

"STRONG FAITH"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
July 11, 1993

## "STRONG FAITH"

### INTRODUCTION

I came across an article recently in one of our church publication (Dimensions for Living) which made me smile. Entitled, The Little Red Hen, it serves as something of a "springboard" for today's sermon on faith. Let me share it with you.

It was the winter of 1940 and the husband of the author of the article was out of work. A house painter and a textile worker, he was temporarily unemployed. These were difficult days for the family. There was very little money and their eighteen month old daughter, Rachel, was recovering from pneumonia and really wasn't doing that well. The family doctor insisted that little Rachel eat a boiled egg every day but even that was beyond their means.

A friend suggested, "Why not pray for an egg?" They were a church-going family, but somehow the idea of actually praying for their own needs hadn't really come home to them, especially for an egg. Josephine, the mother and the author of this article, says that she wasted no time and got down on her knees and prayed that God would provide an egg each morning for their daughter. Later that morning Josephine heard some cackling coming from the hedge fence behind their home. Among the bare branches there sat a fat red hen. She says that she had never seen this hen before and didn't have the slightest idea where it had come from. She watched in amazement as the hen laid an egg and then proceeded down the road. In a few moments the hen was gone but there sat an egg in her back yard.

What do you do under such circumstances? For one thing, you thank God but would you believe that the very next day Josephine was startled to hear the cackling once again in their backyard. And this red hen came by every day for a week and repeated this routine. And so each day, little Rachel got to have a fresh boiled egg. She got better. The weather improved and Josephine's husband found work. Josephine writes that after about a week,

"The next morning I waited by the window...and watched, but the little red hen didn't return."

### DEVELOPMENT

Jesus had just received some very upsetting, some tragic news. His cousin, John the Baptist, had been put to death by Herod up in Jerusalem. There was a closeness between Jesus and John. Jesus had spent time with John in the desert before He began His ministry. John baptized Jesus. Now John was dead and Matthew tells us in his Gospel that Jesus,

"Withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by Himself...."

In times of crisis, we all need solitude and prayer. And solitude is so hard to find in our busy, hectic lives. We're forever on the go. Jesus needed time alone. We see Him here withdrawing from the crowds and He sailed down the Jordan in search of a place where no one would bother Him. I like the example He is setting for us. If having time away from the crowds was important for Him, think how important it is for us.

Some of you have heard of Dave Dravecky. Five days a week for eight weeks former baseball pitcher, Dave Dravecky, drove 90 miles each way for cancer

treatment in Cleveland. He says that at first that trip seemed so long and so unbearable but then he began to notice the beauty of the lush summer foliage on both sides of the highway. Eventually this peaceful drive made its way through Shaker Heights, an older area with some stately mansions.

However, those daily trips were still quite monotonous and Dave Dravecky writes that he could have almost made that trip in his sleep, yet those long drives became an opportunity for him to grow in his faith. He'd think and pray and listen to tapes of his favorite Bible teachers. Sometimes he would listen to a tape of a hymn that he knew and sing along with it. His voice isn't exactly the sound of music, David says, "But those hills did seem to come alive!" It was "quality time" when he would not be interrupted by either telephone or by anything else.

Those eight weeks he has said of driving to and from the Cleveland Clinic saved his life - his spiritual life, that is. He needed that time, he says, "alone with the Lord". He needed it desperately. Maybe even more than the radiation. What was true for him was also true, I feel, for Jesus. He was nourished by His time alone and strengthened by His time of prayer. And what was true for Him is also true for us. Solitude and prayer...how essential to us.

#### JESUS CARES ABOUT OUR NEEDS

Back to the Scripture lesson. Note that when Jesus returned from His time alone that there was a large crowd standing around and waiting for Him. Matthew describes it,

"He saw a great crowd and He had compassion for them and cured their sick...."

And this leads us to the second thing that we would do well to notice in this scripture passage. Jesus cares about our needs. He took time to heal the sick. He could have sent the crowds away. He could have said, "Don't bother Me...can't you see that I'm grieving?" He could have ignored them and gone on His way, but He didn't. He stopped. He listened. He healed. He responded to their needs in the only way that He knew...out of love.

There's a bit of a contrast here between Jesus and His disciples. He was filled with compassion but it seems to me that His disciples were more concerned about convenience. Remember, it was getting late and the people were getting hungry. They went to Him with their concern and said to Him,

"Lord...this is a deserted place and the hour is now late. Send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy some food for themselves."

The disciples were being practical, after all they didn't know what to do with such a large gathering. They didn't have the means to feed them all. The only reasonable solution was to send them off to nearby towns and let them fend for themselves. I think that's what we would have done in their shoes. But Jesus had other ideas. It was one of those beautiful and rare moments to trust that God would somehow provide. No need to worry...everything was under control.

Let me share with you another story that I read about in the Catholic Digest. This, too...makes the day a bit brighter for us all. It speaks to us of God's providence. Sometimes it comes directly, sometimes indirectly.

Beryl David tells about a near tragedy that befell his 74 year old grandfather. Apparently his grandfather was returning from an out-of-town Mass one cold Saturday night when his car broke down on an isolated stretch of highway. As he got out of the car to check the engine, he slipped and fell badly twisting his leg. When he tried to get up, he couldn't...the pain was so bad that he nearly passed out. He lay there...helplessly on the road...and the chance that someone might come along before morning was rather remote. Also, because of his precarious position, a passing motorist might run him over without ever realizing someone was there. As the frosty asphalt began to sap his body of warmth, the older gentleman decided that this was a rather undignified way to die. He began to pray.

A couple of hours later, a young man driving a white car happened to spot Beryl's grandfather and expertly tended to him. The man by then was nearly dead from exposure, but the young Good Samaritan took him to a local hospital. After making sure he was going to be all right, the young man took off. The only thing the family was able to find out about this Good Samaritan was that he may have been a college student. A nurse in the Emergency Room said that he had been wearing a jacket with the word, "Providence" lettered on the back. No one has ever been able to convince Beryl's grandfather that this particular fellow who stopped and saved his life was merely connected with a university in Rhode Island.

A good story. God's providence doesn't always come that directly. Still, we know that He cares. First, in times of distress, we seek solitude. Second, we seek out a caring God. And now on to the third point to lift up.

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Finally, we trust that God not only cares but that He is able...He is able to provide for all of our needs.

Have you ever noticed that the disciples are not always portrayed in a positive light in the Scriptures. There are times when it is obvious that they simply are not on the same wave-length as Jesus, their teacher and leader. This is one of those times.

Picture the scene again. Jesus is telling them to give the crowd something to eat. "What did you say, Lord? Give them something to eat". Maybe they didn't hear him right. Five thousand people and only five loaves and two fish and small ones, at that. Something doesn't compute properly. I'm sure the disciples looked at each other and probably exchanged some words with each other about Jesus. Talk about "disbelief". Impossible. Only the best caterers in Jerusalem with tons of food and with a bit more notice could have managed to feed that crowd.

The disciples knew that the little bit of food they had would never be sufficient, but they were wrong! Little is always much when Jesus is involved. Yes, He can take a little and make it go a long, long ways. And so Jesus took the little bit of bread they brought to Him,

"Looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave it to the disciples...."

And the rest is history. The disciples, in turn, gave the food to the crowd. You know the rest. Everyone had enough to eat and twelve baskets of food were left over.

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The things you have put your faith in...are you sure they can provide an answer for those moments of deepest need? The bank account. The healthy body. The good education. All are valuable, but are they sufficient? Can they carry you over the long haul.- Only God, as He has come to us in Christ, I believe, is able to supply all of our needs.

BACK TO THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

Can't you imagine the expressions of disbelief that must have been

on the faces of the disciples. They thought they didn't have enough, but Jesus soon proved they had plenty. Perhaps they started punching each other and giving some high fives, saying,

"Can you believe what just happened? Can you believe it?  
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CLOSING

Across the years I have come to a very deep appreciation for the different ways that Alcoholics Anonymous and several other Twelve Step Groups have helped so many people. As you may or may not know, the individual seeking help must first have the ability to acknowledge his or her inadequacy and powerlessness. A certain man I was reading about recently had been sober for 8,774 days. Now, he does not go around talking in terms of months and certainly not years. He has learned to live one day at a time. He goes to meetings and treatment centers to help people overcome their disease. En route he always stops at a doughnut shop and buys some fresh doughnuts and a cup of coffee.

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Together they clasped hands as a team and proceeded to sing, "Lean On Me". And then when they had finished singing, they stood up with a shout and were ready to go out and face the challenge of another day.

Long ago on green Galilean hillside next to a lake some five thousand people came together and ate bread and fish. There they marvelled at the love and the power of Him, a simple teacher from Nazareth who talked to them about "the things of God". We don't know if they sang or shouted...maybe a bit of both. We do know that this was a day they would never forget. They had come away to be with Jesus. He cared for them and met their needs and they even experienced a foretaste of what will come - the "heavenly banquet" when we will all one day feast with Jesus.

PRAYER

Help us, O God, to be still and to remember Jesus as He was then...powerful to help and to heal. Let us think of Him as He is now - powerful as the spirit of God at work among us...to lift us up and to set our feet once again on the high road of life.

You have taught us to come apart from the world and to rest awhile. Help us to set aside all our cares and concerns that we may look only on the brightness of Your Being...to think only of Your power and Your peace. Ease the tensions of our bodies and set our minds at rest, that we may be ready to receive that which You are so ready to give to each of us.

In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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The disciples were being practical, after all they didn't know what to do with such a large gathering. They didn't have the means to feed them all. The only reasonable solution was to send them off to nearby towns and let them fend for themselves. I think that's what we would have done in their shoes. But Jesus had other ideas. It was one of those beautiful and rare moments to trust that God would somehow provide. No need to worry...everything was under control.

Let me share with you another story that I read about in the Catholic Digest. This, too....makes the day a bit brighter for us all. It speaks to us of God's providence. Sometimes it comes directly, sometimes indirectly.

Beryl David tells about a near tragedy that befell his 74 year old grandfather. Apparently his grandfather was returning from an out-of-town Mass one cold Saturday night when his car broke down on an isolated stretch of highway. As he got out of the car to check the engine, he slipped and fell badly twisting his leg. When he tried to get up, he couldn't...the pain was so bad that he nearly passed out. He lay there...helplessly on the road...and the chance that someone might come along before morning was rather remote. Also, because of his precarious position, a passing motorist might run him over without ever realizing someone was there. As the frosty asphalt began to sap his body of warmth, the older gentleman decided that this was a rather undignified way to die. He began to pray.

A couple of hours later, a young man driving a white car happened to spot Beryl's grandfather and expertly tended to him. The man by then was nearly dead from exposure, but the young Good Samaritan took him to a local hospital. After making sure he was going to be all right, the young man took off. The only thing the family was able to find out about this Good Samaritan was that he may have been a college student. A nurse in the Emergency Room said that he had been wearing a jacket with the word, "Providence" lettered on the back. No one has ever been able to convince Beryl's grandfather that this particular fellow who stopped and saved his life was merely connected with a university in Rhode Island.

A good story. God's providence doesn't always come that directly. Still, we know that He cares. First, in times of distress, we seek solitude. Second, we seek out a caring God. And now on to the third point to lift up.

HE PROVIDES FOR ALL OF OUR NEEDS  
vide for all of our needs.

Finally, we trust that God not only cares but that He is able...He is able to pro-

Have you ever noticed that the disciples are not always portrayed in a positive light in the Scriptures. There are times when it is obvious that they simply are not on the same wave-length as Jesus, their teacher and leader. This is one of those times.

Picture the scene again. Jesus is telling them to give the crowd something to eat. "What did you say, Lord? Give them something to eat". Maybe they didn't hear him right. Five thousand people and only five loaves and two fish and small ones, at that. Something doesn't compute properly. I'm sure the disciples looked at each other and probably exchanged some words with each other about Jesus. Talk about "disbelief". Impossible. Only the best caterers in Jerusalem with tons of food and with a bit more notice could have managed to feed that crowd.

The disciples knew that the little bit of food they had would never be sufficient, but they were wrong! Little is always much when Jesus is involved. Yes, He can take a little and make it go a long, long ways. And so Jesus took the little bit of bread they brought to Him,

"Looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave it to the disciples...."

And the rest is history. The disciples, in turn, gave the food to the crowd. You know the rest. Everyone had enough to eat and twelve baskets of food were left over.

"YOU'RE NOT A REALIST IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN MIRACLES"

There are many places where people seem to be putting their faith now-a-days - in their bank accounts, in taking care of their bodies, in education. These are all good, but the question I often find myself asking is: are they enough?

The newspapers recently carried a story about a mid-western city whose major hospital for a number of years had fire-fighting equipment that had never been connected. Think of it. For thirty-five years it had been relying upon some equipment that had never been attached to the city's water main. The pipe that led from the building extended four feet underground and there it stopped. What would ever have happened to the patients in that hospital if there had ever been an emergency. The medical staff and the patients had always felt complete confidence in the system. They thought that if a blaze broke out, they could depend on a nearby hose to extinguish it. But theirs was a false security. Although the costly equipment with its polished valves and well-placed outlets was adequate for the building, it lacked the most important thing - WATER.

The things you have put your faith in...are you sure they can provide an answer for those moments of deepest need? The bank account. The healthy body. The good education. All are valuable, but are they sufficient? Can they carry you over the long haul. Only God, as He has come to us in Christ, I believe, is able to supply all of our needs.

BACK TO THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

Can't you imagine the expressions of disbelief that must have been on the faces of the disciples. They thought they didn't have enough, but Jesus soon proved they had plenty. Perhaps they started punching each other and giving some high fives, saying,

"Can you believe what just happened? Can you believe it?  
I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. Awesome.  
Really. Awesome. Hey, He's really something..."

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four of the Gospels. Those present that day would carry this memory with them to their final moments. And no wonder. He was, in a sense, giving them the foretaste of the heavenly banquet yet to come....a banquet prepared for the foundations of the earth for those who believe in Him and are willing to trust Him.

CLOSING

Across the years I have come to a very deep appreciation for the different ways that Alcoholics Anonymous and several other Twelve Step Groups have helped so many people. As you may or may not know, the individual seeking help must first have the ability to acknowledge his or her inadequacy and powerlessness. A certain man I was reading about recently had been sober for 8,774 days. Now, he does not go around talking in terms of months and certainly not years. He has learned to live one day at a time. He goes to meetings and treatment centers to help people overcome their disease. En route he always stops at a doughnut shop and buys some fresh doughnuts and a cup of coffee.

One day he thought that the other people who come to meetings would like some doughnuts and coffee, too. He bought some and brought them along with him. He said it was like having the sacrament when he shared those doughnuts and coffee with the others in that group. At the close of the meeting the members of the group came out in the middle of the room in a huddle just like a sports team.

Together they clasped hands as a team and proceeded to sing, "Lean On Me". And then when they had finished singing, they stood up with a shout and were ready to go out and face the challenge of another day.

✓ Long ago on green Galilean hillside next to a lake some five thousand people came together and ate bread and fish. There they marvelled at the love and the power of Him, a simple teacher from Nazareth who talked to them about "the things of God". We don't know if they sang or shouted...maybe a bit of both. We do know that this was a day they would never forget. They had come away to be with Jesus. He cared for them and met their needs and they even experienced a foretaste of what will come - the "heavenly banquet" when we will all one day feast with Jesus.

PRAYER

Help us, O God, to be still and to remember Jesus as He was then...powerful to help and to heal. Let us think of Him as He is now - powerful as the spirit of God at work among us...to lift us up and to set our feet once again on the high road of life.

You have taught us to come apart from the world and to rest awhile. Help us to set aside all our cares and concerns that we may look only on the brightness of Your Being...to think only of Your power and Your peace. Ease the tensions of our bodies and set our minds at rest, that we may be ready to receive that which You are so ready to give to each of us.

In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.