

"ONE CAME BACK"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
November 22, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

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"I'd never been to church in my life and I remember how eagerly I awaited that first Sunday. I had just had a glimpse of God Almighty - men, an alcoholic, a drug addict - rich, lonely and miserable. Already I was beginning to know what real joy really was!"

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"As time went on and I attended other churches in various parts of the country, I made a bewildering discovery. These 'long-faced and listless people' were present in every congregation."

And then she asked a very good question,

"How could they come into God's presence Sunday after Sunday without breathing in the joy that danced in the very air?"

JESUS AND THE LEPERS

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They saw Jesus and His disciples approaching. They knew right away who it was. And when they saw Him their hopes were lifted. They cried out, "Master, Jesus...have mercy on us!" Jesus heard their cry and having compassion on them, He replied, "Go and show yourselves to the priest".

It was customary for persons with leprosy or any other skin disorder to

show themselves to the priest. It was the duty of the priest to decide whether or not the person was healed or not. If the priest declared the leper cured, he was then free to rejoin family and friends. He no longer had to live as an outcast on the outskirts of town. He was then accepted as a whole person and brought back into the community. Thus Jesus told them to visit the priest.

The ten lepers did exactly what Jesus asked them to do. They went to show themselves to the priest. And Luke writes, "And as they went, they were made clean!" They received the gift of healing. Thank God. Free at last from this dreadful disease. Ten were healed. But only one returned to say "thank you" to Jesus. Only one came back. He wanted to find Jesus immediately. He was elated and began to praise God in a loud voice. Healed! Such a healing could only have come from God. Upon finding Jesus, he fell at His feet and thanked Him.

WE RECEIVE MORE THAN WE EXPECT

Point one then of today's "three pointer". The first thing we want to note this morning is that in saying "thank you", we so often receive more than we expected.

Returning to Jesus to say thank you, this man received something he never expected. Jesus saw great faith at work in this man at His feet and looking right at him said, "Get up and go your way, for your faith has made you well!"

This man received more than just physical healing. I would suggest to you that he also received the gift of grace. Another translation of this wonderful account has Jesus responding with these words,

"Get up and be on your way; your faith has brought you salvation.

When we pause to say thank you, we will so often in life receive a greater blessing for our effort. Never forget that.

John Canuso made a deal with God. Chances are that name doesn't ring a bell with many of you. Raise a hand if you've heard of that name. His nine-year old daughter, "Babe", had just been diagnosed with leukemia and as he knelt down by her bedside, he swore, "You save my kid and I'll dedicate my life". God did indeed save the life of his daughter. She's now 26, married and the mother of a one-year-old boy...a child she thought she would never be able to have because of all the radiation and chemotherapy.

John kept his promise. A builder by trade, in 1974...the year his daughter first became ill...he reached down into his own pocket to renovate and furnish a rundown Philadelphia home that became the first Ronald McDonald House, a place where families could stay while their youngsters were being treated at Children's Hospital. John said,

"Thank you, Lord...I'm glad you asked me to do something in my profession for others..."

Helping others was John's way of saying "thank you". And often I'm reminded of John Canuso when I pass through the doors of the Ronald McDonald house down the street...between first and York Avenue and I think of people who have stayed there from all over the country and the world while their children have been receiving treatment at Sloane Kettering.

But back to John Canuso. Soon afterward he started his own foundation and raffled off houses and hosted art auctions and dinners. In 17 years with the help of family and fellow builders, he has raised something like \$700,000 for leukemia research. And in all those years since his own daughter's illness and treatment, John discovered more blessings than he ever expected. He continues to receive letters thanking him for all he has done from the parents of ill children, from relatives of those children, from the doctors and the staff of Philadelphia's Children's Hospital.

Only one out of ten healed came back to thank Jesus for the gift of healing. How disappointing to Jesus that must have been. And when he thanked Jesus he received more than he expected. His faith came alive and he was a different man from that moment on. But let's move on to a second point.

IN SAYING THANK YOU, WE ALSO BLESS OTHERS

And that is that in saying thank you, we also bless others.

I recently read about a Sunday School class of seven year old children out in Huntington Beach, California that made cards to distribute to residents of a nearby nursing home. It sort of reminded me of the cards that our boys and girls send out to the sick and shut-ins of our church. The children went from room to room handing persons their cards. Some people appreciated them while others just said nothing in response.

Audrey Evangelista had one card left. She handed it to a woman sitting in a wheelchair and smiled at her. The woman's eyes just filled with tears of joy and she turned to seven year old, Audrey, and exclaimed, "Oh, thank you... thank you so much". And then turning to another resident, this elderly woman said,

"Would you look at this! Isn't this beautiful!" "Oh, my dear, thank you...."

Little Audrey learned an important lesson that day and reflecting on that special moment later on as an adult, she said this,

"I felt how good it was to give a person something. That is such a good feeling, isn't it? Even Jesus appreciated being thanked!"

And this is why no prayer is complete without a word of thanksgiving. Prayers ought always to begin with a note of thanks. St. Paul it was who said "Give thanks in all circumstances". And St. Augustine, I think it was, who said that "A Christian should be an 'alleluia' from head to toe". But hold on, some of you may be tempted to say,

"But Pastor, you don't know what I'm going through... there is just no way I could give thanks right now."

And I would say to you, "Give thanks anyway". You can't know whether some of your burdens may someday be blessings."

CBS News Anchor, Dan Rather, in his book, I Remember, tells about his football tryout at Sam Houston State Teachers College. Dan Rather had a love for football so he tried out for the team hoping to receive a scholarship. The coach, T. F. "Puny" Wilson, was six feet seven inches tall..an All-American, too.

Dan Rather writes,

"The day was at hand when I suspected that my trial time was up. I was supposedly playing end, and one afternoon Puny had the opposition run one power sweep after another in my direction. This meant that the ball was given to one of their players and all the rest were supposed to knock me out of the way. I was convinced that my staying in school depended on my passing this enormous test."

Things did not go well that day for young Dan Rather. This Lutheran minister's son goes on to write,

"They were knocking me past the cinder track and pretty soon I landed over the fence and then into the next county".

When the ordeal was all over, Coach Puny came over and put his arm around Rather and issued the following verdict on Rather's rather risky play,

"Son...I watched you out there the whole time today. And I want to tell you something that I hope will stay with you the rest of your life...because if it does, it'll be of no small value to you. You're little!"

And then pausing for a moment, he then added, "And you're yellow". Not a very good day for a young man who hoped to receive a football scholarship as a means of acquiring a college education.

Dan Rather tells us that he looks back and sees this as an influential moment in his life. Yes, I think it would be. He called it "a defining moment" and he goes on to say this,

"I was little by football standards, no doubt about it. I measured six feet and always said that I weighed 167 pounds which was an outrageous lie. I weighed 155 - a fly among elephants. By cutting off my 'so-called' scholarship, Coach "Puny" Wilson had crushed a dream; eliminated my chance at housing in the athletic dorm; and I might have been driven out of college all together.

As it turned out, however, the coach had done me an immeasurable service. To stay in school, I latched on to an apprentice sportcaster's spot at a little radio station, and my obsession with football abated sufficiently so I could shift my attentions to where they would do me the most good for the long run - my journalism courses."

You say, "but things really aren't going well for you?" I say, "Give thanks anyway". By giving thanks we unlock the storehouse of God. And we discover that so often in life our trials are transformed into triumphs. The next time you see Dan Rather on CBS News, remember that "defining moment" in his life provided by Puny Wilson.

But one more thing needs to be said in order to make this round out to a "three pointer".

WE ARE ALL DEBTORS

The final point is that we are all debtors. Gert Behanna found some "long-faced" Christians in the churches she visited. They were Christians who in the press of life's battle had forgotten the debt they owed. Perhaps there are some present here this morning who fall into this category. I believe that every one of us ought to spend our lives saying "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you". We are all so richly blessed.

Last month we passed to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. Some questions were raised as to whether or not Columbus was the first to make this discovery and some, particularly Native Americans, were not too happy with the discovery itself. Yet, there is no denying that Columbus did indeed make a contribution to our world which influenced the lives of many generations to come.

One historian, quoted in an article in October, had this to say,

"It was the genius of Christopher Columbus to marshal all of his knowledge and past experience and use it to forge the Enterprise of the Indies...Columbus' breakthrough lay in his ability to make theory a useful too. This was a thoroughly modern idea....the notion that ideas could be transformed into action, even on such a grand scale as the scheme of getting East by going West - was what set him apart. Columbus was born at precisely the right place, and grew into manhood learning precisely the right things, at a time when the West discovered it must risk, or wither, or grow or die."

Whether the actions of Columbus meet with your approval, we do acknowledge his contribution. We acknowledge all the men and women through the ages who have given themselves to provide us with the many blessings we this day enjoy. But like that one Samaritan who came back, we are thankful, most of all, to Jesus. His contribution is greatest of all, for He has given us life...and hope...and love...and victory.

CLOSING

One came back praising God. Where do you fit into this this morning? Are you out there on the road with the nine who take life and all of its blessings for granted? I feel sorry for you if that's where you are. Or, is there something of a "song in your heart" this day... this time of "thanks-giving"...a song for all that God has done for you? Think about it today and in the days of this week. And a joyous and a happy thanksgiving to each of you.

PRAYER

O God, there is so very much for which we are thankful...that we don't know where to begin. In our better moments, we see just how richly blessed we are and can be. Stir within us the grace of gratitude this hour and let it flow out to others in all we do. In the name of Christ and remembering the "one who came back", we say "Amen" and "Amen".

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PASTORAL PRAYER: November 22, 1992

FATHER GOD, YOUR HAND has touched our dust and given us the gift of life!

You have given us the sense of sight to see flowers and friends.

You have given us the sense of sound to hear words and wind.

You have given us the sense of touch to feel and to explore the world in which we live.

AWAKEN US, O LORD -

To the wonders of the world in which we live.

To the sights and the sounds of nature.

To the presence of those who surround us.

To the mysteries of life that we cannot fully comprehend.

To the simple joys that daily we can experience.

THEN WE CAN BECOME THANKFUL -

That we are alive.

That we can see, and hear and experience.

That we can think and remember.

That we can love and be loved.

That we can wonder and explore.

That we can pray and can praise You.

LORD, WE THANK YOU -

For being patient with us,

For not forgetting us when we forget You.

For loving and forgiving us.

For being here with us now - in our worship, in our fellowship,
in our service to others.

For music and singing that lift us,

For rest and leisure that refresh us,

For laughter and joy that renew us,

For those who understand us and help us to keep with it.

MOST OF ALL, WE THANK YOU for not withholding the blessings of life from us even though we take them for granted.

NOW TAKE US FROM OUR WORSHIP into the city where we can turn our words of thanksgiving into deeds of loving service for others.

KEEP US ALWAYS...close to the side of Christ, mindful of His values and always dependent on His Spirit.

For we would live, even as we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

HELEN

KORSYHA

MOTHER OF

STEVE

- EDUCATION COMMITTEE
November 8, 1990

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