

"THANKLESS JOBS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 28, 1996

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INTRODUCTION

A family of five was enjoying a warm, summer day at the beach. The children were playing in the water and making sand castles in the sand when off in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her gray hair was blowing in the wind and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She was muttering something to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag.

The parents called the children to their side and told them to stay away from the old lady. As she passed by, bending down every now and then to pick some thing up, she smiled at the family...but her greeting was not returned. Several weeks later the family learned that this little old lady on the beach with her bag had made it her lifelong crusade to pick up bits of glass on the beach so that children at play wouldn't be in danger of cutting themselves.

DEVELOPMENT

A rather thankless task, wouldn't you say? Picking up bits of glass so that children won't cut their feet or their hands....there are lots of people in thankless jobs, aren't there? Being a caregiver to someone who is helpless, working in a nursing home. In a sense, too, teaching is something of a thankless task. So, too...being an officer of the law, or a fireman risking his life. I think that almost any type of service work is thankless at times....and that, dear friend, includes many jobs in the church.

I have a friend who collects humorous items that appear in newspapers and signs and other places. Some of the best ones are from church bulletins. Here are some recent ones my friend has sent to me and remember, as I share them with you, that they have appeared in a church bulletin somewhere. You may have to think about one or two of them so I won't rush through them.

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Here is a hymn. "Let All the World in Every Corner Sin". (No. 93). WHOOPIE! It reminds me of one that we once had in our bulletin, "For Those Who Sin". Rehearsals are held at 9:30 Sunday morning...downstairs in the choir room.

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And one of my favorites. "Miss Charlene Mason sang, "I Will Not Pass This Way Again"...giving obvious pleasure to the entire congregation.

Well, even singing in church can, at times, be something of a thankless job....or teaching a Sunday School class of unruly kids, or serving on the stewardship drive. Any job where there is not much recognition, or where you feel you're being taken for granted....such can seem, at times, like a thankless job!

Ruth Harms Calkin stated it well when she came up with these lines:

"You know, Lord, how I serve you...with great fervor,
when I'm in the limelight.
You know how eagerly I speak for you....at a meeting
of the Women's Club.
You know how I effervesce when I'm called on to pro-
mote a Fellowship Group.
You know my genuine enthusiasm...at a Bible Study Class.

BUT HOW would I react, I wonder...if you pointed to a
basin of water....
And asked me to wash the callused feet....of a bent and
wrinkled old woman, day after day....and month
after month,
In a room where nobody saw.....and nobody knew?"

We know what she's talking about, don't we? Thankless jobs. And jobs with-
out much of a payoff in money or recognition. Repetitive jobs. Boring jobs.
Repulsive jobs. Dirty jobs. Lonely jobs.

THE SHEPHERD'S JOB

But let's come back to the scripture passage which has helped to launch this sermon...that of the shepherd's job. That's a bit of a thankless job, too. It really is. Imagine having to deal with dumb and smelly sheep all day long. In Palestine, in Biblical times, flocks of sheep were plentiful. They still are. They dot the countryside and clutter up highways and crowd the streets of towns....the shepherd with his long staff walks in front of the flock and the sheep follow him. In fact, at times they crowd around so closely that they hamper the movement of the shepherd himself. Dumb...helpless sheep.

According to William Barclay, the New Testament scholar, the life of a shepherd was hard...very hard. The shepherd never got a day off. And there being little grass, the sheep were bound to wander and since there were no protecting walls, the sheep had to be watched continually. Many were the times when they would stray and get lost, slipping over the side of a narrow plateau. The job of the shepherd was not only constant, but at times it was also dangerous, for, in addition, he had to guard the flock against wild animals...and then, too, there were thieves and robbers always around to steal the sheep. With little in the way of pay and little in the way of human contact, being a shepherd had very little to recommend it. A thankless job - indeed!

Yet, this is exactly how Christ portrayed Himself - as a shepherd. It's the most familiar image we have of Christ...a shepherd holding a lamb in his arms...tender, comforting....but a lamb is not a full grown sheep. Its wool is not wet and matted. It isn't caught in a crevasse. It is not bleating for the shepherd to come to its rescue. The shepherd with a lamb in his arms has long adorned the walls of a church nursery.

BONDING BETWEEN SHEEP AND SHEPHERD

Of course there is a certain "bonding" that takes place between the shepherd and his sheep. Over there in John's Gospel, chapter ten and verse three, we read:

"To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

Sheep calling contests are quite common in Palestine. Several flocks are placed in an enclosure and mixed in together. Then shepherds whistle a distinctive tune or some call or shout in a peculiar manner or particular way. Some shepherds use a pipe with a particular pitch. Each shepherd's signal is understood by his own sheep and they respond immediately. They make their way through the crowded enclosure to where their shepherd is waiting. The shepherd who collects a given number of sheep in the shortest period of time is the winner of such a contest.

Sheep know their shepherd's voice and follow him and the good shepherd, of course, knows his sheep. The individual sheep in a flock all look alike to the untrained eye. However, the good shepherd can tell them apart....often because of their defects and their peculiar traits. A man who was tending a large flock explained to a Christian friend who had expressed his surprise at his familiarity with each animal. The shepherd said to his friend,

"See that sheep over there...notice how it toes in a little. The one behind it has a squint. The next one has a patch of wool off its back. Ahead is one with a distinguishing black mark, while the one closest to us has a small piece torn out of its ear."

Observing all of them...the believer then thought about Christ, the Good Shepherd, who also knows the individual weaknesses and the failings of His flock and watches over the members with discerning love and sympathetic understanding.

Christ, the Good Shepherd!

Taking over the thankless job of watching over His sheep and taking the time and the trouble to know them all by name. Can you imagine that? There have always been people with a good memory for names....

"Napoleon, who knew thousands of his soldiers by name, or James A. Farley, who once claimed he knew 50,000 people by their first name....of Charles Schwab, who I once read knew the names of all 8,000 of his employees at Homestead Mill....or Charles W. Eliot, who, during his forty years as President of Harvard, earned the reputation of knowing all the students by name each year, or Harry Lorayne, used to amaze his audience by being introduced to hundreds of people, one after another, then giving the name of any person who stood up and requested it."

But can you imagine Christ knowing all His sheep by name? That's millions

and millions of people over 2,000 years. It's no wonder really then that we call Him Master and Lord - for that He certainly is!

Watching over His flock and calling them all by name. And, in so doing, He is setting something of an example for us. Years ago when I was first starting out here I came across a quotation of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the illustrious pastor and preacher of the Riverside Church. He was quoted by a staff member as having said:

"A really Christian Church must be 'personality centered', its criterion of value the saving experiences which come to individuals. Keep your eyes on individuals. Nothing in the long run matters in this church save what happens to them."

"Keep your eyes on individuals". Tough to do in a city like this where people come and go....unlisted telephone numbers, returned mail and what have you. And wouldn't it be something if here in the church we really got to know each other well enough that we didn't need to wear name tags?

CLOSING Christ sets the example. The Good Shepherd. Yes, He continues to watch over His sheep. He knows each of us by name. He even laid down His life for us...in our behalf. Now He is calling us to take up the often thankless job of losing ourselves in service to others and yes - to His Church, too, that bears His name.

We have a number of thankless jobs to be handled in this Church. Every church has them. Some of you are already involved in their doing. I think of the woman who comes in here once a week and straightens out the hymnals and puts those little envelopes in the pew holders. And as long as I live, I'll never forget the example of a layman of this church who every Sunday morning for years would arrive forty minutes ahead of everyone else, go downstairs, take a broom and then head out to the sidewalk and sweep it....a Wall Street attorney, with Shearman and Sterling.....a thankless job...perhaps only his wife and his minister knew that he did this. I was in my late twenties at the time and he was in his mid-fifties. His example of doing a "thankless job" so touched me that I felt I could do a few of my own.

The Good Shepherd is calling to each of us to look around us and to take on a thankless job, or two in His name, with no other reward than this that someday we may hear His voice saying to us:

"Well done! Thou good and faithful servant!"

To me, the wondrous thing is that as we loose ourselves in service for Him, something good happens in the process. Not only do we help others, but we "find" ourselves in that process and somehow come to like ourselves better for it!

PRAYER Savior, like a shepherd lead us....much we need Your tender care. In your pleasant pastures feed us, for our use your folds prepare. O blessed Jesus.....You have bought us, Yours we are. Be the guardian of our way; keep your flock, from sin defend us. And seek us when we go astray. All we ask in the name of the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep by name and who gently calls them home to Himself. In His spirit, we pray. Amen.

VISITORS: Sunday, April 28, 1996

Weather: Cool, sunny and 64 degrees.

Attendance: 196 Adults, 7 babies, 17 children. TOTAL 220

1995: 178	1987: 160	1979: 161
1994: 155	1986: 176	1978: 165
1993: 215	1985: 170	1977: 158
1992: 203	1984: 182	1976: 164
1991: 190	1983: 185	1975: 126
1990: 170	1982: 266	1974: 128
1989: 194	1981: 200	1973: 147
1988: 195	1980: 184	1972: 129

1. IT Mr. Chris Amfowoshe: 306 East 93rd Street, #3B
New York, NY 10128
Telephone: 427-2148

Pink card. Letter. 2nd visit, I (PC) think. Tallahassee Baptist Church. Black gentleman. PC chatted with before service. Mid-thirt

2. IT Mr. Steven Garberick: 300 East 88th Street, #3N
New York, NY 10128
Telephone: 629-0951

Pink card. Letter. PC to call him. Trinity Evangelical Church, South Bend, Indiana. Mid-twenties. New to city and wants to know more about PAUMC.

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Telephone:

Pink card. Letter. Signed a visitor card. Member of the Park Avenue Christian Church. Greeted at door by PC.

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Out of Town Letter. Retired clergy couple from NJ. Coffee hour. Met quite a few folks.

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Hoboken, New Jersey 07030

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(over)

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2. Norman Wallace
3. Monte Kovac
4. Leslie Thompson
5. Bill Swenson
6. Rich Kim
7. Lindy Rhyne
8. F.S. Koto: Fiji
9. Kent Wolgemuth
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14. Charles and Dorothy Scardino
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ALSO WITH US:

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And being a shepherd is a thankless job. It really is. Imagine having to deal with dumb and smelly sheep all day long. In Palestine, flocks of sheep are plentiful. They dot the countryside and clutter up the highways and crowd the streets of towns and villages. The shepherd with his long staff walks in front of his flock and the sheep follow him. In fact, they crowd around so closely that they at times hamper the movement of the shepherd. Dumb, helpless sheep.

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Yet, this is exactly how Christ portrayed Himself - as a shepherd. And this is the most familiar image we have of Christ....a shepherd holding a lamb in His arms. Tender, comforting, sweet. But a lamb is not a full-grown sheep. Its wool is not wet and matted. It isn't caught in a crevasse. It is not bleating for the shepherd to come to its rescue.

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PRAYER