

"PRIESTS TO EACH OTHER"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York City, New York 10028
November 13, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

I like to think that I work in a stressful job under a lot of pressure. Recently I saw a list of professions ranked according to the degree of stress related to that profession. I went down the list looking for "minister". It wasn't there. Well, I thought, maybe it's under "clergy". And so I looked a second time. It wasn't there. "Pastor?" No. "Priest?" No. It wasn't there under any category. I threw the paper away.

I mentioned this at lunch recently to a friend who is a psychologist. He told me that the ministry is considered a "low stress" vocation. So I have no "empirical data" to prove that I am in a stressful vocation. I like to think it is. No one likes to think that they have an easy time of it.

You ask anybody if their vocation is a stressful one and they'll answer "yes". You ask anybody "How's your job going?" and they'll start telling you about the pressure they're under. If your job is sitting in a chair doing nothing all day long, you're going to have some stress related to that job. You will still worry about something. Probably about your performance review.

MOSES / STRESSING OUT

Today's sermon gets underway then with this observation that everybody has some stress. That's why I was delighted to come across an incident in the Book of Numbers, the story of Moses "stressing out" in the desert. It's a wonderful story...the way I like my heroes...under stress. I guess I want them to know what I have to put up with.

That's what is so great about the Bible. There are real people in it. Yes, even Moses, the great leader of the Hebrew people is under stress. The Bible makes it clear to us that Moses was ill-prepared to do the job he was called to do. He didn't have the talent to do it. But he "hung in there" and he made it, got the job done. That's there to tell you that if you do what God calls you to do, and "hang in there", the chances are that you're going to make it.

You think you've made mistakes in your life? You think you've got some problems? You think you have to work with a bunch of turkeys (note I'm in season) when you'd rather be soaring with the eagles? Well, here's old Moses, who had to be the leader of a bunch of complainers for forty years, and he never really wanted the job in the first place. He was living a happy life in Midian, working for his father-in-law. He could probably have inherited the farm if he had stuck around, but he stumbled on that burning bush and God spoke to him...a conscience at work. He was called to remember all of those who were suffering in Egypt, all those he left behind in slavery. He's enjoying the good life, the affluent life, in Midian and they're suffering "down there" in Egypt.

AND WHAT FOLLOWS

God told him to go and lead those people out of slavery into freedom. Moses said, "I am not able". God said, "Do it anyway. I'll cover the bases for you". Moses said, "But I can't make a speech. How can you be a great leader if you're not a great communicator... if you stutter?" God said, "Don't worry about it...just do your part. I'll try to think of something". And He did.

It went splendidly - really. Remarkably! In fact - miraculously - when you really stop to think about it. Everyone got along just fine. All went

according to the plan...smoothly...everyone happy. Until they got into the middle of the desert. Then trouble. Have you ever been on a tour with a bunch of complainers? Have you ever had to lead a tour? Well...you can imagine what Moses had to put up with for forty years...out there in the hot desert. No easy tour...no buses, no rest rooms, no cool drinks at sundown.

I suspect that some of the complaints were legitimate. Especially the complaint about the lack of food to feed the families. The people would plead with Moses during the day, ask him to do something about it, and at night Moses could hear their weeping. They blamed him for the mess they were in. Remember as Kennedy once put it, "Success has one hundred fathers. Defeat is an orphan". They complained to Moses, "We were better off in Egypt when we were slaves than we are now that we are free".

Well, finally Moses had had all he could take and he said to God,

"Why have you done this to me? Why have you laid all of this on me? Am I the natural father of all these people that I should take responsibility for looking after them? I've had it. You can take your old Exodus and finish it yourself. I'm going back to Midian. I don't need this!"

And then comes our text,

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone'".

Now this is an amazing passage. What we have here is the establishment of the religious community as a corporate body. It's not all on Moses. It's not a one man show. The religious community is a spiritual community, with the emphasis on community. Moses didn't have to do it all by himself.

"I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and I'll put it on them so that they will bear the burden of the people with you".

Isn't that something! That's marvelous. I'll just bet that's the scene that Paul had in mind when he sits down centuries later to write those lines to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burden, and so fulfill the Law of Christ".

PAUL'S CONTRIBUTION

Yes, I'll bet that's what he had in mind, because, remember...Paul was a good Jew, a Pharisee, which means he was "up" on Judaism. He knew all of these stories by heart. He also knew about the heritage of community, that Israel was a special community guided by God's spirit, and he knew that God spreads the Spirit around to all the people. He knew that God takes some of the Spirit to be placed on priests and leaders, and sprinkles a bit of it on all members of the Church.

Paul made that point over and over again in all of his letters. We are one body in Christ, one Body in the Spirit. And the body is made up of different

parts. Each part has its own gift. Each member of the Church has a gift to give. Every gift is equal in importance to every other gift. Every gift can be used by the Spirit to build up the whole body of Christ. Paul says that over and over again...in every Letter...you've heard it. We are all gifted because of the Spirit.

AND LUTHER CAME ALONG

And then Luther comes along in the Middle Ages, hundreds of years later, and said we've forgotten all that that Paul had said. We may be a great religious, international organization. We have these great, beautiful, Gothic cathedrals with flying buttresses, but we're not flying as a Church as long as the Spirit is locked up in the sacristy where only the priests can get to it.

So Luther took some of the Spirit that had been reserved for the clergy and he gave it to the laity. Remember what he called it. It's one of the "hallmarks" of being a Protestant. He called it the "priesthood of all believers". "We are to be priests to one another" said Luther.

Do you know what a priest does? A priest mediates the grace of God. A priest makes the presence of God real in the world. That's the job of a priest. Luther said - and Paul said it before him - we are all priests. That is to say, we can all mediate the grace of God to another human being. We can all make God real in this world. How? By bearing one another's burdens.

REFLECTIONS ON IT

Now this idea has been around for a long time, but it's still new to a lot of people and it's hard to sell in America....because...America is charged with "individualism". If you are successful in America, it's because you do something all by yourself. "Pugged individualism" - that's still the myth in this land. Even in religion it's the model. So, in America we say religion is primarily private and personal. What I do in religion is my own business. How many times we've heard that. Or, I can worship just as well on a golf course Sunday morning as I can in Church. Baloney. But hello somebody! But you've heard it and I've had that feeling...or here's a more credible scenario:

"The woods are my cathedral. The sunset is my stained glass. The sound of waves or waterfalls are my organ. The song of birds my choir."

Yes, I'll confess that I've had feelings like that, too. Nothing makes me feel more religious than being out in the woods all by myself, or walking on the beach next to the ocean, or hitting a golf ball down a beautiful green fairway. It just puts me right next to God.

I'm not knocking this...nature religion is legitimate and somewhat universal and probably goes back to the time when we lived in the woods and worshipped tree spirits and at mistletoe (getting into the season). But I like to think that the human race has evolved since then.

And one way it has evolved is that there are now what are called "higher religions". They've been around for a long time and Christianity is one of these higher religions. And Christianity, hoping not to offend sun worshippers, says religion is not solitary - that it's corporate. Religion is not only a matter of having a private experience, it's a matter of belonging...of belonging to a worshipping community.

It's not only a matter of experiencing God's grace personally, but of mediating God's grace to somebody else. It's not only having God take your burdens away, but sharing one another's burdens. As we sometimes sing in the hymn, "Blest Be the Tie that Binds",

"We share each other's woes, our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows, the sympathizing tear".

COMMUNITY Community. That's what that hymn is about and we'll be singing it four weeks from today when new members join our fellowship. In fact, community is so important in the church that the Church has its own special word for it: "Koinonia"....sharing one another's burdens. Koinonia means holding one another in community. We're here for that. We're here to build a community into which people with burdens can come and feel somebody knows and cares about them and is willing to share a burden with them.

And it doesn't stop there. Paul is not interested in the Church being a therapy group. He's more interested in the Church being a missionary group... which means that we're supposed to try to make the whole world look like a community. We're supposed to move toward that time when the whole world will see itself as one family under God as the Father. One day, we say, that's going to happen. One day the whole world is going to say, "We share each other's woes, our mutual burdens bear". Someday all of humankind is going to sing that, and the church's mission now is to move the world toward that goal.

One of the stories of recent days as we have lit a candle commemorating Krystalnacht is about Herman Graebe who died recently and who was honored at a memorial service at which the Israel Consul spoke. He spoke of Graebe's heroism and his willingness to sacrifice everything for the sake of other human beings.

Herman Graebe was a train engineer whose position made it possible for him to smuggle Jews out of the Ukraine. He did it at great risk to his own life and in the article describing his heroism reference was made to a book entitled, When Light Pierced the Darkness, a book about Christians in Poland during the Second World War. The Jews who were saved were almost always total strangers to their rescuers. They knocked on doors and asked for help. The rescuers were from all segments of society and had nothing in common except a lifetime of helping others in need. When the knock came at their door, there was no question as to what they should do. A lifetime of "bearing one another's burdens" had been developed and responded.

WHEN THE KNOCK COMES There is no better criterion than that for judging who is Christian. When the knock comes at the door, there is no question what the Christian will do. When the burden of the world is placed upon them, there is no question what they will do. When somebody else's pain is put before them, there is no question. And someday I believe the whole world is going to do that - share one another's burdens. In the meantime, the Church is here to "model" it for the world. That's why we say that Christianity cannot be a private affair. It has to mean belonging to a caring community that will help carry the burden of the world.

John Wesley put it this way, "There is no such thing as solitary religion". I'm so glad Wesley said that so we can point to an aphorism befitting the great founder of a great denomination. Luther had more than Wesley and one of Luther's best was "We are priests to one another" which is the source of the title of this sermon. It reminds us that God can work through us to bring His

grace into somebody else's life.

"Bear one another's burdens" is the way it will happen. You can be a priest to someone else, an instrument of grace in somebody else's life, the way that God enters another life - just by your being there and caring and listening and reassuring them. All God needs to touch somebody's life is for you to touch somebody's life. That's all it takes. So let somebody today, this week, know that you're there for them - thinking about them and praying for them. And, try if you can to...

Start thinking corporately rather than solitarily. Start seeing if you can forget yourself and think about somebody else. And you'll be surprised how the burden that you carry in your life is going to get lighter. You may question that. You think the world is dominated by the Law of Physics which says you add your burden to my burden and my burden gets heavier. But there's not only the Law of Physics which applies to rocks, but there is also the Law of Grace which applies to human beings. And this Law says, when I give myself to others my load gets lighter. We're playing around here with something tremendously powerful, so let me close with this account.

TILLICH AND ROGERS

It's a printed dialogue of a conversation between Paul Tillich, the famous theologian, and Carl Rogers, the famous psychologist. Rogers asked Tillich why he still horsed around with religion since science answered all the questions. Tillich said, had

"There are two dimensions of life. There is the horizontal dimension. There is the vertical dimension, our relationship to God"

In response, Rogers said,

"You know...I had this fantasy of what the vertical dimension is like. It doesn't go up, but it comes down. I mean, I feel, that at times when I'm really being helpful to a client in those rare moments when there is something approximating an 'I - Thou' relationship between us, when I feel that something significant is happening in the relationship, then I feel that somehow I am in tune with the forces in the universe. Or, the forces are operating through me.

I guess I feel somewhat like a scientist, the way he feels when he is able to bring about the splitting of the atom. He didn't create it with his own little hands, but he put himself in line with the forces of the universe, and thereby was able to trigger a significant event.

I feel much the same way in dealing with a client when I am really being helpful. The force of the universe is working through me."

You are a priest to one another. You are mediators of the grace of God. So, bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: November 13, 1988

WE THANK YOU, O GOD, for life and light and for all things good!

For home, for work, for play, for worship.
For baseball and football, for running and jogging and walking.
For dear friends in whose affection we find a sense of
 life and laughter, warmth and worth.
For time's ability to heal old wounds and bitter hurts.

WE THANK YOU, LORD!

AND AGAINST ALL that would crush it and destroy it, we thank you, O God,
 that we still believe in that Kingdom Jesus saw, and
 taught and for which He died on a Cross.

That even in those dark stretches of life when it would appear that evil has triumphed, we keep discovering clues that point us in Your direction and remind us that You are still very much at the helm.

For the power and pull of the Scriptures in our lives.
For the Church - not yet without its spots and wrinkles.
For modest victories over sin and self-centeredness.
And chiefly for Yourself - revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth -
 Our Lord, our Example, our Redeemer - we now bless and
 praise Your holy name.

HELP US TO LEARN FROM YOU - who never art in a hurry, yet never late.

Bless us with Your poise, something of Your peace and power.
Bless us individually and together with a moving experience
 of Your presence that the fire and determination with-
 in our hearts may vitalize our worship and energize
 our work.

HELP US TO wash one another's feet, rather than always putting stones into
 one another's shoes.

AND SUCH IS THE NATURE of our life, O God, and so sorely have we been deceived
 that we can go for days and weeks without stopping to offer and
 pray an honest prayer...

Sealing ourselves off from mystery.
Relying heavily on our native skills.
Postponing life's big questions, avoiding decisions.
Staying busy - getting, spending, running. We have a
 way of making You, Our God, an expendable extra in
 our busy lives. Now, in this worship experience:

Surround us with Your spirit.
Surprise us with Your joy.

Strengthen us in Your word,
Send us forth renewed with
 love and faith in our hearts.

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

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

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

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

1. Elizabeth McCaddin, sister of carolyn Broones. 3. Phyllis Gardner, mother of Bob.
4. Heidia Rabowsky. 5. Sharon, daughter of Michael. William Brown, father of
Laraine Balk. Maude Barnett Bud.

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to _____ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting 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"

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our 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.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

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".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

There is a tie...and a reason why we have Dedication Sunday on Thanksgiving Sunday. To me, it's most appropriate....as we reflect on our many blessings at this time of Thanksgiving...and say our "thanks" to God.

PRESENT TO SPEAK ON THIS CONCERN

Our Financial Canvass is moving along.
We're now completing our second week

of it and here to bring us up to date is Mary Lou McGanney - a co-chair of the canvass along with Bob Lewis who spoke last Sunday. John Simms is over-all chairperson and has been writing those wonderful paragraphs that have been in the bulletin these past four to six weeks.

Mary Lou McGanney - a trustee of our church and former president of the Methodist Church Women of our parish and a valued member of the Finance Committee will bring us up to date. Dr. McGanney.

OFFERING

Jesus said,

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive"....in this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.

FRIENDS / FAREWELL

This morning we say "farewell" to two people...one is the lovely lady who read the scriptures... Litiana Browne, returning tomorrow to Fiji. Also, this is the last Sunday for Moses Olabode, leaving this week for Nigeria. Our prayers and warmest wishes go with these two people.....and thank them for being a part of our lives...for Moses - a year. For the Brownes - three years. Godspeed.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 13, 1988

VISITORS / GREETING

We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning...pleased to have you with us and hope that we'll have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way following this service - either at the door as you depart, or downstairs in the Russell Room where coffee and tea and some delightful fellowship will be available. So, join us downstairs...if time permits.

Be free in the sharing of your name with us. Fill out a visitor card or take a moment to sign one of the Guest Books. Worship with us again next Sunday. Work with us in our programs of service to others in this Yorkville community.

You worship in a church whose roots are "deep" in the soil of this part of New York City - a neighborhood church...a church that has been ministering here since 1837 - 151 years. This is the fourth building out of which this Methodist congregation has served. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you on this November Sunday morning.

PARISH CONCERNS

Please review the parish concerns carefully...on your own before departing. Be sure to pick up your copy of our November news sheet which gives you a broader picture of what's going on right now.

The meetings for this week are noted in the bulletin. Also, note the word about the new hymnal fund.

Next Saturday is the day of our Church Fair. That's hard to believe...so we have a busy week coming along and hopefully, all is in place (or soon will be) for the most successful Fair ever...under the fantastic leadership of Jacqueline Notestine. Be sure to give your "fair" share of time, talent and dollars to help ensure its success.

Next Sunday is a "big" one for us - Thanksgiving Sunday...with a special offering and a special appeal for food for the Thanksgiving Dinner baskets being put together by the Yorkville Common Pantry. The news sheet carries the list of suggested food items to bring. Volunteers are needed to help out at the Pantry.

Also next Sunday the Membership Committee is planning to have a special coffee hour for new friends of our church...same time, 12:10 to 1 pm... but on the third floor. So, new friends, plan to come and enjoy meeting some of your neighbors and friends here in the church. A nice idea. And regular members, please be on hand to help make these new friends feel "at home".
Next Sunday.

CANVASS SUNDAY

We shall also celebrate next Sunday as our Dedication Sunday. Thanksgiving Sunday...Dedication Sunday....

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