roof, a support pole. Do you know what they called that pole? They called it "the center of the universe". They made decisions as if they were at the center of the universe.

That is the perfect symbol for the human predicament. We believe that when we sit to make decisions about the tribe, or the world, or about our relationship to other persons, is the center of the universe, that we have perfect vision, that we know the way things really are, or the way they will really be, like those Corinthians who had "prophetic powers" and were able "to understand all mysteries". When we think where we are is the center of the universe, we are

tempted to think that our view is infallible, that our virtue is superior, and that our tribe is chosen. And if you think that that's just an Indian problem, then suggest to somebody that you think that Americans ought to look at the world from somebody else's point of view. I tell you that the chances are that that won't be taken kindly. It never is, no matter what your group may be.

There is more than one way to see the world. There is more than one way to look at a problem, to see a situation, to view a human concern. We see the world from our own perspective, from our own point or prejudice. We know in part, we see through a glass darkly, even though we may think that where we sit is the center of the universe or at least pretty close to it. Again, "tolerance for ambiguity" is something that all of us can use.

#### TRUE OF THE THINGS WE CANNOT SEE

Now, if that's true of the things that we can see, how much more is it true of the things that we cannot see? Have you ever had the experience of talking religion with someone who arrived at a conclusion that was different than yours? It baffles you. You both read the same Bible, you both look at the same evidence, you may even pray together, and you come out with different conclusions. That used to bother me a lot when I was younger. I'd spend hours debating a religious subject with somebody. I would demolish their reasoning with my own so brilliantly that I'd sit back and admire it. Then I'd wait for them to thank me for leading them out of darkness into light. And they would thank me all right, for proving their point.

Archbishop Temple and Bertrand Russell debated on the British Broadcasting Company, the subject, "Is the Soul Immortal?" After an hour of frustrating debate, Archbishop Temple said, "I believe in immortality more than the evidence warrants". And Bertrand Russell said, with amazing candor and quickness, "And I disbelieve more than the evidence warrants".

That's the human situation. Only enough evidence to draw your own conclusion. And no matter what your conclusion is, you will probably find somebody who looks at the same evidence and comes to a different point of view. That's what Paul is speaking to at Corinth. We know in part. Someday we will understand fully. And that "someday", incidentally, is when the Kingdom comes, not before then. Until then, we see in a mirror dimly. Therefore, "Faith, hope and love abide - these three. And the greatest of these is love."

#### THESE THREE GRACES

These three graces are necessary for the three areas of life where there is the most uncertainty: our knowledge about God; our knowledge about the future, and our knowledge about other persons. In all three we need a tolerance for ambiguity. In all three it can be said, "The more you know, the less you know".

First, it's true about God. Those of us who claim the Bible as our authority on matters theological ought to know that. In the Hebrew Bible, there's a marvelous phrase, "No one can see God and live". God in the Old Testament is always pictured as hidden in a cloud. And if not, He's so glorious, His presence so brilliant, that nobody is able to look at Him. It's like looking at the sun. And when Job complains about his life, God answers, "Who is this who darkens counsel with words without knowledge?" When Jesus found somebody boasting that they knew what God was going to do, He reprimanded them saying, "Nobody has ever seen God". And Paul, in Romans, says of God, "How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable are His ways". That's our heritage. You live with the

Bible long enough and it'll make you humble about God talk. That's why Paul says, in our knowledge about God we live by faith.

And our knowledge of the future is no more certain. Nobody knows the hour or the day of the future events, Jesus says. Not even the Son, only the Father. It's interesting to note that this predicament has caused two kinds of reactions, those who despair and those who hope. Some despair because they cannot predict the future. They don't know what will happen in the future, so they fear that the worst will happen in the future. And others look at the same uncertain future and see it as a reason for hope. They say because we don't know what will happen, anything can happen. For people of faith, an uncertain future is a reason for hope. So Paul says, in relation to the future, we live by hope.

And finally, there is mystery about other persons. I think this is what Paul is centering on in Corinth, because that's the problem there. That's why he says, "The greatest of these is love". In another letter he will also put the trinity of faith, hope and love, but he'll put it in a different order because the problem in that other church was something else. But the problem in Corinth was division, getting along with one another, so he tells them that the greatest of these is love.

I have my list of good guys and bad guys. I bet you do, too. Just like they did at Corinth. And the disconcerting thing to me about that list is that the more I get to know the bad guys, the more I like them. And the longer I know some of the good guys, the more I think I've got them on the wrong list.

Do you ever sit in airports and sit and watch people? I know some people who do that. I don't do that. I watch the people watching the people in airports. It's a great hobby. I read the work of a man who spent his time watching people in airports. I really enjoyed the portraits he drew. He was a brilliant, humorous writer. You'd recognize the people right off: the bookkeeper, he described him to a "T"; the school teacher, you know what she looked like; a mechanic. I said to myself, "This guy's uncanny". Then he described a man with "a gray pallor and a sickening grin". He said, "He must be a clergyman". Now wait a minute. I concluded that he doesn't know what he's talking about.

CLOSING We believe that we can describe other people. We can peg other people. But no one can do that to us because we're unique. And if that's true of me, then it's true of everybody. If they don't know me, then I can't know anybody else with certainty either. And that's why we need love.

So to the question, "How can I know God?", the answer is through faith. And to the question, "How can I know the future?" the answer is through hope. And to the question, "How can I know another human being?", the answer is through love.

For we "see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now we know in part, then we shall understand fully, even as we have been fully understood. So faith, hope and love abide - these three - and the greatest of these is love."

PRAYER Make us deeply sensitive to Your Presence, O God, to your power and peace and persistence in these quiet moments. Make our hearts receptive to the Word of truth that comes to us from St. Paul. And when we are

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those three gates: is it KIND, is it TRUE, and is it NECESSARY. In the spirit  
of Christ we pray. Amen

## INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. The day of rest is at hand.

May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life and may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding presence. In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

## MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Comfort ye. Comfort ye my people, saith your God. He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms."

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us."

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: we are forgiven."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing... you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole"

## PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken-hearted among us. Abide among us as a healing benediction.

Answer the unspoken prayers offered to You on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

RUTH FRAME  
JANE ELIZABETH BROWN  
RICHARD BURNS

Joyce and Florence West, Francis Gallagher -  
loved ones of Kevin Gallagher.

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 11, 1987

LORD, we thank YOU for this time set aside for prayer.

Let it be a special time, a coming together of Your spirit with ours. Let this be a time of honesty when we open our lives to the light of Your presence.

Sometimes we struggle to frame our prayers. Somehow words fail to carry the feelings that lie deep within us. And so we need Your help to lift these inarticulate yearnings and these deep concerns. Our confidence is that You hear us even in the silence.

So meet us, we pray, at the point of our tears and in the midst of our pain. Speak order to our confusion and speak courage to our fears. Let us hear Thy truth in the void of our lives, in the emptiness of all our so-called success.

LEAD US, LORD, in paths of righteousness until we are one with Him who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life to set others free.

Our Scriptures encourage us, Lord, to bear the burdens of others, and in so doing to fulfill the law of Christ, which is the way of love.

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SO LET US take a moment to pray for each other.

Let us pray for those struggling with the loss of a loved one.

Let us pray for those who may be facing lingering illness.

For those facing an agonizing decision.

Let us be in prayer for those whom we know that are in financial trouble.

Let us lift to God in prayer all those who need assurance of God's love and of our love.

Let us pray for our world at large, for the hungry and the homeless. For those who have no family to support them.

And finally, once more, let us pray for peace in our world, for peace among the nations.

WE OFFER these prayers, O God, in the name and in the spirit Christ, our Lord.



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