"ON BEING AVAILABLE"

A Sermon

By

Philip A. C. Clarke

January 31, 1982
Third Sunday After The Epiphany
Park Avenue Methodist Church
New York, New York
TEXT: "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your own welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the Gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me."

(Philippians 2: 19 - 23)

INTRODUCTION A word concerning the historical background of the text. The apostle, Paul, was in prison awaiting trial for his life when he penned those lines. For some reason, he was anxious to have some news of the Christian community in the city of Philippi. He longed to get there himself for a visit, but since that was now impossible, he was proposing to send Timothy in order that he might bring back news to Paul on how things were going.

I think we can assume that Timothy was not Paul's first choice for the mission. Apparently others were approached for the trip, but for some reason they were not available and so Paul found it necessary to call upon Timothy.

A FEW THINGS ABOUT TIMOTHY A few things about Timothy. From all that we know Timothy was the ideal person for such an assignment. By faith, ability, experience and temperament, he was eminently qualified to take on this assignment. Timothy had undertaken such missions before. He had served as Paul's "trouble-shooter" and special envoy on more than one occasion. Paul admired Timothy's skill and diplomacy as well as his courage and conviction.

So this was not the first time that Timothy had undertaken - on Paul's behalf - a mission of this nature. There had been the time when he had been sent from Athens to encourage the Church at Thessalonica when that church was facing persecution. Then, too, he had gone from Ephesus to Macedonia, and then on to Corinth, when the apostle himself was unable to pay those churches a visit. We know from the Bible record that Timothy was an able, loyal and responsible young leader. Paul loved him as a son and had complete confidence in him.

WHY DID HE SEND TIMOTHY If Timothy were so ideally suited for this mission in the first place, then why on earth did Paul consider sending someone else. The record's not clear on this; we can only surmise. For one thing Paul probably felt a need for his moral support, his counsel and encouragement while in prison and during the approaching trial. From a personal point of view, Paul could ill afford to part with his friend right now. Paul, remember, was not married; he had no family to support him in this time of trouble. We can understand his reluctance to part with his young friend who was like a son, and why he was so critical of the others who had refused to take on the mission.

I think it all comes down to this: Paul was sending Timothy because no one else was available. The "others" to whom he refers in his letter had either turned him down or were not simply qualified.
Initiative, creativity, dependability, persistence, getting started, staying with it, seeing it through, making a difference.

He hated to call on Timothy again...especially since he felt a need to have him close by in Rome, but Timothy was the only qualified person available for the assignment who was willing and ready. Paul didn't like to work a willing horse to death, but the other horses were refusing to be harnessed. So often in getting the Lord's work done, you have to use the horses you can catch and harness and hope to train.

What was wrong with those other companions of Paul? How was it that none of them could undertake this mission. Here again, the record is not too clear to us, but one can see three reasons - possible reasons - as to why they did not go.

DIFFICULT JOURNEY First-off, they didn't go because the journey was difficult and too demanding. They were willing to serve the Christian cause and to be a part of Paul's team - but not when it called for real heroism and for some measure of personal sacrifice. This trip to Philippi was a long and dangerous one. It was 700 miles as the crow flies and travel in those days was slow and difficult and very uncertain. There was no flight from Rome to Philippi...no shuttle to jump. One had to travel by foot, by donkey and by sail boat.

Paul was asking a great deal. It would be inconvenient, uncomfortable... many days would be required. And so we shouldn't be too surprised then that "they with one accord began to make excuses".

So much for them. What about ourselves? What would our answer have been? How often it is that the sacrificial job goes begging in the Christian enterprise? The job that ties you down, that takes away a bit of your free time, that demands a real commitment. Those are the tasks that are tough to fill in the life of the Church. And some of them would never get done or filled at all were it not for some devoted, over-worked, conscientious Timothy who steps in when the others beg off. It's true in every congregation. It's true here. As they say, if you want a job done, ask the busy person.

We're at that time of year where we're preparing the Nominating Committee Report for presentation at the Annual Meeting on February 28th. I hope you all will try to be there. It's important. This is the report that involves getting volunteers for those many tasks involved in running a Church. It's my job to ask one hundred or more of you to lend a hand and help out with some assignment. Believe me, it means so much when I get that positive response, "Of course I'm available...it's an honor and I'll do my best...and attend the meetings and carry my share." Most respond in that fashion. Here and there you'll find some responding (and hopefully with good reason), "well, I'd rather you try to get someone else to do it if you can".

We have positions to fill. We have jobs to be done in this parish that call for time, for energy and for sacrifice. And on a scale of 1 to 10, how do you rate yourself as a volunteer participant in the life of the Church...getting the job done, being there, following through, making a difference. How do you rate yourself? We've got a few tens...a lot of fives...a few threes and twos. In other words, there's room for improvement. I challenge you to become a ten!

NO REAL INTEREST Another reason why these "others" were not available is suggested by a phrase which Paul uses, "I have no one like him who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare." Or, as J. B. Phillips

(community)
puts it in his translation: "I have nobody else with a genuine interest in your well-being".

These "others" to whom Paul was referring lacked any real concern for the wellbeing of other Christian groups, especially those far away. I guess we could say that they were interested in the cause of Christ in the city of Rome, but not to the same degree when it came to the cause over in the province of Macedonia. I can hear them rationalizing, "There's too much work to do here in our own church...why worry about Philippi? We've got our problems right here at home, Paul. Let's not worry about them...let them handle their own".

Now it's quite possible that these people from the Church in Rome were "narrowly parochial" in their concern, caring little for the welfare of Christian people beyond their own parish. I'm sure they were good people, but somewhat provincial in their point of view. Their interests were heavily local. Their vision sharply circumscribed. Their sympathy had little reach. To use a more modern technical word, they lacked an "ecumenical" vision. They were parochial. They apparently cared little for the welfare of the Christian cause beyond their own neighborhood.

Of course this spirit is still with us today. There are hosts of well-meaning Christians today who have little concern for their brethren in other lands and in other places. They cannot see beyond their own national or denominational nose. They have little desire to be a part of the world-wide fellowship of all believers. Some there are who actually oppose efforts to transcend national and denominational differences in declaring to the world at large, "the unity of faith"...of the faith we share "in Christ".

We've just completed our observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I was disappointed with the response from our own parish to the Service at St. Joseph's in celebration of our unity with other Christians. Four or five of you were there. Perhaps it was a bad afternoon...cold, and other concerns before us. There's room for improvement in our congregational support of the ecumenical vision. We had about 100 people from 11 Eastside churches.

There are some persons in our churches who lack concern for even the larger work of their own denominations. They have a genuine concern for the local congregation. They're eager for its growth and effectiveness, but they are largely indifferent to the well-being of the entire denomination of which they're a part. They will pray for the success of the local program and will give support to local needs, but beyond that their attitude may have a bit of "live and let live" philosophy.

Three weeks from today, February 21st, we'll have opportunity to share in worship and fellowship with other Eastside Methodist Christians. We're planning a Sunday afternoon service that will bring 10 congregations together in the John Street Church - Methodism's oldest church in America - and with our Bishop as our preacher, how can we miss! As co-chairmen of the committee that's responsible for it, you can do me a favor by being there. I'll forgive you for your lack of support for last Sunday afternoon's service. It will be good for us to come together with Methodist friends from other congregations. It's important and help us to overcome some of the feelings of isolation and separation that we feel in city parishes. The only ones who are excused are the four who attended last Sunday's service.
THEIR OWN INTERESTS WERE PRIMARY

Now there's still one more reason why these other persons were not available for the trip to Philippi, and it's suggested in this sentence, "They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." J. B. Phillips has it this way in his translation of the New Testament, "All the others seem to be wrapped up in their own affairs and do not really care for the business of Jesus Christ."

Wrapped up in their own affairs, they had little time and energy left over for the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God. Their affairs were not necessarily bad... chances are they may have been wholesome and legitimate concerns of life. They were apparently busy... perhaps too busy... to render a specific service for the cause. Other things came first.

It's a situation that is re-enacted often in the life of the Church. The over-crowded life can be the enemy of fruitful Christian service. "Sorry I can't help you... I don't want to take it on unless I have the time and can do a good job with it... what about that fellow Timothy. Hey, there's a good man. He's got the time and skill and personality to do the job. Ask him. Maybe if things lighten up, I might be able to lend a hand... further on down the road... but not now."

And the wonderful thing is that Timothy finds the time to do it. Thank God for the Timothys. We can't operate without them. We can always use a few more. Yesterday we had a rummage sale. Someone remarked, "If we had had 6 more workers, we could have probably sent 3 more children to Summer camp". Timothy's don't have to be coaxed and coddled. When the need arise, they're available. Thank God for them.

CLOSING

A few days before Christmas George Steinbrenner sent out a letter to his players urging them to report to spring training three weeks early. His Christmas letter urged "maximum dedication" and offered to trade anyone who "would rather be a part of another organization". Pretty direct. Stiff.

If he can ask for "maximum dedication" on the part of his players, as a representative of Jesus Christ I feel I can ask for "maximum dedication" on the part of you who are a part of this team effort. I have no hesitation in asking for it. I would certainly shy away from trading any of you away... for I've seen too many instances of people growing in their commitment to Christ and maturing in their concept of rendering service to others in His name. Somehow as we mature and deepen in our Faith, we come to see what's really important and lasting in terms of this life... and the values that abide.

Paul turned to Timothy for a demanding assignment. Timothy was available. I wonder where we fit in to all of this.

PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to search our hearts and our ways on this matter. Help each of us to consider our values and priorities and to ask that difficult and revealing question: where do we put the things of the spirit. Remind us that something is at stake in this concern. And help each of us, when called upon to assume a task in your name, to make ourselves available for it and to do it cheerfully and with a light but a serious heart. In the spirit of Christ.
"The Scripture Reading for today is taken from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 4. Verses 1 - 6. It is found on page 1018 in the Bible that is in the pews."

After announcing the page number...pause for about 10 to 15 seconds...allowing people time to locate the scripture in the Bible. People do like to follow along with the reader.

Thanks...

"Thus ended the reading taken from the Holy Scripture. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word and to our understanding of it.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

REMEMBER TO:

1. Go slowly...don't rush it...remember it's The Word of God...don't read it casually, and

2. Keep your voice up...smile...and remember that Ada Kinney has to hear you 'way in the back of the Church."
ANTHEM: "Like As a Hart"

"Like as a hart desireth the waterbrooks, so longeth my soul after Thee, O Lord."

ANTHEM: "The Lord Will Not Suffer"

"The Lord will not suffer thy foot to be moved, and He that keepeth thee will not slumber. Nor will He, nor will He slumber. Behold! He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to remain to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New singers are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held Wednesdays at 6 pm in the downstairs Choir Room. Now's a fine time to join!

NEXT SUNDAY

The first Sunday of the month is the time to include your world hunger donation in the offering plate. Designate your check for world hunger or if you're using a love loaf the ushers will be glad to receive it. Extra love loaves can be picked up on the table in the Russell Room.

ADULT FELLOWSHIP NEWS

If you have not received a copy of the Winter / Spring activity schedule, see Dave Kilbride or Mary Pat Englehart at today's coffee hour.

Our first event is the Annual Wine and Cheese Party to be held this coming Friday evening, February 5th, at the home of Janet Shroads, 515 East 85th Street. The party starts at eight o'clock. If you would like to attend and have not yet put your name on the list, do so today or call Mary Pat at 348-8580 or Dave Kilbride at 288-4647 by Wednesday.

A reminder: our Winter Weekend will be held on March 5th, 6th and 7th at Epworth in High Falls, New York. Mark your calendar now and see Dave or Mary Pat for further information.

NEXT SUNDAY NIGHT

The MYF will sponsor a Spaghetti Dinner next Sunday evening at six o'clock in the Russell Room. Tickets go on sale today at the coffee hour. ($3.00 for adults and $1.50 for children). Bill Lowry, a classical guitarist, will provide some entertainment following the supper. Support our teenagers and buy a ticket today.

MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Membership Committee will meet next Sunday at 12:45 for an important meeting. Plans for the coming months will be reviewed.
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
January 31, 1982

ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A. M.

ORGAN
"Offertoire" Peeters

CALL TO WORSHIP
HYMN NO. 293 "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)
O God, our Father, who hast set forth the way of life for us in Thy beloved Son; we confess with shame our slowness to learn of Him, our reluctance to follow Him. Thou hast spoken and called, and we have not given heed; Thy beauty hath shone forth, and we have been blind; Thou hast stretched out Thy hands to us through our fellows, and we have passed by. Forgive us our transgressions; help us to amend our ways and in Thine eternal goodness direct what we shall be, in the name and power of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER
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PSALTER
"My Soul Thirsts for God" No. 569
GLORIA PATRI
No. 792
AFFIRMATION OF FAITH
No. 740
***

ANTEHEM
"Like As a Hart" Palestrina
SCRIPTURE
Philippians 2: 12 - 24 Page 1023

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM
"The Lord Will Not Suffer" Bach

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY
No. 809

HYMN NO. 256 "Be Thou My Vision" Mr. Clarke

SERMON
"On Being Available"

HYMN NO. 250 "Soldiers of Christ, Arise"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN
"We Believe In One True God" Peeters

*** Interval for Ushering

LAY READER

We welcome Susan Carol Porter to the Lectern today. A native of Glen Allen, Virginia, a graduate of William and Mary College with a BS in Math, Susan is an Account Executive with the Depository Company on Wall Street. A new member of our Church, Susan serves on a coffee hour team and is active in the Adult Fellowship.

USHERS

The ushers today are Miss Wilkinson, Ms. Anderson, Miss Jennings, Miss Jones and Ms. Veenstra.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warmth made possible for us today by Mrs. Whelan, Miss Arnett, Miss Englehart, Mrs. Reyno, Miss Schumann and Miss White.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

The Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. Coffee is available and new members are most welcome. William Proctor is Class Leader.

CHURCH SCHOOL

Sessions of Church School for children are offered on Sunday mornings from eleven to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is also available.

PICK UP YOUR COPY

Be sure to pick up your copy of the February issue of "A Word In Edgeways", our monthly newsletter. Copies are available in the narthex near the door as well as on the table in the Russell Room.
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
AT 9-6997

CHURCH DIRECTORY
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Co-Chairmen, Day School Committee .... Mr. and Mrs. Hughes
Chairman, Ushers ...................... Mr. Larry Morales
Coordinators, Adult Fellowship ....... Miss Mary Pat Englehart
Mr. David Kilbride
TEXT: "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you. I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your own welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me".  

(Philippians 2:19 - 23)

INTRODUCTION  
A word or two concerning the historical background of the text.  
The apostle, Paul, was in prison in Rome awaiting trial for his life when he wrote those lines. For some reason, he was anxious for more news of the Christian community in the city of Philippi. He longed to get there himself for a visit, but since that was now impossible, he proposed to send Timothy, in order that he might bring back a report on the conditions in that young church.

It appears that Timothy was not Paul's first choice for the mission. The record suggests that he had asked others to undertake it, but for some reason they were not available and he found it necessary to approach Timothy.

A FEW THINGS ABOUT TIMOTHY  
Now a few things about Timothy. From all that we know of this man Timothy, he was the ideal person for such an assignment. By faith, ability and experience, he was eminently qualified to render this service. Timothy had gone on such missions before. He had served as Paul's "troubleshooter" on more than one occasion. Whenever a particularly difficult or delicate situation arose in one of the mission churches, Paul turned almost instinctively to this younger man, knowing that he could handle almost any situation with great skill and diplomacy.

So this was not the first time that Timothy had undertaken, on Paul's behalf, a mission of this nature. There had been the time when he had been sent from Athens to encourage the church at Thessalonica when that church was undergoing persecution. Then too, he had gone from Ephesus to Macedonia, and then on to Corinth, when the apostle himself was unable to pay those churches a visit. We know from our biblical record that Timothy was an able, loyal, deeply dedicated and most responsible young man. Paul loved him as a son and had complete confidence in his abilities.

WHY DID HE SEND TIMOTHY?  
If Timothy were so ideally suited for this mission, then why did Paul consider sending someone else. The record does not tell us why; we can only surmise. Paul's reasons were probably of a more personal nature. Since Timothy was Paul's close companion and trusted friend, the apostle undoubtedly felt that he needed his moral support as well as his counsel and encouragement while in prison and during the approaching trial. From a personal standpoint, Paul could ill afford to part with Timothy now. Isn't it true that when one is in trouble and facing great personal danger, it is a real satisfaction and blessing to have close by those whom he knows and loves the best. Paul was not married and so had no family to support him in this time of trouble. We can readily understand his reluctance to part with Timothy at this time, and why he was so critical of the others who had refused to go.

It all comes down to this: Paul was sending Timothy because no one else was available. These "others" to whom he refers in his letter had either turned him
down or for one reason or another were not qualified. He hated to call on Timothy again, particularly at this time when he needed him in Rome, but Timothy was the only qualified person available for the assignment who was willing and ready. Paul didn't like to work a willing horse to death, but the other horses were refusing the bridle. So often in getting the Lord's work done, you have to use the horses you can catch and harness and then hope to train.

Suppose we pause to ask ourselves what was wrong with these other companions of Paul? How was it that none of them could undertake this mission? Here again, the record is not too clear, but I can see three reasons, possible reasons, why these others did not go.

**I. JOURNEY TO DIFFICULT**

First, they did not go because the journey was difficult and too demanding. They were willing to serve the Christian cause, but not when it called for real heroism and for some measure of personal sacrifice. This trip to Philippi was a long, wearing and dangerous trip. Philippi was seven hundred miles as the crow flies and travel in those days was most difficult and uncertain. There were no "jet stream" flights leaving Rome every few hours that would put one in Philippi in 90 minutes. One had to travel by foot, donkey, or by tiny sailboat.

Yes, Paul was asking a great deal. The trip which he was proposing was an inconvenient and uncomfortable one. It would require many days. We shouldn't be too surprised then, that "they with one accord began to make excuses".

Now in a sermon of this nature, we need to ask ourselves what would we have done under similar circumstances? What would our answer have been? Is it not always the sacrificial job that goes begging in the Christian enterprise? People can readily be found for the less demanding forms of service, but the task that takes it out of you, that "ties you down" to a weekly responsibility (singing in the choir, or teaching a Sunday school class), the task that drains some of your free time and energy - these are the tasks that are hard to fill in the life of the church. And some of them would never get filled at all were it not for some devoted, over-worked Timothy who steps in when the others beg off. It is true in every congregation. It's true in this congregation.

This is that time of year in the life of our church when my disposition is apt to be less sunny than it is at other times. I think part of the reason is due to the fact that we are preparing for the Annual Meeting of the church. And one of the difficult assignments of this time of preparation is to complete the Nominating Committee report - the report that involves getting the laymen of the church to assume some form of service to their church, to do a job in the church. So many people say "no", so many say "well, I'd rather you try to get someone else to do it if you can". On the other hand, how wonderful it is when someone is available and responds positively, "Why I'd be glad to do that for my church. I'd consider it an honor". We have positions to fill, some tasks to be done that call for time, energy, personal sacrifice.

**II. NO REAL INTEREST**

Another possible reason why these "others" were not available is suggested by a phrase which Paul uses, "I have no one like him who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare". Or, as Phillips' translation has it: "I have nobody else with a genuine interest in your well-being".

So these "others" whom Paul referred to lacked any real concern for the welfare of other Christian groups, especially those far away. They were interested in the cause of Christ in the city of Rome, but not in that same cause over in the province of Macedonia. Can't you just hear them rationalize? "There's too much work to do
right here in our own church. Why worry about Philippi? We've got our problems. Let them handle theirs".

It is quite possible that these laymen of the church in Rome were "narrowly parochial" in their concern, caring little for the welfare of Christian people beyond their own parish. They were undoubtedly good people, but they were somewhat provincial in their point of view. Their interests were all local, their vision sharply circumscribed, their sympathy had a short reach. To use a more technical, modern day word, these men were not "ecumenical" in their vision. They were parochial. They cared little for the welfare of the Christian cause at large.

Of course this spirit is still with us today. There are hosts of well-meaning Christians today who have little concern for their brethren in other lands and in other churches. They cannot see beyond their own national or denominational nose. They have a little desire to be a part of the world-wide fellowship of all believers. Some there are who actually oppose efforts to transcend national and denominational differences in demonstrating to the world "the unity of faith".

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins this Tuesday. We have opportunity to personally witness to the growing unity of the church of our day by supporting the service that has been described in the bulletin. And we can do more than just attend that service. We can make good use of the pamphlet that is in the bulletin in the privacy of our own homes by lifting hands and hearts in prayer that this movement may grow in strength. Inject the atmosphere where you work and live with enthusiastic words concerning the growing unity of the church in our day.

And there are some persons in our churches who lack concern for even the larger work of their own denomination. They have a genuine concern for the local congregation. They are eager for its growth and effectiveness, but they are largely indifferent to the well-being of the entire denomination of which they are a part. They will pray for the success of the local program and will give to support local needs, but beyond that their attitude is one of "live and let live". So Paul had to send Timothy, for he alone had a genuine interest in the welfare of the Christian cause in the city of Philippi. He cared.

III. THEIR OWN INTERESTS WERE PRIMARY

Now there is yet a third possible reason why these other men were not available for the trip to Macedonia, and it is suggested by this sentence: "They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ". J. B. Phillips in his translation of the New Testament puts it this way: "All the others seem to be wrapped up in their own affairs and do not really care for the business of Jesus Christ".

This line tells us a great deal. These people were not available for this assignment because they were preoccupied with other things. They were all "wrapped up in their own affairs" so that they had no thought, no time, no energy for the matters pertaining to the kingdom of God. These affairs were not necessarily bad. They may have been quite wholesome and legitimate concerns of life. I think it would be unfair of us to assume that these early Christians were engaged in harmful pursuits. They were apparently just too busy - too busy to render a specific service for the Christian cause. Other things came first.

As I see it, this situation is being re-enacted every day in the life of the modern church. The over-crowded, pre-occupied life is the enemy of fruitful Christian service. So often I find that people cannot take on church assignments because they were already committed to and deeply involved in other things - "in their own affairs".
"We're sorry but that's the way it is. I just don't want to take it on unless I have the time that it needs. What about that fellow Timothy. Now there's a good man. He's got the time and the skill and the personality to do the job" "He's a good man; try him"

And the wonderful thing is that Timothy somehow finds the time to do it. Thank God for the Timothys. We couldn't operate without them. Timothy finds the time. Why? Because basically his sense of values is different from the next man's. He doesn't have more time. It's just that he puts certain things first, and if it's a choice between the church, a task in the church, and perhaps a cocktail party or a night out on the town - his church comes first. He has a sense of what truly is vital and important. He doesn't have to be coaxed and coddled. When the need arises, he is available. This is why Paul turned to Timothy for that assignment in Philippi.

I wonder where we fit in to all of this. I wonder....

LET US PRAY Help us, Lord, to search our own hearts and our own ways. Help each of us to consider our scale of values and to ask where on it do we put the church and the things of the spirit. Remind us that something is at stake in this vital matter. And help each of us, when called upon to assume a task, to make ourselves available for it. In the spirit of Christ we pray. Amen

And once he has said "yes" - he carries through on the assignment...all the way. Thank God for the Timothys. We have them in this church - a half dozen or so. We could use a few more.
"ON BEING AVAILABLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 18, 1998
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INTRODUCTION  Jeff Hill is with IBM. And like many people now-a-days, he works from home. Working from home, he says that he needs a very professional sounding voice-mail greeting so everyone will know he's hard at work...at home.

While he was recording a new message recently, Jeff's wife was across the hall from his home office, folding some towels with their six-year old daughter who had just emerged from the shower. Jeff's professional sounding message ended up sounding something like this...listen carefully:

FIRST: a male voice: "HI, this is Jeff Hill with IBM"

SECOND: a female voice: "Look at you. You have no clothes on...."

THIRD: a male voice: "I'm not available right now..."

Well, maybe Jeff's message didn't convey what he meant to convey, but it helps to bring us to the concern I wish to place on your heart this morning. Are you available? After all...this is where the rubber meets the road in Christian discipleship. Are you a participant? Or, just a spectator?

DEVELOPMENT  Remember Flip Wilson and how we enjoyed his sense of humor. How did it go? "I'm a Jehovah's 'BY STANDER'....they asked me to become a 'witness'...but I didn't want to get involved!"

Writer Frederick Buechner tells about his wife's great grandfather, a man named George Shinn. Shinn was a pastor back in 1880. He was summoned in the middle of the night to the bedside of an old woman who lived by herself. She had little money and few friends and she was dying. She told Shinn that she wanted another woman to come and stay with her for such time as she might have left, so Shinn and the old woman's doctor struck out in the darkness of the night to try to find a companion for her.

It sounds like a parable the way it has been told. They knocked at doors and threw pebbles at second story windows. One woman said she couldn't come because she had children. Another said that she wouldn't know what to do and what to be in a crisis. Another was suspicious of two men prowling around at that hour of the night and wouldn't even talk to them. But finally, as the account comes down to us, Dr. Shinn in the prose of his time, said:

"They rapped at the humble door of an Irish woman, the mother of a brood of children. She put her head out the window and asked, 'Who's there? And what do you want this hour of the night?'. They told her the situation and her warm, Irish heart cannot resist. 'Will you come?' 'Sure and I'll come...and I'll do the best I can'. And she did come and she did the best she could"...is how the account ends.

This woman was willing. She was available. Is there a warmer word in our language. Available. "I'm here...I'm ready...I'll do the best I can!"
CROWDS FOLLOWED JESUS

Back to our text for today. Great crowds were following Jesus. He turned to them and said:

"Anyone who wants to be My follower must love Me far more than he does his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers or sister...YES...more than his own life...otherwise he cannot be My disciple...."

Jesus was asking plenty...oh, that's for sure! Can I count on you? Are you ready to do your part? There are plenty of people who are curious and some who are genuinely interested, but the number I've noticed gets smaller and fewer when it comes to those who say, "I'm available". Are you? That's the first question we need to ask ourselves remembering that Jesus does not ask us to do anything He has not done Himself.

When Jesus said that we must love Him more than we love our family and our friends, we remember that time when His own family showed up to take Him home. They were concerned for His well-being. It's there in Matthew's Gospel, chapter twelve. Remember what He said:

"Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" Then He answered His own questions...pointing to His disciples and saying, "Look...these are My mother and brothers".

And that great line as a climax..."Anyone who obeys My Father in Heaven is My brother, sister and mother".

One wonders: did Jesus not care about His mother and brothers? Yes, of course He did...He cared...deeply, but He could not let His love for them keep Him from His mission. I'm sure that as the shadows of the cross grew darker around Him that He was tempted to go back home...to the security and comfort of hearth and family. But He had a higher calling and He could not let His love for His immediate family stand in the way and that, dear friend, is a choice that courageous and committed people sometimes have to make.

Each summer in Cherokee, North Carolina, Unto These Hills, America's most popular outdoor drama tells and re-tells the thrilling story of Tsali, a Cherokee Indian brave. I think it was in 1838...a year after this church was founded...that 17,000 Cherokee Indians were forced by General Winfield Scott to journey en masse in awful conditions from western North Carolina to Oklahoma. More than 4,000 perished on that terrible trail of tears. Some one thousand Indians, however, had managed to hide in the Great Smokey mountains and one of these was Tsali.

Tsali's wife had been murdered by a drunken United States soldier, who, in turn was killed by Tsali and his kinsmen. Consequently, Tsali escaped into the depths of America's largest virgin forest. Eventually a trusted friend of Tsali's transmitted Scott's compromise proposal.

"If Tsali and his kin would surrender to be shot, the remainder of the tribe could stay in the beautiful land of their birth...."

The story continues...
After days of anguish, Tsali...with his sons and brother-in-law walked unescorted into a nearby town to face certain death. What brought him? The soldiers could never have found him in his cave near Clingman's Dome in the Smokies. Despite a burning desire to live, love for his people brought him to die.

At the last moment, his youngest son was saved from the firing squad by the tears of a woman missionary. But no such luck for Tsali. The rifles rang out and three men died, but a thousand Cherokee Indians were free to remain in the Great Smoky mountains. Tsali was available for his people.

"Greater love hath no man than this...that a man lay down his life for his friends...."

(John 15: 13)

Sometimes we are compelled by a far greater love than that which we have for our mothers and our brothers and our spouses. In the same way that Tsali was moved to give up his life for his people, our Lord, Jesus, was available for you and for me. And He asks us to do no more than He has already done.

AND...ARE YOU AVAILABLE TO SUFFER POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES? All of this leads us on to another question: as you walk in His footsteps, are you available to suffer the possible consequences of discipleship? Jesus said:

"And no one can be My disciple who does not carry His own cross and follow Me."

Generally speaking, we are not a people who are willing to make sacrifices. Granted, there are exceptions...but as a whole we have become a people in love with comfort. We drive comfortable automobiles. We live in comfortable houses. We even belong to comfortable churches. Does it ever concern you....it does me....that perhaps we have chosen "the wide gate"...and not the narrow one. The easy road and not the road that leads to life.

Some may recognize the name of Chiune Sugihara, born as a day of new beginnings. January 1st, 1900. As a boy, we read that he cherished the dream of becoming the Japanese ambassador to Russia. By the 1930's, he was the ambassador to Lithuania, just a step away from Russia. There was that morning when a huge throng of people gathered outside his home. They were Jews who had made their way across some very treacherous terrain from Poland, desperately seeking his help. They wanted Japanese visas, which would enable them to flee Eastern Europe and the Gestapo.

Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide visas and three times he was rejected. He had to choose between the fulfillment of his dream as an ambassador and the lives of people. He chose the latter. He dared to disobey orders. For 28 days he wrote visas by hand, barely sleeping or eating. Recalled to Berlin, he was still writing visas and shoving them through the train windows into the hands of these Jewish refugees who were running alongside the train. Ultimately, this man saved six thousand lives.

Sugihara was not only a courageous Japanese. He was also a committed Christian. He spent his remaining days in Japan, humbly selling lightbulbs and when his story was finally told, his son was asked:
"How did your father feel about his choice?" And the young man replied, "My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right things, he was available to do it."

There's that word again: available. Friend...it takes courage to be available. It takes compassion and caring and commitment. Ask yourself: are you willing to walk in the steps of Christ? Are you willing to suffer the possible consequences. And one more thing: are you willing to tell His story and share the lifting word with others about the life and love of Christ.

ARE YOU AVAILABLE TO TELL HIS STORY

Are we too scared to "let our light shine before others?" Are we too sophisticated to "go and make disciples of all nations?" Or, is it that we really don't believe in the power of God to change the lives of people? Whatever the reasons, few Christians are willing and able to share their faith with others.

Some of you have heard this before, but let me share it again. Years ago I was sitting in the study of a friend and colleague, Tom Grissom. Tom, at that time was pastor of our Salem United Methodist Church, here in the city. My eye spotted something on his study wall. It was framed and read:

"God never asks about our ability, or our inability. But only about our AVAILABILITY...."

How many times I've thought of that as we work hard and struggle to keep this center of God's light and love alive in this city...in what some will call "the world's greatest mission field". I was drawn to this assignment 42 years ago this Fall. The day I had my interview with the PPR committee and the District Superintendent, was the same day that Don Larsen pitched his perfect game in the 1956 World Series. I feel I've come "full circle".

And as I look ahead, I'm reminded of what God can do with anyone who makes himself or herself available...available to walk in Christ's footsteps, yes...available to take a courageous stand when necessary...available to share one's faith when the opportunity arises. It's such a simple thing. It is to say when we hear God calling "in the night"....

"Here I am Lord. I will go, Lord...if you lead me. I'm here...available...and I'll do the best I can - for Him!"

PRAYER
PASTORAL PRAYER: October 18, 1998

ETERNAL SPIRIT...whose light and love has been shed abroad in our world through the words of the wise and the deeds of the daring and the brave...we who are gathered together here in this sacred place would THANK YOU for the wisdom put before us in the books of the Bible and in the words of those who would lead us well into new life.

FROM OUR earliest years we have heard these words and well we know that happiness would be our lot if we could and would only heed them...and so,

WE PRAY, O GOD, that while we worship YOU that each of us may find some change taking place within ourselves. Help us to make those changes which lead to a fuller, richer life. Help us to quiet those hot and angry impulses that would destroy us and others...and YES,

WE PRAY, Lord, for the success of the "Good News"...the Gospel of Jesus as it touches the lives of all who hear it and feel it.

We pray, too, that our loved ones from whom we are separated by distance in these moments...those who are far away...may find some comfort in the assurance that Your PRESENCE is with them as it is with us.

THROUGH these dark, dreary and difficult days may we daily be kept in the path of hope and love. Help us to always walk "the high road" and to be steady in hours of conflict and confusion. Help each of us, too, as we look forward to coming weeks to set our feet upon those things which belong to this hour and this place.

MAY WE GIVE our lives for the things...the values...which are of greatest importance. And accept us as we give our energies to the Church of Jesus Christ in its effort to hold the attention and affections of all peoples on those things which are of lasting value.

NOW BLESS our fellowship with one another. May there be no stranger who lacks our company and may no failure of ours be responsible for the loneliness of any person. And,

In everything we do this day...may the mind and the spirit of Jesus be alive in us. In His blessed name, we now pray.
ANTHEM: "Psalm 23"

The familiar words of Psalm 23 provide us with the text for the first anthem.

ANTHEM: "How Lovely Are the Messengers"

"How lovely are the messengers that preach the gospel of peace. To all the nations is gone forth the sound of their words, throughout all the lands their glad tidings. How lovely they that preach us the gospel of peace".

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in the downstairs Choir Room.

WORSHIP COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Worship Committee will meet on Sunday, October 25th, at 1:00 pm.

SPECIAL PICK-UP, NOVEMBER 7

Please call Julie Klein (722-3187) or Lynn Tucker (369-3897) for arrangements to pick-up larger size objects or multiple bag donations for the 1998 All Church Fair.

THE ENVELOPE IN THE PEW

There's an envelope in the pew for an October gift to the special World Communion offering of Sunday, October 4th. Envelopes will be there for one more Sunday for any late gifts for this special appeal.

MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Membership Committee will meet on Tuesday evening of this coming week at 6:30 pm in Fellowship Hall to make plans for the special November 8th coffee hour for new friends as well as to prepare for the Sunday evening, November 15th, Membership Conversations for those who wish to join the Church on December the 6th.

GREAT FICTION GROUP

Thursday, October 29th, is the date of the next meeting of our church Book Club. The meeting is scheduled for seven o'clock on the third floor. She's Come Undone by Wally Lamb is the book to be reviewed. Dinner in a nearby restaurant will follow.

DON'T FORGET

Don't forget to return your filled-out copy of the recent questionnaire sent out to all church members by the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee. It's important to receive your input! (Send it to the church office). It will assist the Bishop and the District in the selection process of new ministerial leadership upon the forthcoming retirement of Mr. Clarke.
A FALL RUMMAGE SALE

Our Fall Rummage Sale is scheduled for Saturday, October 31st, from 10 am to 3 pm. Workers are needed for it, especially some strong and able men. Please be in touch with Margaret Fisher, Coordinator, at 662-6432 if you can lend a hand.

Proceeds go to the Summer Camp Program at Camp Olmsted run by the United Methodist City Society. The John J. Risley Fund for the Homeless sponsored by our Church also has a share in the proceeds.

Pick up some of the flyers in the narthex today. Post them around the neighborhood and in your building. Help to share the word of this outreach program of our Church.

TODAY AT ONE

The Fall Church Conference of our parish will be held this afternoon in our third floor Fellowship Hall. A light lunch will be provided for those who attend — and we hope that many of you will! Head to the third floor around 12:40 and secure some refreshments for the meeting which will begin at one and extend through two-fifteen. Our District Superintendent, the Reverend Carol M. Cox, will be present for this "once a year" meeting.

Several important items are on the agenda including the election of four trustees and the presentation and adoption of the 1999 operating budget. Plans for the forth coming 1999 November Financial Canvass will be reviewed.
TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
October 18, 1998
ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A. M.

ORGAN
"Ballade"
Clokey

CALL TO WORSHIP
HYMN NO. 545 "The Church's One Foundation"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

Eternal God, You make all things new and forgive old wrongs we can't forget. We confess that we have spent time without loving and years without purpose, and the calendar condemns us. Daily we have done wrong and failed to do what You have asked of us. Forgive the past. Do not let evil cripple us or shame us. Lead us into the future, free from sin, free to love and ready to work for Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose spirit we pray and in whose name we offer this prayer of confession. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

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PSALTER
Psalm 24
No. 755

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH
No. 885

GLORIA PATRI
No. 71

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ANTHEM
"Psalm 23"
Zimmerman

PSALTER
Psalm 24
No. 755

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH
No. 885

GLORIA PATRI
No. 71

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ANTHEM
"How Lovely Are the Messengers" Mendelssohn

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY
HYMN NO. 593 "Here I Am, Lord"

SERMON
"On Being Available"
Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 578 "God of Love and God of Power"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN
"Allegro"
Clokey

*** Interval for Ushering

LAY READER

We welcome Amy Walker Sublette to the lectern today. A native of Little Rock, Arkansas, Amy studied theater at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. An aspiring actress, Amy has lived in New York for almost four years. She and her husband, Brad, have been members of the Church since last December.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar today are given by Jane and Lyndon Woodside in memory of their parents, Hubert and Valerie Woodside and Ann and Eric Wilke.

GREETERS AND USHERS

The greeters today are Walter Spencer and Vonne Whittleton. The ushers are Julie Hymen, Ken Borgeson, Iris Cotton, Susan Joggom, Lita Reynolds and Lillie Rodgers.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. All are invited to share in these moments of warm fellowship made possible for us today by Jane Chaney, Rachel Bard, Cathy Bose, Norma D'Ambrosio, Wendy Cooper and Iris Cotton.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday morning from ten-thirty to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is available on the fourth floor.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

The Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday morning at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. Michael Reaves, our Assistant Minister, is class leader.
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
427-5421

CHURCH DIRECTORY
Philip A. C. Clarke ........................................... Minister
Lyndon Woodside ........................................... Organist-Choir Director
Judi Ferland .................................................... Secretary
Judith Keisman .............................................. Day School Director
Roberto Meriles .............................................. Custodian

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                      Larry Morales
Lay Leader ................. Larry Morales
Associate Lay Leader ................. Eric de Freitas
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Chairperson, Publicity Committee ............. Sam Wilson
Chairperson, Day School Committee ........... Anna Delson
Chairperson, Ushers ......................... Effie French
Superintendent, Sunday School ............... Veronica Winder