

"SEVENTEEN CENTS WORTH OF LOVE"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street, New York City
November 9, 1986

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TEXT: "He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.'"

Luke 21: 1 - 4

INTRODUCTION

Every now and then a cartoon strip gives us an insight into human nature that strikes home because it's real. There was a cartoon in Pogo awhile back where a duck comes to talk to the little possum as he is fishing at the river. Let's listen to their conversation.

"Howdy Pogo" he says, "Is you see my cousin?" "Your cousin?" inquires Pogo politely. "Yep" says the duck, "He's migratin' north by kiddie car". "A duck migratin' by kiddie car?" "Yep" answers the duck. "He's afeared to fly high, he gets afeared he might fall off". Pogo asks, "Then why doesn't he swim?" Back comes the answer, "He gets seasick". Then Pogo passes judgement on the duck's strange cousin. He says, "All I can say is that when he decided to be a duck, he picked the wrong business".

DEVELOPMENT

You may not see a connection between this little story and our situation here this morning, so let me make my point clear to you. A Christian who is not willing to talk about or reflect upon how he or she uses his money is something like the duck migrating north on a kiddie car. He picked the wrong business. And, by the same token, the Christian pastor who is not willing to raise the concern of stewardship at least once a year and talk openly with his people about money may have picked the wrong business.

I, for one, do not particularly enjoy asking for money. I can think of many other subjects I would rather address. But, at this time of year we solicit your support of this institution because we deeply believe in it and we want to be sure that it has a chance to do what only it can do for others in our world and here in this city.

SEVENTEEN CENTS WORTH

Let me come at it for a few moments this morning from the point of love and devotion, commitment and need. A friend of mine tells a story about something that happened when he was a boy growing up in California. When he was young, his father had a birthday. He didn't realize that it was his father's birthday until it was too late to buy him a present. He went through all of his resources and came up with exactly seventeen cents. He put the nickel, the dime and the two pennies in an envelope and gave it to his father, saying, "Here, Dad, happy birthday".

He said that his father carried that seventeen cents in a special compartment in his wallet for more than twenty years, in fact until his pocket was picked and he lost his wallet. It wasn't that he needed the seventeen cents; it was the love and the devotion it represented. That's what was precious to him. And what his Church needs most is not your dollars (important as they are). We need most the love and the devotion that are represented by what you give. If we have that love and that devotion, the dollars somehow, I believe, will take care of themselves. Don't you agree?

BIBLE PICTURES

Now this is the theme that runs through the two short pictures that were lifted up in our Scripture Lesson this morning that Cathy read for us. An unidentified woman makes an extravagant offering of ointment to anoint Jesus. So extravagant that the disciples were shocked. Why did she do it? We don't know and we are not told why. But this act speaks for itself. She is making this act of love because of something that has happened to her and she is responding in this beautiful and extravagant way.

Or, here is the same story in a different form. A poor widow, putting her tiny coins into the enormous offering containers of the Temple. Why did she do it when she needed them herself? Again, we can only conjecture. But I would like to suggest again that it was a response of love and devotion because somewhere, sometime, something had happened to her in her life that made her want to do something to show her gratitude.

LETTERS

Ministers receive letters. Sometimes we get letters from people who are complaining, sometimes promoting, sometimes inquiring, sometimes soliciting, sometimes asking for favors and most of all, they tell you their real feelings. I wish I could share some of the warm and wonderful letters I receive from people who write back to tell me what this parish has meant to them.

For instance, I received a letter some time back from a gentleman now living in Hamilton, Texas who joined this Church back in 1958 and left NYC for early retirement in 1962. Let me read a few lines to you. I liked the way he closed that letter. "Must say I still love Park Avenue Methodist Church of New York City. It's the greatest. God bless you". Slipped in with the letter was a generous check. Twenty years plus, since he last sat here in these pews. He must be in his mid eighties. I thought to myself after reading that letter... "After all those years...he still feels that way about this Church. We must be doing something right...something that is meaningful to people as they come through this way". And there have been other letters similar to this one coming back to us from others who once sat here.

I am proud to be part of a Church that can inspire that level of love and devotion. I got to thinking about why it is that this Church has this effect on so many people.

For one thing, it has inspired love and loyalty through the years because it is a Church that constantly points beyond itself. Halford Luccock of Yale Divinity School was fond of saying that the mission of the Church is "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable". I've never forgotten that and I guess this is what we try to do. We try to challenge people as they come here to us from all parts of the country to look out beyond themselves, to invest something of their time and energy in this community, in this Church, to try to make the city more human. We try to console them in time of need, to be a friend, to offer support, to speak the lifting word in order to get them around a difficult corner of life. We try to help people keep their perspective on life straight - and it's so easy to lose one's perspective in this city, to lift them above the pressures of trivia and such that clutter everyday living.

We try to remind people what is ultimate and what is transitory. Worship - more than anything else - reminds us constantly of the presence of God in Christ who is a fixed point of reference for us. We come here, week by week, to lift

up the broken pieces of our lives, to feel that we have been forgiven for our mistakes and to be empowered for another week of service.

Another reason that this Church has, through the years, generated love and loyalty from its supporters is the quality of service it offers. Mediocrity in the Church has often brought me pain. I feel the Church demands our best effort and I become antry and frustrated when I feel people are not giving it their best shot. When they become casual and haphazard in meeting a commitment. We try to do a professional job in this parish. Our standards are high. I would like to think we are a "high-demand" Church.

Helen Hayes in her memoirs "On Reflections" writes about the lack of quality and care in the world today.

"In all the professions there is a lamentable lack of professionalism. The mere scanning of your badly proof-read newspapers brings to your attention architects who have forgotten to build staircases to now inaccessible rooms, surgeons who have either removed the wrong thing or left hygenic momentoes of their visit, international spies who announce their arrival, and jolly toymakers who break your child's heart on Christmas morning by neglecting to include in the box one small part without which the gift cannot be assembled.

I respect the professional. If he does his job with excellence under trying conditions one can safely assume that, in life as well, he will behave with fortitude and grace under pressure".

To do a job with excellence under trying conditions. I think that reads like the credo of your Church and of those who work here. I can tell you this from the vantage point of the years I have spent in this Church that each year is just as difficult as the preceding year...sometimes even more difficult because of the greater number of people in this city whose lives have been touched by some part of this church's ministry. The quality of life in this city creates pressures for many that threaten to tear people apart. The insecurity of our time makes people want to throw up their hands and quit. It is no easy task trying to keep a center of hope afloat in this city. Ministry is not easy.

We are set in a culture that has been characterized as "the KLEENEX culture" - the first generation to believe that everything in life is disposable, to be used and then discarded. The media characterize it as the "ME" generation, with everything focussed on how it affects the individual and little if no commitment to any value or any system as better than any other except as it affects ME.

And friends, into this culture, we of the Church must present what we really have to offer - a God in Christ who is from everlasting to everlasting, but who is experienced in new ways in every generation. A faith that is rooted in personal experience, but which drives persons beyond themselves to the world to serve in Christ's name. And we must take this message, this "Good News" and package it in this building, adorn it with magnificent music, personalize it with prophetic preaching and pastoral attention, season it with the spice of pluralism and diversity of every kind, undergird it with programming developed by dedicated lay

people, minister to many persons who never pass through our doors and do this 52 weeks of the year and seven days of the week - day and night. What can we fail to do with so many good things going for us? It is a great time to be a Church in NYC and to be "in ministry". As Randy Day, our outstanding District Superintendent said to me in a letter that came as a follow-up to our recent Charge Conference of October 22nd, "Park Avenue Methodist is a great Church!" I love it...even after thirty, tough, demanding years. Someone once said, "The dream of every minister is to go to heaven by way of NYC". Why? Maybe it's because there is more sin here to deal with.

And brothers and sisters in Christ, this is why you and I need to respond affirmatively and hopefully, quickly and generously, so that our church's ministry of love and devotion in Christ's name can be "lifted up", sustained and strengthened for the year ahead.

WE APPEAL

And so today and in the weeks ahead we shall quietly appeal for the continuing gift of your love and loyalty because...we need it. Perhaps you are not aware of how much we need you. Some may say we have not emphasized it enough, but I am doing it now. Some there are who feel with our "soft sell" approach in this Church that we fail to communicate the urgency of your gift and our need. So let me remind you that there is no pledge too small to be unimportant to this forthcoming financial canvass. Let me remind you that there is not one of us so "down" that there is not something he or she can give to show loyalty and devotion to what we are attempting to do here in Christ's name. Let me remind you that the Bible reminds us all that the tithe is the standard of giving and that each of us should be always working toward that. This is not simply a book-keeping matter; it is in fact a deeply spiritual approach toward giving. I says to us:

"Lord....everything I have you have given me and I am thankful for it. I am accountable for how I use it so I will offer you back through the Church a given percentage. 10% may be too much for me to handle right now, but let me spend my years on earth working toward it....and help me to use all my time, talent and treasure in accordance with your will."

CLOSING STORY

I close with one of my favorite stories, a moving story which comes from an unpublished speech by Winston Churchill. It was in the Second World War, in those critical days before the Allies had had many succeeded and the outcome was still every much in doubt. Everything depended on production, and in England, production depended upon coal. So 3,000 union leaders were invited to the Methodist Central Hall, across from Westminster Abbey to hear the Prime Minister.

My Churchill spoke to them frankly and at considerable length about the grimness of the situation they were in, but he closed by pointing out to the day when peace would at last come...when, at last, the hand of brutal tyranny had been struck down, he said, there would be a "great parade". And in it would march all who had served in this great cause. He pictured for them a vast throng in Piccadilly with Montgomery and his men sweeping by. "And what did you do?" a voice would cry from the crowd. "We fought at El Alamein". Then the men of the Royal Air Force would pass by, the "few to whom the many owed so much". "And what did you do?" "We drove the Luftwaffe out of the sky". Then the men of the Merchant Marine who had outlasted the submarines and gotten vital supplies to England.

Last of all, he said, a great host of men would march by with begrimed faces and miners lamps on their caps. "And what did you do?" would come the cry. And from 10,000 throats would come the answer, "We were deep in the pits with our faces against the coal". Labor leaders are not sentimental and the English are not known as a demonstrative people, but they say that when Churchill said that the whole audience rose and cheered so strongly and so uproariously that he could not go on. He had led them to see that they were needed to serve a great cause.

FINAL And so are you. We are part of a great cause. The Christian Church and all that it stands for at its highest and its best becomes personal for us as we consider making a pledge...a pledge of our financial support for the year ahead. We ask for your memories - of what the Church has meant to you in other places and in other days...we ask, too, for your dreams of what can happen here. And then, I urge you, prayerfully and thoughtfully, to give what your love and loyalty for Christ and his way compels you to give - your extravagant gift of love, your two mites of devotion, your 17 cents worth. Together we can do what needs to be done. I believe that. We've done it before and we can do it again...all of us together.

PRAYER Make us sensitive, each of us, O God - to your spirit moving in our hearts here this morning. Confirm within the resolutions and the intentions of these moments. Melt us. Mold us. Fill us. Use us...for great things in this place and in this time.

Hamilton, TX, 511 E. Henry St
Oct 18, 1978 76531

Dear Phil:

This last April 29th I was returning to my FLA home after a vacation. Driving through the Mts of North Georgia a driver cut in front of me and drove me off the highway. I am very lucky to be alive as my station wagon was a total loss. My injuries include a fractured skull, broken jaw bone, fractured chest and three fractures of my right foot.

My family (Brothers) in Texas convinced me to give up my FLA home as I had no one to assist or help me in FLA.

My recovery has been good. All except the foot, it is a real problem up to now.

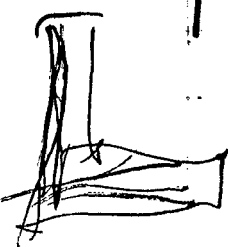
I purchased a small home next to my Aunt, it is an old home I have had it removed/renovated. Has been a lot of fun and hard work. However I enjoy it.

I was born in this area, so it is like returning home again.

My Grandfather was a Methodist Minister. All my family are strong Methodist members. No doubt I will join the local church.

Must say I still love Park Ave Methodist Church of New York "It is the greatest"

God bless you
Toland Atkinson



October 25, 1978

Mr. C. Toland Atkinson
511 East Henry Street
Hamilton, Texas 76531

Dear Toland,

It was great to receive your letter. However, I was really shaken to learn all you have been through. You're right...you're "very lucky to be alive". Looks like the Good Lord was looking out for you, Toland.

I think it's great that you've moved out to where your roots are. The purchase of the small house next to your Aunt sounds mighty good. As you say, it's hard work but fun, too, in fixing up a house to be a home.

I had no idea that your grandfather was a Methodist preacher! Should you feel tempted to move in the direction of joining the local Methodist Church, as I feel you will want to, just tip me off. We can issue the transfer of Church Letter quite easily. This sort of thing is usually handled between two church membership secretaries. I'd hate to see you sever a tie with us, but certainly will understand. You've been a real stalwart across the years...always pledging and sending along those checks. Great support and faithful interest - for which I am most grateful.

Hope the foot heals and that everything else is OK. Keep me posted and drop me occasional notes. I always love to hear from you. I remember with deep gratitude your kind and gracious words of support to me back when I first came here in the mid-fifties. You always gave me a boost and a lift. God bless you, Toland. You're the greatest!

Sincerely,

TEXT: "He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury; and He saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had.'" (Luke 21: 1-4)

INTRODUCTION Every now and then a cartoon strip gives us an insight into human nature that strikes home because it's real. There was a cartoon in Pogo awhile back where a duck comes to talk to the little possum as he is fishing at the river.

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DEVELOPMENT You may not see a connection between this little story and our situation here this morning, so let me make my point rather quite clear to you. A Christian who is not willing to talk about he uses his money is something like the duck migrating north on a kiddie car. He picked the wrong business!

It reminds me of the story of the Scotsman who was baptized in a running stream, but somehow managed to come up out of the water with his pocketbook dry and untouched by his religious fervor and commitment. And there are many like him. At this time of year we solicit your support of this institution because we deeply believe in it and we want to be sure that it has a chance to do what only it can do for others in our world and here in this city.

Let me come at it for a few moments this morning from the point of love and devotion, commitment and need. A friend of mine tells a story about something that happened when he was a boy growing up in California. When he was young, his father had a birthday. ~~He~~ didn't realize that it was his father's birthday until it was too late to buy him a present. He went through all his resources and came up with exactly seventeen cents. He put the nickel, the dime and the two pennies in an envelope and gave it to his father, saying, "Here, Dad, happy birthday".

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For instance I received a letter earlier this week from a gentleman now living in Hamilton, Texas who joined this Church back in 1958 and left NYC (for retirement in Florida) in 1962. Let me read a few lines to you. I liked the way he closed that letter. "It is the greatest. God bless you". Slipped in with the letter was a generous check. Sixteen years have passed by since he was here. He must be close to 80. I thought to myself..."after all those years...he still feels that way about this church...we must be doing something right....something that is meaningful to people as they come through this way". And there have been other letters similar to this one from others.

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And this is why you and many more must respond affirmatively and generously so that this degree of competence of our church's ministry of love and devotion in Christ's name can be sustained for years to come.

CONCLUSION

What more can be said? We appeal for the gift of your love and your loyalty because...we need it. Perhaps you are not aware of

how much we need you. Perhaps we have not emphasized it enough, but I am doing it now. Some feel with our "soft sell" approach in this church that we fail to communicate to you the urgency of your gift and our need. There is no pledge too small to be unimportant to this forthcoming financial canvass. There is not one of us so down that there is not something he or she can give to show loyalty and devotion to what we are attempting to do.

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FINAL And so are you! It is a great cause of which you and I are a part. Today we set out on a six week campaign to raise \$55,200 from the members and friends of this church to support the program and ministry here for the coming year.

We need your support We ask for your memories and your dreams. We ask that you reflect today on what this church has meant to you and what you would like to help it mean to others. And then, I urge you to give what your love and your loyalty to Christ compels you to give - your 17¢ worth...your extravagant gift of love, your two mites of devotion.

PRAYER