

"MOVING TOWARD SAINTHOOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
November 5, 1995**

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INTRODUCTION

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I'm not going to speculate on "who" or "how many" of you are saints in this congregation, or "who" the sinners are....other than to remind you that today, in many churches across our land, is the celebration of All Saints Day. Last Wednesday, the Christian Church paused to honor the "A Students" of our faith, those who have gone on to the Kingdom of light and who are now praising Christ before the eternal throne of God.

I like this Sunday because we do get to sing "For All the Saints" and I would like to think that we are all moving toward sainthood, struggling to be honor students of our Faith. Several points to make in connection with this Sunday.

WE'RE ALL AGING

For one thing, we're all aging. You may not have noticed that. One of our members celebrated her 100th birthday on All Saints' Day. Yes, we're all aging. It's one of the hot topics in magazines and on television and down in Congress. The "baby boomers" are reaching 50 years of age. What will happen to Social Security when the boomers reach the age of retirement. It's a question that is often being asked and discussed. There is a remarkable transition taking place in our society.

I heard it said recently by one of our church leaders that medical science is keeping the Methodist Church alive. Since 1983 persons 65 and older outnumber teenagers. And did you know that the fastest growing segment of our population, for the first time, is the 85 and over age group. And by the year 2000, I'm told that the 35,000 Americans who today get to light 100 candles on their birthday cake will have tripled. And with life spread over such a span, it's not at all unusual today to find five generations in one family. And two of them may be getting pension checks.

In the early nineteen thirties, at the time of the Great Depression, our nation's population was considered to be young. By now, it has shifted to the other end of the spectrum. Yes, an amazing transition is taking place in our society. And we have all observed how gracefully many people are making that transition. I chuckled to read about one woman who was reaching a ripe old age and she was looking for a comfortable retirement village in which to live. One village she visited asked her to fill out a questionnaire on her health and lifestyle. Then she wrote down her address and on the line where it said "ZIP", she wrote: "Surprising amount...considering my age!"

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"Doctor....I don't think I'll be around then." "Nonsense" replied the physician with a warm, reassuring smile. "You'll be around for years...yet!"

The poor fellow gave the doctor a rather odd look, then somewhat nervously cleared his throat and said,

"I mean, doctor.....I'll be in Florida....I go there every January." Seventy-eight isn't as old as it use to be!

IMPROVING OUR HABITS

Point one. We're all moving toward sainthood because we are aging. And secondly, we are also moving toward sainthood because we are fashioning habits that grow stronger with the years.

Charles Crowe, a Methodist preacher out in Illinois, who use to author our little Lenten devotional, The Sanctuary, back before Maxie Dunnam, once wrote:

"The passing years usually do very little to alter our basic character except to intensify it, unless we resolutely take ourselves in hand. If we are tight at forty, we will likely be stingy at 70. If we are skeptical at 50, we will probably be cynical 20 years later. And if we think that the world is against us at 40, it will in all likelihood still be against us on our deathbed....only more so...for 'as you show, so shall you also reap'".

A lot of truth in his words. Habit is a powerful force in our lives. You may have heard the story - a true story - about the television announcer who had been doing coffee commercials for several years. Then, one day, he changed sponsors. This time he was doing a commercial for a cigarette company. On camera for his first new commercial and wanting to do a good job, he took a long draw on his sponsor's cigarette...blew a smoke ring...looked straight into the camera and said,

"Man.....now that's real coffee!" Old habits die hard.

And can you imagine what happened on Easter Sunday in a Methodist Church down in Atlanta when the preacher's kid took it upon himself to change the "LADIES" and "MEN" signs on the restrooms doors in the Peachtree United Methodist Church. The visitors read the signs, but the members didn't bother. A note of panic was added to the Easter service. Old haits die hard.

Of course, we can't win. Remember hearing about the wife who was always complaining about her husband leaving the top off the toothpaste tube. Finally, on their 25th anniversary, he decided to please her and started putting it back on. After a few days, she eyed him suspiciously and asked him at breakfast one morning, "How come you've stopped brushing your teeth?"

William James, the great philosopher, once wrote:

"Ninety-nine hundredths or possibly nine hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of our activity is purely automatic and habitual, from our rising in the morning to our lying down each night. Our dressing and undressing, our eating and drinking, our greetings and our partings, even most forms of our common speech, are things of a type so fixed by repetition as almost to be classified as reflex actions....."

Someone once said....and this has always been a favorite of mine:

"Watch your thoughts; they become words.
Watch your words; they become actions.
Watch your actions; they become habits.
Watch your habits; they become character.
Watch your character; it becomes your destiny."

The secret of a successful life is to establish the right habits because as we grow older those habits become quite difficult to change. Those habits forge out who we are. They determine our character and how this old world of ours needs people of character.

Long ago Isaiah wrote:

"Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter. The nation that keeps faith. You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in You."
(Isaiah 26: 2-3)

That is the goal of those who are going on to sainthood - the perfect peace of a steadfast mind. We want to fashion "holy habits" - habits of love and of tolerance, of patience and of faithfulness, or responsibility and of right living. We want to examine our hearts and ask ourselves if the habits we are establishing will take us where we want to go - recognizing that habits do fashion themselves into character and that character determines a life's destiny.

FINAL TEST: LIVES FASHIONED AFTER CHRIST

And, of course, the final test of sainthood is whether our lives are gradually becoming fashioned after the life of Christ.

And to me this is the beauty of the "march" toward sainthood. It is a life-time process of growth. If our relationship with Christ is the real thing, if it is authentic, then each decade of our lives ought to see us become more and more like the Master. Think what that says about our lives. As we get older, our lives can have an even more profound influence on those around us. Talk about role models. They once said of Oscar Levant that he would,

"Get up in the morning...brush his teeth and sharpen his tongue."

Al Davis said that of Howard Cosell at his Memorial Service last May, but suppose for a moment that every teenager had the kind of grandmother or the kind of grandfather who was so loving and so accepting that they knew that no matter how tense things might get at home, there was someone they could talk to. Why? Because they knew that their grandmother or their grandfather was like Jesus! Think, for a moment, what an influence such folks would have on our society.

Author Kurt Vonnegut, of all people, said it best some time back in USA TODAY's, Opinion Line. He said that he had gotten a letter from a woman a while back who was expecting a child and she was wanting to know if he thought it was a mistake to bring a little baby into a world as troubled as this one. Vonnegut responded with these thoughts:

"What made being alive almost worthwhile for me was the saints I met. They could be almost anywhere. By saints I mean people who behaved decently and honorably in societies which were so often obscene. Our own society is very frequently obscene (Vonnegut concluded)....and perhaps many of us....regardless of our ages or power or wealth....can be saints for her child to meet."

Wow! You know, he's right! Maybe that is the great purpose for those last decades of life....to be saints for some child to meet and to get to know!

Tony Campolo tells a story...a classic story....about a drunk who was miraculously converted at a Bowery mission. Prior to his conversion, Joe had gained the reputation of being a "hopeless, dirty wino" for whom there was no hope....only a miserable existence in the ghetto. But following his conversion to a new life with God, everything began to change. Joe became the most caring person that anyone associated with the mission had ever known. He would spend his days and night hanging out at the mission doing whatever needed to be done. There was never any task that was too lowly for Joe to take on. There was never anything that he was asked to do that he considered to be beneath him. Whether it was cleaning up the vomit left by some violently sick alcoholic or scrubbing the toilets after careless men left the men's room filthy....Joe did what was asked with a soft smile on his face and always with a seeming gratitude for the chance to help. He could be counted on to feed feeble men who would wander into the mission off the street and to undress and tuck them into bed... men who were too out of it to take care of themselves.

One evening, when the director of the mission was delivering his evening evangelistic message to the crowd of still and sullen men with drooped heads, there was one man who looked up, came down the aisle to the altar and knelt to pray, crying out for God to help him to change his ways. This repentant drunk kept shouting:

"O God. Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe...like Joe!"

The director of the mission leaned over and said to the man,

"Son....I think it would be better if you prayed....'Make me like Jesus!'"

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All Saints Day. It's a day of celebration of those who have lived the life of faith before us and now surround God's throne in praise. But it's also an acknowledgement that all of us are moving...hopefully...toward sainthood. Yes, we are establishing habits and fashioning a character and shaping a destiny. And as such our latter days may be more exciting and more profitable than our earlier days. Why, you ask? Because our lives are becoming a shining example of the life of righteousness and grace that we have come to see in Christ. And that is an exciting and a profitable thing to happen to a person at any age of life.

CLOSING

Many years ago, after a similar service and a sermon on a November All Saints Sunday, one of our members....William Logan....sent me a card a few days later....a card his wife had picked up at a service she was attending that Sunday in her Church. Entitled, Why Were The Saints, Saints? -

"Because they were cheerful when it was difficult to be cheerful, patient when it was difficult to be patient; and because they pushed on when they wanted to stand still, and kept silent when they wanted to talk and were agreeable when they wanted to be disagreeable. That was all.

It was quite simple and always will be."

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments as we now prepare to share in Holy Communion. Wrestle with us in the deep corners of our lives where our thoughts, our words, our actions get woven into habits.....and where our habits help to build character and shape our destiny. May the light of Your love shine in those dark corners and make a difference.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warning, healing presence. And point out markers on the trail for those who may have lost their way. And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision.

For the race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would run it well and to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Christ in whom we have come to see life's highest hope as well as to experience its deepest meaning. Amen.

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And because they pushed on when they wanted to stand still,

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PRAYER

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May the light of Your great love for us all shine in those dark corners and make a difference. Let that love for all of your children shine in the dark corners of our world...in Bosnia, in Serbia, in Srebrenica...in that part of our world where slaughter and violence and bloodshed run rampant and where world leaders struggle to find the road to a lasting peace.

Let Your great love also shine in the land of Israel torn asunder in recent hours by the senseless assassination of a man who loved peace, Itshak Rabin, and who gave his life that Jews and Arabs might live together in peace in that part of the world.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care...those whom we mention in our prayers privately at this time. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming and healing presence. And point our markers on the trail for those who may have lost their way. And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very moment be on the verge of some destructive action or unhealthy decision.

For the race is so short, O God...even at its longest and we, as followers and disciples of Christ, would always try to run it well and always to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Christ in whom we have come to see life's highest shope as well as to experience its deepest meaning. In the name and spirit of Him who said, "Blessed are the peacemakers"...we ask this prayer. Amen.