

"SITTING AT THE HEAD TABLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
September 13, 1992

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### INTRODUCTION

To me it's always refreshing when people "out there in the public eye" don't take themselves too seriously. Democratic Senator Fritz Hollings told his colleagues in the Senate that he took a "polygraph test" once upon a time in order to find out what the lie detector fuss was all about. But Hollings, that silver-haired and flamboyant orator from the State of South Carolina, reported that he flunked the test when he started a sentence with the words, "Now...in my humble opinion...."

And shortly after Senator Bob Kerry of Nebraska announced his availability for the Democratic presidential nomination, he made an appearance before the National Press Club where he was questioned by members of the press and one of the press asked Kerry, "And how do you, Senator, compare yourself to the late William Jennings Bryan" also from Nebraska and a presidential candidate in 1896, 1900 and again in 1908. After a short pause, Kerry said, "Well...most importantly, he's dead and I'm not!"

And I'll never forget Adlai Stevenson's quip upon hearing that Norman Vincent Peale had come out for the Republican candidate in 1960, fearing Kennedy's Catholicism, that "Paul is appealing, but Peale is appalling".

### A FOLLOW-UP

You know, a sense of humor does help. "A cushion of life" someone has said. Don't you love the person with a healthy sense of humor, who doesn't take himself or herself too seriously and who has a good perspective on life. If you do, then you really ought to love Jesus of Nazareth. From what I've picked up from reading the Gospels, Jesus must have been blessed with a sense of humor. He made puns. He used hyperbole - extreme exaggeration. He must have kept people "off-guard" with His unique perspective on life. He told His share of stories, many of which have come down to us across twenty centuries. You know them as well as I do.

Back in the Old Testament someone described the coming Messiah as a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". Some Christians have taken that to mean that Jesus was somber all the time and to me that's the wrong picture. Would the common people have heard Him gladly if He had been an old sourpuss? John the Baptist baptized thousands, but nobody ever said that they "enjoyed" hearing John. I'd like to think people enjoyed hearing Jesus, seeing that twinkle in His eyes. And if you can picture Jesus with a smile on His lips and a twinkle in His eye when He said some of the things He said, then His teachings take on a new freshness for us. They come alive and those "sad-faced" Christians who don't appreciate His sense of humor miss out on a lot, I think. For example, consider our scripture reading for today. What sour, sorrowful and melancholic religious leader is going to give advice to His followers like this:

"When you are invited to a wedding feast" Jesus said, "Do not sit down in a place of honor. Suppose a more prestigious person than you is invited? Then the host of the wedding feast will come to you and ask you to move down. That will be most embarrassing to you. Let me give you a better strategy. When you go to a wedding feast, sit down in the lowliest place in the room. And then...when the host spots you, he will invite you to move up...."

president" we've ever had...and maybe it has something to do with the fact that he's devoted himself to a life of serving. That along with his "human rights" emphasis may have him in our President's Hall of Fame before some others. And a recent article in the Times was saying something of the same sort of thing about Herbert Hoover and his life of serving apart from the four years spent in the White House. ...and the "service" he gave this country following WWI.

Greatness is measured not by what we gain but by what we give. You and I know it's true but we sometimes forget it and we'll continue to have some problems in our society that cannot be solved until more people in the upper strata of our society are as concerned as much with giving as with gaining. But let's move on to the second lesson that peaks through here which "is like unto the first".

TRUE STATUE IS MEASURED BY HOW WILLING WE ARE TO HUMBLE OURSELVES

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is not measured by how much we "puff" ourselves up, but by how willing we are to humble ourselves. You know...there's an awful lot of silliness that goes on in our world because of inflated egos.

Back in 1970 two researchers for the Kinsey Institute began a rather extensive survey of sexual attitudes of 3,000 adults. By 1980, they had completed their research and had it already for publication, but one small detail remained that had to be resolved. The authors of the survey - Albert Klassen and Colin Williams - couldn't quite agree on whose name should appear first on the cover and so for 10 years the publication stood waiting to be published because of that small detail. Other researchers interested in the results finally persuaded to resolve their squabble. Some of their colleagues felt that 10 years was really long enough for these two men to decide whose name should come first on the title page. Fragile egos.

Someone once said this and I like it,

"If you want to realize your own importance, put your finger into a bowl of water...take it out...and look at the hole."

Remember the play about a bird named Chanticleer who thought his "crowing" brought the sun up each morning. Day after day he got up at dawn and "crowed". And what a mighty "crow" it was. And sure enough, the sun did rise! 'Course he came to think he was responsible for that marvelous sequence. One day, however, he became preoccupied with his personal problems and forgot to crow. Sure enough, the sun rose anyway. How downright silly we are when we puff ourselves up. I think...we elevate ourselves much more surely through a light touch of simple humility. I love this story that follows...

Virtuoso violinist Pinchas Zukerman was giving a master class to a group of young artists who had come to the Aspen Music Festival. These young artists were being observed by a large audience of their peers and teachers and performers. The atmosphere was electric. Zukerman was offering friendly advice and encouragement to each of these talented performers. He discussed their playing in detail and then would pick up his own violin to demonstrate the finer points of technique and interpretation.

Finally came the turn of a young musician who performed brilliantly. When the applause settled, Zukerman complimented the young artist. Then he walked

over to his own violin...caressed it, tucked it under his chin, paused a long moment...and THEN, without playing a note or uttering a word, he placed it back in its case. This time the applause was deafening, in recognition of a master who could pay so gracious a compliment to a young apprentice.

We know it's true. The person who is constantly "puffing up" himself or herself...bragging about exploits and showing off trophies and buying bigger and better things to stay one step ahead of the Joneses...is at heart a very insecure person - boring and fearful. Such a person is afraid that he or she doesn't really measure up. The greater the emptiness on the inside, the greater the need to surround ourselves with the trappings of success on the outside. And the more unsure we are about our own self-worth, the greater our need to "lord" it over someone else. Someday...we come to realize it's all a sham.

True stature is not measured by how much we puff up ourselves, but by how willing we are to humble ourselves. But go one additional step with me, if you will and ask: where does a feeling of self-worth come from, if not from the trappings of worldly success? How else can we prove that our lives really do count? I know of only one answer and this brings us to the third and final point. Stay with me a few minutes more...the third lesson this suggests...

FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

Which is: follow the example of Christ - Himself. The Bible tells us that He could have had it all, but He gave it all up - for you and for me. Instead of seeking to gain, He gave. Instead of "puffing Himself up", He humbled Himself...even unto the cross. And what happened as a consequence. The Bible tells us that God "raised" Him up, gave Him a name above every name that at the very name of Jesus "every knee shall bow!"

Now we're talking about true greatness. Follow the example of Jesus. Be as concerned about your giving as your gaining. Humble yourself and learn to trust your reputation to God. Follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

I spoke of Gandhi earlier in the service. From what we know he took Jesus seriously. Gandhi once acknowledged that he had been much influenced by the reading of the Gospels and deeply touched by the life of Christ. He even once remarked, "I might have become a Christian had it not been for Christians".

Gandhi did not lead the masses by standing like a monarch above them, but by identifying with them and sharing in their circumstances. A part of Gandhi's greatness was that not even the untouchables of India were beneath him or were ever made to feel uneasy in his presence. Other Indian leaders lived in mansions, far removed from the masses, going everywhere and doing everything "first-class", but Gandhi would not allow anyone to be lower than he. Other Indian dignitaries, usually of high caste themselves, were no more willing to associate with "untouchables" than with lepers. But Gandhi not only lived and marched with them, but he gave them a new dignity and a new name. "Harijans" is what he called them..."the people of God!"

And in very much the same way, Christ has given each of us a new dignity and a new name. Such dignity does not come from what we have, but by what we are - those who have been "called" by His name. And as His followers, we are to go out and give that dignity to others...that same dignity.

CLOSING

Who knows...perhaps there is someone present here this morning who would secretly like to be up there..."at the head table" with Jesus. On occasion, we're all tempted to want to sit up there....then go ahead, start with it today and do it like He did!

FIRST: Give back a bit more than we try to gain or get.

SECOND: Humble yourself.

THIRD: Follow His example and serve others.

It's as simple as that. Do this and you'll find yourself up there..once day sitting near Him in His blessed Kingdom.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness, O God, in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the deep corners of our lives...where our emotions sometimes can betray us from being more Christlike. Dismiss us now with Your blessing and refresh us as we go from here through the streets of our city always trying to bring a touch of dignity to the hurt and the homeless of our city...that we may be "life-givers" and not takers. In His name we pray. Amen.

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Then you can have a modest smile on your face as you say, 'Excuse me...excuse me' and make your way to the front. You will be honored in front of all your friends."

Now what kind of spiritual advice is that for a spiritual leader to hand out to His followers? There's not much here in the way of theology and very little that is "awe inspiring". It's down to earth, practical, humorous and light-hearted. You can see the folks sitting around...smiling...perhaps even grinning at the freshness of this insight of Jesus. But then Jesus drives home His point and He "zaps" them with this word,

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted..."

Then Jesus turns to His host and continues....

"When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or your rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when YOU give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

And so in His unique and joyous manner, Jesus offers us some practical lessons that only a few wise persons ever seem to heed. Let me touch on three.

GREATNESS MEASURE NOT BY HOW MUCH WE GAIN, BUT GIVE

And the first lesson that seems to be break-

ing through here is that greatness is measured NOT by how much we gain, but rather by how much we give.

I wonder if anyone has ever counted up how many millionaires this country has produced over the last 200 years...the past two centuries? How many can you name. I have no idea how many, but how many can you name - 50, 25, 10? I'm sure we've produced thousands of them. And most of them are gone, dead and buried and all of their toys are back in the box! Somebody else is now living in their magnificent mansions and everything they worked for has turned to dust. Except for those few who learned this lesson: that greatness is measured not by what you gain, but by what you give.

Take the names of Carnegie and Vanderbilt and Rockefeller...would they be remember if their names were not attached to or engraved on some public buildings, or libraries and universities? Would we have any idea who ol' Joe Kennedy was, with all of the millions he made from "boot legging" if his boys had not gone in to public service? And a century from now, whose names will live on after all of the life styles of the rich and famous of today have faded into obscurity? Albert Schweitzer? Mother Teresa? Gandhi? Martin Luther King, Jr. The number will be few. There will be some artists and scientists and perhaps a political leader here and there, but in every case one thing is certain: each of them will be people who gave more to the world than they received!

It's interesting to note the rising esteem with which the country and the media regard President Jimmy Carter. Many felt while he was in office that he wasn't a good president, but so many now seem to agree he's the best "ex-

president" we've ever had...and maybe it has something to do with the fact that he's devoted himself to a life of serving. That along with his "human rights" emphasis may have him in our President's Hall of Fame before some others. And a recent article in the Times was saying something of the same sort of thing about Herbert Hoover and his life of serving apart from the four years spent in the White House.

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It's as simply as that. Do this and you'll find yourself up there...sitting near Him in His kingdom.

PRAYER       Make us sensitive to Your nearness, O God, in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the deep corners of our lives...where our emotions sometimes can betray us from being more Christlike. Dismiss us now with Your blessing and refresh us as we go from here through the streets of our city and a new week. In the Lord's name we pray. Amen.