

"SEARCHING FOR SAINTS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
November 2, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

"Life is a mystery...a great mystery" says Lucy to Charlie Brown. "Do you know the answer?" Charlie Brown answers,

"Be kind. Don't smoke. Be prompt. Smile a lot. Eat sensibly. Avoid cavaties. Vote. Mark your ballot carefully. Avoid too much sun. Send overseas packages early. Love all creatures - above and below. Insure your belongings. And try to keep the ball low...."

And before he can get out another platitude, Lucy interrupts and says to him,

"Hold real still, Charlie Brown...because I'm going to hit you a sharp blow upon the nose!"

DEVELOPMENT

This is All Saints Sunday, the one Sunday of the year when we come in here singing the hymn, "For All the Saints".

This is the day when we pause to celebrate the lives of some special people who have enriched our lives. I like to think of them as the "A+" students of the Faith. Oh, like Lucy...we may be tempted at times to sigh and say, "It's all a great mystery...life, that is"

What is a saint - anyway...and Charlie Brown might answer,

"Well....a saint is someone who is kind, doesn't smoke, is always prompt....smiles a lot and eats sensibly, avoids cavaties, votes and marks his ballot carefully...avoids too much sun. Sends his overseas cards and packages early. Loves all creatures - big and small, above and below. And always tries to keep the ball low...." And so on.

Is that your definition of a saint - a nice person who abides by all the rules and lives his or her life with a touch of common sense?

Francis of Assisi bears the title of Saint, but according to an article some time ago in Christianity Today, Frances wasn't always a nice guy to be around. Apparently, he had this "thing" about money. His friars were not to touch it. And he did not mean the...

"You can touch money...but just don't let it grip your heart" sort of stuff....

They say that one day a worshipper left a coin as an offering at the base of the cross in the Church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, Francis's headquarters. It was a common offering of praise and gratitude to God in that day, but when one of the friars saw the money...disturbed by hits presence at the cross, or perhaps knowing of Francis's revulsion of money, he tossed it over to a window sill. And when Francis learned that this friar had touched the money, he did not take the errant brother off to one side and quietly explain his point of view and then hug him so as to be sure there were no hard feelings. Instead, he rebuked the brother severely and then commanded him to lift the money from the window sill with his lips, find a pile of donkey manure and with his lips place the coin in the pile of donkey manure.

Now...I ask you: was that nice? Necessary. How could a saint be so nasty? Of course Francis was an exception to the larger guild of saints? Actually, when compared to the hundreds of stories of saints that can be culled from the Bible and the pages of church history, Francis was merely fulfilling his job description. I think that true saints are never shrinking violets. They are people of action and conviction, many of whom we might find ourselves in disagreement with. They are apt to be people who painted outside the lines of accepted practice. They are people who make a lasting impact on the time in which they serve.

So let's give some thought this morning to sainthood and ask ourselves just what kind of people we would need to be if we were to qualify.

SAINTHOOD IS A LIFESTYLE

First of all, sainthood is a lifestyle. We might even go so far as to say it is an alternative lifestyle. Saints are people who take the teachings of Jesus seriously.

Consider today's scripture reading from Matthew's Gospel - the Beatitudes.

"Blessed are the merciful...blessed are the peace-makers....blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...blessed are those who are persecuted for my name's sake."

There's nothing here about financial security...nothing about classy threads... nothing about driving the right car....none of the things the world seeks after. Saints are people who march to a different drummer. They're people who dare to be different.

A traveler reported seeing a sign on a restaurant wall out in Wyoming....

"If you find your steak tough...walk out quietly. This is no place for weaklings."

Sainthood is not for weaklings. Felix Adler put it like this,

"The hero is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets of life for men to see by. The saint is the man who walks through the dark paths of the world.....himself a light!"

Saints are people we look up to. They are people of integrity who will stand their ground regardless of the standard the world may set.

Tennis fans may remember the name of Stan Smith, one of the best of the very best tennis players in the early seventies. But many who knew of his athletic skills were unaware that Stan Smith - a gracious, friendly man, and a man of integrity....that Stan Smith was also a Christian...in the best sense. He was also a good friend of another man of great character and integrity, a man by the name of Arthur Ashe. One year, Arthur Ashe and Stan Smith were competing against each other in the World Championship of Tennis tournament. The winner would gain instant fame and a great deal of money. The two men were well-matched in skill and the score was tied at match point. Let me describe what happened in the moments that followed...

Arthur hit a very tricky drop shot that just barely cleared the net. To the crowd's amazement, Stan Smith caught the shot and returned it in time, winning the game. But the umpires were not convinced that Stan had hit a legitimate shot. If the ball were "up"...still in play....then Stan won the match, but if the ball had bounced twice before Stan reached it, then his hit was illegitimate, and Arthur won the match.

The angle and nature of the shot made it almost impossible to see it clearly. And a review of the video -tape didn't provide a conclusive answer. Neither the umpire, nor Arthur Ashe had a clear view of the ball. According to the rules of tennis, the umpire asked Stan if the ball had been "up" when he hit it. He replied that it had been. Stan won. A minor controversy arose over the incident and Arthur Ashe was asked many times why he had not contested the call in some way. Arthur answered, "If Stan says it was up - it was UP". In other words, he believed in the integrity of his friend so much that he trusted his honesty in a close situation.

As far as I know, Stan Smith is not a candidate for sainthood. But he did bear one of the characteristics. His words and his actions were one. Sainthood is a lifestyle. He walked the talk. Integrity, someone once said, is the cement of society. It's a big part of the lifestyle of sainthood.

TESTIMONY TO CHRIST'S PLACE IN OUR LIVES

place and presence in our lives.

Secondly, sainthood is also a living testimony to Christ's

Several Sundays ago, at the door following the service, a young man introduced himself to me and to Barbara Landon who was "at the door" with me making a few notes and jotting down shared messages. He was wearing a bracelet that had on it the letters "WWJD". Neither Barbara nor myself had ever seen such a bracelet before....let me tell you a bit about them.

According to the Associated Press, one of the best-selling items today in religious bookstores is a simple nylon bracelet with the letters "WWJD" embroidered on the fabric. Many stores are selling as many as 2,000 bracelets a week. These \$ 1.50 bracelets are in such demand that their creators are scrambling to handle the high demand. What does "WWJD" signify? Raise a hand if you know. It's the simple question, "What Would Jesus Do?" This is the question that is constantly on the lips of every saint. What would Jesus Do? This is why saints live an alternative lifestyle.

They have a different standard for their lives. Their lives are a living testimony to the Lord whose name they bear. It was this question "What Would Jesus Do?" that inspired Charles Sheldon to write his book, "In His Steps"...at one time the third "best-seller" of all times....with the Bible, first, and Pilgrim's Progress, second.

Henry Poppen, who spent over 40 years of his life as a missionary to China, once told Dr. Robert Schuller of his experience of going to a remote village where presumably missionaries had never been. And there he told the people all about Jesus....how He was kind, gentle and able to forgive easily and loved even those who were at times a bit unloveable. When Dr. Poppen finished telling them about Jesus, some of the men came to him and said, "We know Jesus! He has been here."

"No" said Dr. Poppen...."He lived and died in a country far away from here." "No...no" they replied. "He died here. Come. We will show you his grave...."

And they led him outside the city to a cemetery where they showed him a grave. On the tombstone was the name of a Christian medical doctor, who, all on his own, felt called by Jesus to go there....and to live there...and to die there. The people so admired him that they thought he was Jesus - the very person Dr. Poppen had told them about.

Would anyone confuse your life with that of "your" Lord? Remember first, sainthood is a lifestyle. Second: it is a living testimony to the power and presence of a "living Christ". But there's one more thing.

SAINTHOOD IS A LEGACY TO THE WORLD

Sainthood is a legacy to the world.

That is...saints have only one reason for walking this earth. That when they finish their sojourn, the world will be a better place for their having passed through this way - down here. Yes...a legacy by which the world becomes a better place.

What has all of this got to do with you and me? Just this. Every follower of Jesus is called to sainthood. We are called to live merciful lives, peace-making lives, lives of integrity and justice and generosity. We may not wear a bracelet that says "WWJD", but that is to be our credo, "What Would Jesus Do?"

We are to leave the world a better place for having been here. It's a challenge. Why were the saints, saints? As someone has written so beautifully,

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

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"I got a letter from a woman a while back. She was pregnant and she wanted to know if I thought it was a mistake to bring a little baby into a world as troubled as this one is. And I replied what made being alive almost worthwhile for me was the saints I met. They could be almost anywhere. By saints I meant people who behaved decently...honorably in societies which were so often obscene. Our own society is very frequently obscene."

Vonnegut concludes,

"Perhaps many of us...regardless of our age or power or wealth, can be saints for her child to meet!"

PRAYER We thank You, O God, for the lives of men and women who have loved so much that through them You have been able to speak to us. Help us to accept their invitation to try for the good life...for life on the higher level...that through us something of Your love and power may again stream into our world....

Lead us out into the larger spaces where men and women dare to believe things that they cannot prove.

Fix our eyes on those who have "fought the good fight, run the race, finished the course, kept the faith" to the end that we, when we are tempted to give up, or to fall away, may keep on...running. When we are discouraged, remind us of the race that the "A" students of our Christian faith once ran and give us the will and the strength to follow them...knowing that the race is worth running....and that event at its longest, it is short.

In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

OR THIS PRAYER Lord, make us instruments of Your peace...that where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master....grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console.....to be understood, as to understand....to be loved, as to love.....For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning, that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. In the name and spirit of Christ, we now pray. Amen.

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OR THIS PRAYER Lord, make us instruments of Your peace...that where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master....grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console.....to be understood, as to understand....to be loved, as to love.....For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning, that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. In the name and spirit of Christ, we now pray. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Sunday, December 21, 1997 / Fourth Sunday in Advent

AS WE GATHER once again, O God, to JOURNEY back to Bethlehem.....

To MARVEL at a star shining above a manger, and
To HEAR the song of the angels, let us

CHERISH the old stories,
SING the beloved carols, and
PONDER again the glad tidings they bring us of
hope and love,

LET US, in our own ways, in our own lives and languages,
and with our own imaginations and understanding,
join the CHORUS of praise....proclaiming the
greatest of all wonders -

THE REDEEMING PRESENCE of YOUR SPIRIT at work
among us all, and

LET OUR VOICES rise up like candle flames,
brightening this place to celebrate a HOLY CHILD
in a humble place, in a lowly manger.

LET US PRAY for the NEEDS OF this world.

LET US PRAY for PEACE and GOODWILL on earth and that the teachings of Jesus, as
a man....HIS EXAMPLE may inspire us and touch us to work for peace.

LET RULERS be JUST and COMPASSIONATE.

LET COUNSELLORS and TEACHERS be WISE.

LET HOUSES of worship throw open their welcoming doors to all who would venture
in during the days of this Holy Season.

BECAUSE JESUS was born in a cold and cruel time, we pray that the ICE of our
human indifference be melted so we may be LAVISH with our gifts, with
our talents, with our words.

LET US reach out toward those who are helpless, hungry, homeless.
LET THERE be rest for the weary and worn, healing for the sick, and
comfort for the dying and for those who weep in mourning,
may there be consolation.

LET every parent be as loving as Mary and Joseph, and
LET every child be honored in memory of Jesus who was a friend to
little ones.

And then TEACH US, O GOD....teach us to search for Christ's lifting PRESENCE
among the fields, the streams, the mountains, the streets of our city,
however splendid or shabby. And let wherever we are be a MANGER in
which we can find the spirit of Christ reborn. Now bless our lessons,
our carols, our celebrations and our lives and the lives of all people
in all times - now and every more. AMEN.

PASTORAL PRAYER: December 20, 1998

O GOD, OUR FATHER...

Once again, you have brought us to this joyous season of the year when "there's a song in the air"...and the world around us begins to take on a new look.

Because of Bethlehem...because of the star and the stable... because of Mary and Joseph and the child in the manger, we know YOU as ONE who is not just "up there" or "out there"... beyond us...but rather as ONE who is very much a part of our life...here with us now...identified with infants and well as infinity.

LORD, we meditate this hour upon that ONE LIFE, born of Mary...and remembering how she "pondered" the meaning of that Holy Birth.

We, too, would "ponder" the meaning of that life in the days of this glad season...of what Christmas can and should mean to us.

We remember His lowly toil and His lonely way.
His lifting words, His deeds of caring...
His friendship for the defeated,
His hope for the discouraged...

LET the carols take us back to see again the warmth and the wonder, the tenderness of Your coming.

LET our minds comprehend as never before the glory and the joy of the deep meaning of this divine event.

In His coming, You have shown us that Your love is for everyone.

No one is too small or too weak.
No one is too poor or too lowly...
No one is too selfish or too sinful.

Melt any hostility we harbor as we meditate on the One who came to love and to forgive.

OPEN our hearts to Your coming, dear God, that you may come into our lives and make them new...then we shall be able to sing about ourselves:

"All is calm, All is bright".

In the spirit of the Child of Bethlehem, we pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, June 15, 1997

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors....delighted....and we hope the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more personal way.... at the door or if time permit, downstairs....
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Take a moment to fill out....or to sign. Come, worship. Come, work with us.
- C. Doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner since 1837. Fourth building. Minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...
- D. Members: wear your name tags....make a point of getting the name of that person you've been calling "HI"....

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Pick up a copy of the monthly news sheet....it will keep you up to date on what's going on. Finance Committee will be meeting on Thursday evening....be sure to SIGN UP today...if you haven't already....for the ALL CHURCH PICNIC of Saturday, June 28th...or if you prefer to picnic with the CHOIR on Sunday, the 29th...Michael Craig's Mansion in New Jersey...perhaps we can arrange that!
- B. Altar flowers. Celebrating the 16th anniversary of Larry and Doreen Morales....and speaking of weddings....Jim Langford and his bride, Molly Martin...this coming Saturday at 11. Coming all the way from Dallas to be married here!
- C. Bill Bonwitt is attending his daughter's wedding this weekend in San Francisco. Back next Sunday....Bill's last Sunday will be July 27th and we'll have a FAREWELL PARTY for him as part of that Sunday's coffee hour...and thank him and wish him well in his new assignment.

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than
it is to receive". In this spirit,
let us worship God...