

"SPECTATOR OR PARTICIPANT?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist
Church
106 East 86th Street
Third Sunday in Lent
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"SPECTATOR OR PARTICIPANT?"

INTRODUCTION

It was three years ago this past January when that airplane crashed in Washington, D. C., taking off from National Airport. It plunged into the Potomac River. Lenny Skutnik was on his way home from his office in one of the government buildings. The office had been closed early because of the viciousness of the snow storm. He got as far as the 14th Street Bridge crossing over the Potomac and saw the traffic jam. Stalled there, and seeing the red lights of ambulances and the helicopters hovering overhead, he left his car to investigate. When he got to the bridge he could see people in the water, including a woman futilely trying to grab hold of a life preserver that had been lowered by a hovering helicopter. It was obvious that she wasn't going to make it. The freezing water had drained all of her strength. He watched, along with everybody else.

Then he acted. He tore off his overcoat and kicked off his shoes, jumped over the railing of the bridge into the water, swam to the woman, reached her just as she was going under. With great effort he pulled her toward the shore where another man helped to pull her to safety. The woman, whose name was Priscilla Tirado, was a stewardess on that airplane. She was rushed to the hospital. They said her temperature was 82 degrees. Lenny Skutnik was also rushed to the hospital. He was suffering from exposure. They both managed to survive.

DEVELOPMENT

I'm sure that you remember the pictures on television and in the papers. Those pictures have become a part of a gallery of heroism in our time. They're a symbol of the best that there is in human life. We know that.

I remember reading about an accident report that said there were "onlookers" but no "witnesses". It seemed we had become a nation of "onlookers" - no one willing to get involved, nobody willing to take the risks required to reach out and to touch somebody's life. We are "onlookers" in this nation...very few "witnesses". And that's why the picture of a man risking his life to save another life became something like a religious image, an icon of humanity, what we like to think represents the best in human life - reaching out to help somebody else.

And I want you to see this morning how powerful such deeds are. They make a difference. Acts of courage and love, deeds of mercy - these can change a situation. It was a terrible tragedy, that plane crash. But deeds of humanity - one person reaching out in order to help another person - that is so powerful, that symbol itself so redemptive, that when we think of that incident, that plane crash, it's not the tragedy that we remember - it's the bravery. Mary McCrory, the newspaper columnist, wrote an article about Lenny Skutnik. She penned this line, that "On a killer day in a brutal Winter, he threw us all a lifeline."

THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF HUMAN DEEDS

The redemptive power of human deeds.

That's what this sermon is all about.

Jesus seems to be saying that you and I can make a difference in this world with our deeds. Listen to him,

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand where it can give light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

This is powerful stuff, this calling us "the light of the world". The image of light as used in the New Testament is supposed to be for Jesus. Jesus is the light of the world, that's His title. He's a "light to the Gentiles". "In Him was light" says the Gospel of John, "and that light was the light of the world". Jesus is the light of the world - not us.

But listen to Him. He is saying "You are the light of the world". Does that mean what He was called to do we are to carry on? Or, does it mean that now He does what He was called to do only through us? Like that old poem, "The only hands that He has are our hands". So let it shine - those good works - so the world will give glory to our Father in heaven.

That's simple enough. So why do we do it? I think I know the reason. I think the reason is because we have come to think that there are two callings in the Christian Faith. That is to say, as Protestants, we've come full circle now and returned to the Middle Ages, and think there is a calling for those who are really serious about being Christian in this life, and there is a calling for those who are something less than that. Some people are called, we believe, to live exemplary lives and others are called to support them.

That's the danger of preachers using sermon illustrations of saints and of martyrs. It gives you the wrong idea. We hear about Albert Schweitzer. Albert Schweitzer has to be the world's most famous sermon illustration - scholar, musician, musicologist, philosopher, theologian - he was the best in his generation in almost every one of those fields. And then he gave all that up and went to Medical School to be a physician so that he could go to Equatorial Africa and work in humble service to those in need. That is so far above us, so remote from the way we are. We are mediocre, maybe, in one field; he was a genius in all those fields. He was so obviously called in a way that we are not called. The light in his life was brilliant, and ours is like a little flicker. We can support him, but we can't emulate him. If being Albert Schweitzer is what it means to "let your light shine" in this world, then we sadly conclude: some are called and some are not.

Another way to say it is that Christian life has become like professional sports. That is to say, there are the players and then there are the fans. The players are the stars. They shine. The fans are the supporters. They cheer and pay money to watch the stars. They are supporters - not participants.

I suggest it's not unlike that in the Church. Most of us equate following Jesus with supporting the Church. I've noticed the tendency around fund raising time in the Church is to imply that, or to come out and say it directly. And I don't want to undermine that: my salary depends on that kind of psychology. But, I feel there's a danger, and the danger is that pretty soon you get the idea that there are two callings in the Christian faith. There are those who work in the institution - the clergy, the missionaries, the Christian workers - and they are the players. And then there's the laity, and they are the supporters. And the job of the professionals is to shine, and the job of the laity is to pay the bills. That's the danger. Because what it really means is, I'll let somebody else be Christian for me.

A woman and her husband were traveling on a vacation. They enter a dentist's office and the woman says to the dentist, "I want a tooth pulled right away, and don't use any novocaine because we're in a hurry. Just pull the tooth and we'll be on our way". The dentist looked at the woman and said, "You're really a brave woman."

Show me the tooth." The woman turned to her husband and said, "Show him the tooth, dear."

We believe that some are called to extraordinary feats of courage, even to suffer for Christ, and others are called to support them, to cheer them on. But when you read the New Testament you get a different picture. There are no spectators in the New Testament...have you ever noticed that. There is no division of Christians into fans and stars. Everybody is expected to play. Everybody.

Kierkegaard said we come to Church thinking we are the audience - the preacher is the actor and God is the prompter. You read the New Testament and it's not that way at all. You read the Bible and it says, the people are the actors, the preacher is the prompter and God - God is the audience. There are no spectators in the Christian life. Only actors.

"A city set on a hill cannot be hid...so let your light so shine before the world that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

PARTICIPANTS / NOT SPECTATORS

And so according to this, if the office in which you work, the class room in which you teach...or in which you are a student, the neighborhood in which you live is no different because you are there, then you are more of a spectator than you are a participant.

I know there are problems. You just can't go into a situation and straighten things out. You just can't go around asking people what their problems are because you are there to save them from the problems. You can't do that. It was that kind of zealous witnessing that led some person to say that if you see somebody coming at you with the intention of doing you some good, run for your life! You can't do that. But you can do something. And the metaphor of light - I want you to see this - the metaphor of light suggests that it will happen more from the quality of your life than through anything you say or do. It's like being there as a beacon, as a directional sign, so someone can find their way.

We know this works for those who have suffered something in their life: the loss of somebody, or facing some disease, or the raising of a difficult child. To enter that period in your life is like being at sea in the darkness, not knowing where you are, not knowing if you're ever going to make it. I as a pastor see people in that situation all the time and there's not much I can do, except to encourage them and to pray with them and for them. But I know somebody who can do something: namely the person who has gone through the experience. And I tell you, that person - though they may not say anything - just their presence...the fact that they have been through the same storm and made it through. - this is like a light to the person who feels they are lost.

You've got power in your life to help other people. I don't think you're going to do it by preaching to them, and I know you're not going to do it by condemning them. But you will do it by living a life of faith and hope and love in their presence...with all the strength you have, quietly doing what is right, refusing what is wrong, living by the Beatitudes that Jan read to us earlier. That's what this passage refers to. This passage, as you know, comes right at the end of the Beatitudes. It's like the punch line for the Beatitudes - being humble, seeking righteousness, working for peace in the world, being pure in heart...

That may not seem like much compared to the deeds of the saints and the martyrs, but I tell you, I know people whose lives have changed the environment in which they live by quietly living that life. They were witnesses to a better way, and their presence made better men and women out of the rest of us!

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

I never thought too much about that old hymn we sang earlier, "Brightly Beams our Father's Mercy"...sometimes known as "Let the Lower Lights be Burning." We used to sing it more at parties, for fun, than seriously in the Church. It's one of the songs out of the 19th century Revival time, with a melodramatic flavor to it. It may sound corny to some sophisticated ears....I saw smiles on some faces as we sang it this morning.

It was inspired by a sermon preached by the great evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. Philip Bliss, the author of the hymn, was an itinerant musician, born in Pennsylvania in 1836. He traveled around, taught music, taught voice, and sang a little bit professionally. One day in Chicago he heard the great evangelist, Moody, preach. Moody used the illustration of the ship that was trying to find Cleveland Harbor at night in the midst of a terrible storm.

It goes like this. The Captain saw the lighthouse and drew near. And he shouted, "Is this Cleveland?" And the lighthouse keeper shouted back, "Quite true, sir....it's Cleveland". The Captain then shouted, "Where are the lower lights?" "Gone out" replied the keeper. "Can you make the harbor?" And the Captain said, "We must or we'll perish". And the ship sailed past the lighthouse into the darkness of the harbor. It missed the channel and crashed against the rocks. It was a terrible tragedy. Many lives were lost. Then Moody brought it home with this. "Brothers and sisters, the Master will take care of the lighthouse. Let us keep the lower lights burning!"

And until I heard that story and the origin of this hymn, I always wondered... what are the "lower lights?" You'll always hear, "Let the lower lights be burning." I never really stopped to think about what the lower lights are. Well, the lower lights are the lights away from the lighthouse, along the shore, that are used to guide the ships at night through the narrow channel of the harbor's entrance. Impressed by that, Bliss wrote this hymn which became one of the famous hymns of the American Revival scene. Let me bring things to a close by repeating the lines.

"Brightly beams our Father's mercy from His lighthouse evermore;
But to us He gives the keeping of the lights along the shore.

Dark the night of sin has settled, loud the angry billows roar;
Eager eyes are watching, longing, for the lights along the shore.

Trim your feeble lamp, my brother. Some poor seaman, tempest tossed.
Trying now to make the harbor, in the darkness may be lost.

Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman, you may rescue, you may save."

Whoever you are...don't underestimate the power of your deeds. Somebody needs your light. You may not know who. You may not know when it will happen. You may not even feel that you did anything. But some, you "may rescue, you may save."

LET US PRAY We bring to Thee, O God, the best we have and offer it to Him
who is the Light of the world. Help us to show forth in our own
lives such a measure of that Life and that Love that was His that others may be
drawn out of the shadows into the brightness and glory of it.

Lord, show us the way of light and love. We know what we ought to do. Now
teach us how to do it. In the Spirit of the Master, Jesus, Our Lord and Saviour,
we pray. Amen.

ANTHEM: "God Be In My Head"

"God be in my head and in my understanding. God be in my eyes and in my looking. God be in my mouth and in my speaking. God be in my heart and in my thinking. God be at my end and at my departing."

ANTHEM: "Pater Noster"

The words of the Lord's Prayer provide us with the text for this anthem.

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Wednesday evenings at 6:15 pm in the downstairs Russell Room. Now's a good time to join as the Choir prepares music for Palm Sunday and Easter.

CHECK THE BULLETIN BOARD

Remember to check the Russell Room bulletin board for the names, addresses and phone numbers of church friends who are in the hospital or convalescing at home. Remember them with a prayer, a card or call.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

An Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. Anna Delson is serving as Class Leader during the month of March. Coffee is available and new members are always most welcome.

THE SANCTUARY

Copies of the Lenten devotional booklet, The Sanctuary, are available in the Russell Room. Also, pick up a love loaf for your Lenten world hunger gifts. Both are on the table near the door downstairs.

TUESDAY EVENINGS IN LENT

During Lent - on Tuesday evenings at 6:30 pm in Fellowship Hall - Mr. Clarke is leading a Lenten study opportunity on the Life of Jesus. Those interested in attending are invited to be in touch with Mr. Clarke.

THE ENVELOPE IN THE PEW

The envelope in the pew is for a gift to the special Human Relations Day appeal of the United Methodist Church.

NEW MEMBERS TO JOIN

New members will be received into the Church in late April. Persons interested in strengthening a tie with the Church this Spring are invited to speak to Mr. Clarke.

TODAY AT ONE

A LENTEN PILGRIMAGE

Nine Yorkville Churches are sharing in a unique ecumenical Lenten Pilgrimage. The Churches involved represent five traditions in our community - Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Methodist.

The Pilgrimage began on the First Sunday of Lent here at our Church and continued at the Church of the Heavenly Rest last Sunday. Today Immanuel Lutheran Church is the host. On April 1st, at 11 am, it moves to the Brick Presbyterian Church, Park Avenue at 91st Street. St. Ignatius Loyola Church, Park Avenue at 84th Street, is the host Church for Sunday, April 8th, at 11 am.

On Palm Sunday, April 15th, the Pilgrimage will celebrate the Blessing of Palms at 10 am at Holy Trinity Church on 88th Street, between First and Second Avenue.

Speak to Effie French if you would like to be a part of this Pilgrimage.

The leadership of the United Methodist Women invites you to a special meeting today at one o'clock in the Russell Room. The purpose of the meeting is to vote on the allocation of funds made at the November All Church Fair. We shall also be introducing Mary Lou McGanney, new President of the UMW in our Church, to the congregation.

This is always an exciting hour as we make substantial gifts to the community concerns and outreach programs of our parish. We have nine community organizations on the list. We also have four Methodist institutions beyond the local Church scheduled to receive gifts. They are the Methodist Church Home in Riverdale, the Methodist Hospital of Brooklyn, the United Methodist City Society and the Metropolitan District of the United Methodist Women.

A day like today helps to make all of the hard work of the Church Fair fun and worthwhile. So plan to stay for a sandwich lunch and then help us spend some money on good causes that are helping others.

Help us, O Lord, who claim to be Christians. Teach us our responsibilities to You and to others in this world. Save us from loving religion instead of You. Take fire and burn away our hypocrisy. Take water and wash away the blood that we cause to be shed. Take sunlight and dry the tears of those we have hurt. Take love and plant it in our hearts, that peace and joy may be made real for all people everywhere. For we ask these things in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

PSALTER	"Bless the Lord"	No. 587
GLORIA PATRI		No. 792
AFFIRMATION OF FAITH		No. 740

ANTHEM	"God Be In My Head"	Rowley
SCRIPTURE	Matthew 5: 1 - 16	Page 838

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM	"Pater Noster"	Tschaikovsky
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PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 148	"Brightly Beams our Father's Mercy"
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SERMON	"Spectator or Participant?"	Mr. Clarke
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HYMN NO. 445	"Crown Him with Many Crowns"
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BENEDICTION

The flowers on the altar today are in loving memory of Arthur and Elizabeth High given by their son, Frank.

USHERS

The ushers today are Richard Stanford, Wayne Atwell, Russell Flagg, Frank High, Rod Hoover, David Kilbride, Alan Register and Mark Wyrick.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warmth made possible for us today by Anna Delson, Bebe Ahmad, Jaya Melwani, Karen Oldham, Margie Troike, Helen Wilkinson and Charles Wire.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from eleven to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is also available

A MEMORIAL SERVICE

Next Sunday, April 1st, at one o'clock, a Memorial Service for Fred Nalbene will be held in the Sanctuary.

PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

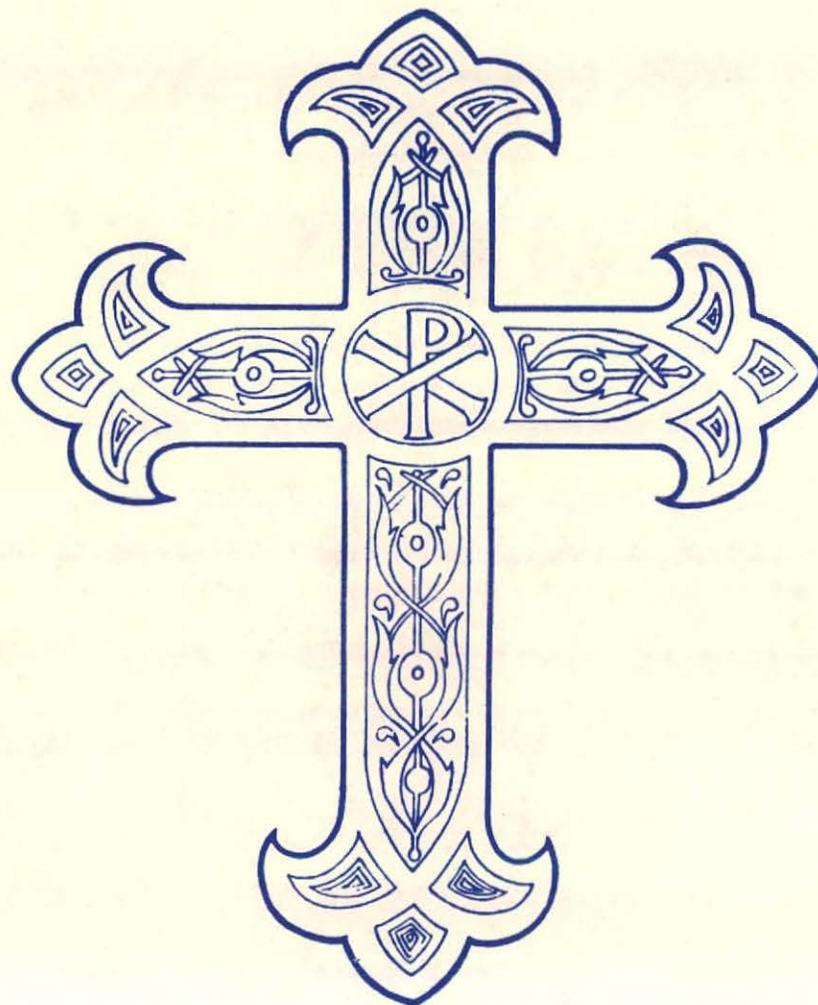
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