"THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 6, 1993
"Sometimes if you're in Boston", he said smiling, "Room service never comes".

And as they use to say in Brooklyn, "Wait..." earlier in the week...

INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon title was chosen in the hope and with the faith that it just might tie in to a basketball game to be played later today here in our city. I've been waiting twenty years for the moment when all of this would "come together". Shortly before midnight, dream ended...

Basketball has helped to make popular the phrase, "The home court advantage", and as most of you know it simply means that the home team enjoys certain advantages over the visiting team. Not only is this true in basketball, but it's also true in other sports. The home team has the backing of a partisan crowd and this can lift a team emotionally, for we always do better when people are cheering for us on the sidelines. It was Bill Bradley, now Senator Bradley, who once said (when he was playing for the Knicks),

"The crowd is our 6th player...give them the game ball for an outstanding performance. They made the difference!"

Whether it's Yankee Stadium or Madison Square Garden, loyal and cheering fans do make a difference.

DEVELOPMENT

Then, too, the home team will not be weakened by the rigors of travel and will benefit from dining "in" rather than eating "out". Professional athletes have been heard to say,

"The steaks all taste the same on the road, and the French Fries go limp and the hotel rooms soon close in on you."

Doc Rivers--of the Knicks said this week, remembering how in a hotel a play is often at the mercy of Room Ser. Then, too, the home team is more accustomed to the peculiar features of the court or the stadium. More accustomed to the climate, and then, too, the home team has been known to get a break now and then from the officials, the referees and umpires. It's called "the home court advantage" and it is something that spills over into other areas of life. Let's explore some of them here this morning.

ITS AT WORK IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE

For one thing, this "home court advantage" and its corollary, the "away game disadvantage" comes in to play with our relationships with people.

Consciously or not, we try to have others meet us on our terrain for that's where we feel most comfortable. We like to "deal" from power, preferring subjects and events and facts that we know something about and which we can handle, and in settings congenial to our strengths. Professional athletes do better on the court than they do before a microphone. The university professor does better behind his desk than out in the corridors facing protesting students.

We tend to get a bit uneasy when conversation drifts to a field or subject that takes us from our area of competence and experience. Sometimes we try to change the subject quickly. Children do it. Adults do it. We like to have people play on "our home court", but good things like growth and understanding can come to us when we master the courage and adventure to play on the other fellow's court. That's where growth occurs and we become more interesting, too.
IT PLAYS IN THE KIND OF SERVICE RENDERED, TOO

Yes, it's at work in our relationships with people, and this "home court advantage" also comes into play in the kind of service a Christian renders and the kind of witness he or she makes.

The negative models that I would use to open up this second point would be the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember, they were the men who came upon the mugging victim on the open road and they chose to play it safe and passed by on the other side.

These men were not bad human beings. Presumably, they were trained and dedicated men, prepared under proper circumstances to bring people to God and God to people. Up there in Jerusalem's Temple, on their "home court", they were probably pretty effective, but not out here in Samaritan territory. Not where physical dangers were lurking and muggers were at work. They were not able to function effectively without their robes and their symbols of authority. But out there on that road that runs from Jericho up to Jerusalem, it was a different matter. They were totally "disfunctional". Their religion didn't "travel" very well.

But enough of them. What about ourselves? Does our religion "travel" out there on the road, "away from home?" Many of us do well here in the Church, on our home court. We're dedicated and we "score" well, but yes - what about "out there" on the road when we have to play an "away game". What kind of people are we and how effective is our witness?

Believe me, the professional clergy person gets caught in this frustration. Let it be "confessed" - most of function best in our place of power - behind a pulpit, or near the altar, in a robe, in circles where we are surrounded by a climate of respect and affection. But frequently, we are apt to be less than scintillating and relevant "out there" in the unprotected rough and tumble of daily life.

On occasion, I have taken myself deliberately into situations where I do not have everything going for me that I have going for me here within the walls of this church building. For I think it's good for a minister or a priest to be in situations where he must get through on the strength of his humanity, rather than on the virtue of his ordination.

JESUS DID NOT SEEK THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

As I read and re-read the life of Jesus, I sense that He did not seek the "home court advantage". Our Lord and our Saviour met people where they were! He took His chances on being hurt and crossed up and confronted and questioned. He did not ask that they should meet Him at some central "holy place" where He had His power and the supporting presence of His followers. The woman at the well. Alone at midnight, speaking truth to Nicodemus. Zacchaeus, up there in a tree in Jericho.

And what of you? How is your "away from home" record? I think we all need the Church, the support and inspiration and reinforcement and enrichment that come from joining with others of like persuasion in fellowship and prayer, and this is why the Apostle Paul urged us to,

"not forsake the assembling of ourselves together".

This we do.
But the critical question is what you do when you're "out there on the road" away from the advantage of the "home court"...where the climate is not one of encouragement, but more of criticism, and where the mind and spirit of Christ count for very little. What do you do, for example, at work when someone comes out with a racial slur or says something with anti-semitic overtones? What do you do when someone with whom you are associated curses the futility of life or signals his or her need for forgiveness and acceptance and a bit of love? What do you do when you are part of some corporate decision in the private or public sector that you sense is running contrary to the will of God as it has come to us in the way and the life of Christ?

Road games are every bit as important as our home games. It doesn't take a great deal to build a good record within the "home court"...within the life of a congregation like this through a number of faithful assignments, but out there, where "it's at", where "it's happening" - this is where the record needs to be written and strengthened both in word and deed.

I think that Jesus dislodged us permanently from the familiar and the friendly when He gave us our final instructions. Remember He said,

"You shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth..."

He wants us to "take the show on the road". Are we able? Are you able to be His witness. We all have our excuses, but remember the lessons of Pentecost which we celebrated last Sunday. We are "empowered" and as you and I confess our faith to others and serve as His witness, we so often will feel the surge of power flowing through us. In other words, we can "win" on the road. You better believe we can. You and I wouldn't be here this morning if people hadn't believe that.

MORE AWAY GAMES NOW-A-DAYS THAN HOME GAMES I sometimes have the feeling that we are being called upon at this point in time to play more games "on the road" than we are "at home", that we live our faith in something of an alien culture, that this country is one of the prime missions fields of the world for taking seriously the goodness of Christ. I think our city represents one of the greatest mission fields in the world today. At its best, the climate is neutral and at its worst, it is hostile.

The prevailing climate or prevailing sentiment, if you will, is a rather self-assured and self-confident, pragmatic secularism that has little room for thoughts of the transcendent. Secular humanism is what some call it. Void of ultimate meanings. Where does the serious Christian come in to this.

I believe that the "key" word is still that word "witness". We bear witness to the truth that we have found and experienced in the person of Christ. It's a witness that must be made on the road as well as at home. It requires both deeds and words. "Preach the Gospel at all times" said Francis of Assisi, "and when necessary use words". "Walk the talk" as someone has put it, remembering that "the least important fact of life is the score at halftime".

CONCLUSION Remember that plastic replica of Peanut's Baseball team. What a bedraggled, non-descript and unlikely lot of heroes they appeared to be. And underneath was this legend,
"HOW CAN WE LOSE WHEN WE ARE SO SINCERE?"

Even though we're sincere and good people and filled with many a good intention, we may lose here and there because we are up against some pretty tough opponents. It is "rough" our there. You know it as well as I do. Yet, our hope continues strong, for our trust is firmly fixed in a God who can "do a lot with a little". Listen carefully to what our coach has to say and as you prepare to depart from this "home court" to play the greater game in other places and with other people, remember that the "key" word is still the word "witness". Be willing to witness to your faith in Christ.

PRAYER

Lord, make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these quiet moments. Confirm within us the feelings and the certainties, the resolutions and decisions that run strong in our hearts. Forgive us for those things which we did which we should not have done and for our failure to do...

Our faith is strong. So let our witness match our faith, both here and in other places. Grant us the power to work, the courage and joy to witness to the Truth we have found in You, the patience to wait and to watch, knowing that Your Kingdom grows quietly and silently and yet - persistently.

The race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory. Visit our sick with the assurance of Your care...forgive In the name and spirit of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep by name and gently calls them to Himself. Amen.

those who need and seek Your forgiveness and remind us that we can never drift...
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Basketball has helped to make popular the phrase, "The home court advantage", and as most of you know it simply means that the home team enjoys certain advantages over the visiting team. Not only is this true in basketball, but it's also true in other sports. The home team has the backing of a partisan crowd and this can lift a team emotionally, for we always do better when people are cheering for us on the sidelines. It was Bill Bradley, now Senator Bradley, who once said (when he was playing for the Knicks),

"The crowd is our 6th player...give them the game ball for an outstanding performance. They made the difference!"

Whether it's Yankee Stadium or Madison Square Garden, loyal and cheering fans do make a difference.

DEVELOPMENT Then, too, the home team will not be weakened by the rigors of travel and will benefit from dining "in" rather than eating "out". Professional athletes have been heard to say,

"The steaks all taste the same on the road, and the French Fries go limp and the hotel rooms soon close in on you."

And so a Michael Jordan slips down to Atlantic City to get away from the press and life away from home. Then, too, the home team is more accustomed to the peculiar features of the court or the stadium. More accustomed to the climate, and then, too, the home team has been known to get a break now and then from the officials, the referees and umpires. It's called "the home court advantage" and it is something that spills over into other areas of life. Let's explore some of them here this morning.

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Consciously or not, we try to have others meet us on our terrain for that's where we feel most comfortable. We like to "deal" from power, preferring subjects and events and facts that we know something about and which we can handle, and in settings congenial to our strengths. Professional athletes do better on the court than they do before a microphone. The university professor does better behind his desk than out in the corridors facing protesting students.

We tend to get a bit uneasy when conversation drifts to a field or subject that takes us from our area of competence and experience. Sometimes we try to change the subject quickly. Children do it. Adults do it. We like to have people play on "our home court", but good things like growth and understanding can come to us when we master the courage and adventure to play on the other fellow's court. That's where growth occurs and we become more interesting, too.
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Yes, it's at work in our relationships with people, and this "home court advantage" also comes into play in the kind of service a Christian renders and the kind of witness he or she makes.

The negative models that I would use to open up this second point would be the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember, they were the men who came upon the mugging victim on the open road and they chose to play it safe and passed by on the other side.

These men were not bad human beings. Presumably, they were trained and dedicated men, prepared under proper circumstances to bring people to God and God to people. Up there in Jerusalem's Temple, on their "home court", they were probably pretty effective, but not out here in Samaritan territory. Not where physical dangers were lurking and muggers were at work. They were not able to function effectively without their robes and their symbols of authority. But out there on that road that runs from Jericho up to Jerusalem, it was a different matter. They were totally "disfunctional". Their religion didn't "travel" very well.

But enough of them. What about ourselves? Does our religion "travel" out there on the road, "away from home?" Many of us do well here in the Church, on our home court. We're dedicated and we "score" well, but yes - what about "out there" on the road when we have to play an "away game". What kind of people are we and how effective is our witness?

Believe me, the professional clergy person gets caught in this frustration. Let it be "confessed" - most of function best in our place of power - behind a pulpit, or near the altar, in a robe, in circles where we are surrounded by a climate of respect and affection. But frequently, we are apt to be less than scintillating and relevant "out there" in the unprotected rough and tumble of daily life.

On occasion, I have taken myself deliberately into situations where I do not have everything going for me that I have going for me here within the walls of this church building. For I think it's good for a minister or a priest to be in situations where he must get through on the strength of his humanity, rather than on the virtue of his ordination.

JESUS DID NOT SEEK THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

As I read and re-read the life of Jesus, I sense that He did not seek the "home court advantage". Our Lord and our Saviour met people where they were! He took His chances on being hurt and crossed up and confronted and questioned. He did not ask that they should meet Him at some central "holy place" where He had His power and the supporting presence of His followers. The woman at the well. Alone at midnight, speaking truth to Nicodemus. Zacchaeus, up there in a tree in Jericho.

And what of you? How is your "away from home" record? I think we all need the Church, the support and inspiration and reinforcement and enrichment that come from joining with others of like persuasion in fellowship and prayer, and this is why the Apostle Paul urged us to,

"not forsake the assembling of ourselves together".

This we do.
"HOW CAN WE LOSE WHEN WE ARE SO SINCERE?"

Even though we're sincere and good people and filled with many a good intention, we may lose here and there because we are up against some pretty tough opponents. It is "rough" out there. You know it as well as I do. Yet, our hope continues strong, for our trust is firmly fixed in a God who can "do a lot with a little". Listen carefully to what our coach has to say and as you prepare to depart from this "home court" to play the greater game in other places and with other people, remember that the "key" word is still the word "witness". Be willing to witness to your faith in Christ.

PRAYER

Lord, make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these quiet moments. Confirm within us the feelings and the certainties, the resolutions and decisions that run strong in our hearts.

Our faith is strong. So let our witness match our faith, both here and in other places. Grant us the power to work, the courage and joy to witness to the Truth we have found in You, the patience to wait and to watch, knowing that Your Kingdom grows quietly and silently and yet - persistently.

The race is short, O God, even at its longest and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory. Visit our sick with the assurance of Your care. In the name and spirit of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep by name and gently calls them to Himself. Amen.
"Homecourt is a natural phenomenon," Riley said. "You're around people who have supported you year after year. It's human behavior."

But to Rivers, the Knicks' starting point guard, the homecourt advantage extended far beyond the Garden court and the Garden crowd. "When you're home, you eat when you want to," Rivers was saying. "You talk to your kids when you want to. You talk to your wife when you want to. You drive to the game when you want to, the way you want to. Some guys go the long way because they've gone that way all year. Some guys pay at the same toll booth."

Rivers smiled, remembering how in a hotel a player is often at the mercy of room service. "Sometimes, if you're in Boston," he said with a laugh, "room service never comes."
"THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE"

INTRODUCTION In basketball, you often hear the phrase, "the home court advantage". It means, of course, that the home team usually enjoys certain advantages over the visiting team in a game. It's something that is true in most athletic contests.

The home team has the backing of a partisan crowd, and this can lift a team emotionally, for we always do better when people are cheering for us on the sidelines. I remember Bill Bradley once saying when he played for the Knicks that "the crowd is our 6th player... give them the game ball for an outstanding performance". Whether it's at Yankee Stadium or Shea Stadium or at the Garden, loyal and cheering fans do make a difference. Take it a step further...

Then, the home team will not be weakened by the rigors of travel and will benefit from dining in rather than eating out. Athletes have been heard to say that the "steaks all taste the same on the road, and the french fries go limp, and the hotel rooms soon close in on you". Also, the home team is more accustomed to the peculiar features of the stadium or the court, or rink. More accustomed to the climate, and then, too, the home team has been known to get an odd break now and then from the officials.

"The home court advantage". There is something to it in athletic contests and also in other areas of life, some of which I want to touch on this morning.

IT FIGURES IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE Have you ever stopped to consider that this "home court advantage" (and its corollary, the "away game disadvantage"), also comes into play with our relationships with people?

Consciously or not, we try to have others meet us on our terrain. That's where we feel most comfortable. We like to deal from power, preferring subjects that we know something about and can handle, in settings that are congenial to our strengths. As a rule, prize fighters do better in the ring than before a microphone. The university president does better behind his desk than meeting students who are protesting in the corridors of a building.

I think we all tend to get a bit uneasy when some social conversation in which we're involved drifts in to a field that takes us away from our area of competence and knowledge, and so for our ego's sake, we try to change the subject and change it quickly. Children do it. Adults do it. We like to have people play on our home court.

But, good things like growth and understanding can come to us when we must the courage and develop a sense of adventure to play on the other fellow's court. That's where a lot of growth occurs and we become more interesting, too.

IT FIGURES IN THE KIND OF SERVICE THAT CHRISTIANS RENDER Let's consider another aspect of this theme. The "home court advantage" also comes in to play in the kind of service that Christians render in the world, and in the kind of witness they make. The negative models here that I would use to open up this point would be the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember, they were the men who came upon the mugging victim on the open road and they chose to play it safe and passed by on the other side.
Now, these men were not bad human beings. Presumably, they were trained and dedicated men, prepared under proper circumstance to bring men to God and God to men. On their home court within the Temple at Jerusalem, they were probably pretty effective, but not out there in Samaritan territory. Not where physical dangers were lurking. Perhaps the robbers were still there. They were not able to function effectively without their robes and away from their symbols of authority. Out there, on the road that ran from Jerusalem down to Jericho, they were totally disfunctional. In other words, their religion didn't travel very well.

Enough of them. What of us? Many of us tend to be pretty enthusiastic, strong and active here in the Church, on our "home court" - but out there, on the road, when we're playing an "away game", how do we do?

And no one I think is caught in this frustration more than the professional minister. Let it be "confessed" - for most of us function best in our place of power - behind a pulpit, near the altar, in a robe, in circles where we are surrounded by a climate of respect, appreciation, affection. But frequently, we are less than scintillating and relevant "out there" in the unprotected, rough and tumble of daily life.

On occasion, I like to take myself deliberately into situations where I do not have everything going for me that I have going for me within this church building. I think it's good for a minister to be in situations where he must get through on the strength of his humanity, rather than on the virtue of his ordination....something of the same holds true for the Christian, apart from his Church.

As I read the life of Jesus I sense that He did not seek the "home court advantage". Our Lord and Saviour met people where they were. He took His chances on being hurt, crossed up, confronted, questioned. He did not decree that they should meet Him at some central "holy place" where He had His power and the supporting presence of His dedicated followers. The woman at the well. Alone at night, speaking truth to Nicodemus. Zaccheaus, in the tree.

And what of you? How is your "away from home" record? We all need the Church. We may not admit it, but we need the inspiration, the reinforcement, the enrichment that comes from joining with others of like persuasion in fellowship, in prayer, and this is why the Apostle Paul exhorted us to not "forsake the assembling of ourselves together".

But the critical question is what you do when you're "out there"....away from the "home court" - where the climate is not one of encouragement, but criticism, where the mind and spirit of Christ count for very little? What do you do, for example, at work when someone comes out with a racial slur or says something with anti-semitic overtones? What do you do when someone with whom you are associated curses the futility of life, or signals his need for love and for forgiveness and acceptance? What do you do when you are part of some corporate decision in the private or public sector that you sense is moving in a direction contrary to the way of Christ and the will of God?

Our road games are every bit as important - if not more so - than our home games. Let me repeat that. It doesn't take much to build a good Christian track record within the life of a congregation through a few committee assignments. But out there - where it's at, where it's happening...this is where the record needs
to be written, both in word and in deed. Jesus dislodged us permanently from
the familiar and the friendly when He said:

"You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all
Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

In other words, He wants us to take the show on the road! Are we able? Are you
able - to do this, to be a witness for Him?

Remember Paul Mickey's first point, his first corner last Sunday. "Evasion?"
We all have our excuses. But remember the third corner, the third point. "Emp­
powerment?" As we confess our faith to others and serve as His witness, we so
often will feel that surge of power flowing in to our being. We can win on the
road. You better believe we can! We wouldn't be here today if people hadn't believed
it!

ILLUSTRATION  Let me share with you something that I have been carrying in
my thoughts since last September. Jack Allen was a writer for
the Buffalo Courier-Express newspaper who was tragically killed in an automobile­
bicycle accident last September 7th. Jack worshipped here with us once or twice
over the years, father of Meg Pilenco, whom some of you know, and brother-in-law
of our own Ellen Nicholson.

One of his colleagues on the paper wrote a tribute to Jack Allen that was
shared with me. Let me read a few lines from it to you:

"Jack was active in his own church, and one who believed firmly
in ecumenism and the spreading of the Word and works of God
through the joint efforts of all faith.

Extremely religious, he was very enthusiastic in his own efforts
to promote the goodness of Christ, even in our city room, where
he was affectionally dubbed 'the God squad'.

A Christian, he wore a cross, always out on the open around his
neck. Recently he was sent to cover a meeting at a private club
and was stopped at the door because he wasn't wearing the re­
quired tie. Nonplussed, he lifted his cross to show the man
and said, 'This is my tie'. He got in.

He was active in church activities, with young people and former
convicts. He was the type of man who could relate to almost
anyone on any level - and did.

Jack was the kind of man who usually sided with the underdog,
and his love for his fellowman and his God were of an in­
disputable, genuine quality. He was an unflappable man who
seldom got 'bent out of shape', and if things went wrong, the
strongest word out of his gentle mouth was 'damm!' .

BACK TO OUR THEME  Back to our theme. It is my growing conviction that we
live our faith in this country in an alien culture; that
every game we play now-a-days is something of an "away game"; that this country is
one of the prime mission fields of the world for taking seriously, as did Jack
Allen, the goodness of Christ. The climate at best is neutral, at worst, hostile.
The prevailing sentiment or climate is a rather self-assured, self-confident, pragmatic secularism that has little room for the thoughts of the transcendent. You know this, far better than I do!

Some of those scripture verses we heard read earlier in the service may have sounded a little strange to our ears. Perhaps we have the feeling that we have moved beyond the position of those Christians in Rome to whom was writing and their need to submit to the powers of their day. I wonder at times if we have moved from that minority status. Are we a Christian nation? How do you see it? It's important for us to consider this, lest our expectations as to what we can achieve in society be exaggerated. How much can we expect to change by ourselves?

However, I think and believe that the KEY WORD is still that word "Witness." We bear witness to the powers concerning the truth that we have found in the person of Jesus Christ. And that witness requires both words and deeds and it must be made on the road as well as at home. And too much "navel-gazing" at home can spoil our record on the road...where we must win...

Pragmatically this means that to get some things done that need doing we will have to form coalitions with others of like mind - non-Christians - and be willing on occasion to play a supplementary or supportive role.

IN CONCLUSION    Somewhere recently around town I saw a plastic replica of Peanut's baseball team. What a bedraggled, non-descript and unlikely lot of heroes they were. Underneath was this legend: "How can we lose when we are so sincere?" I loved it.

Each game in which we're involved as Christians non-a-days, I feel, is something of an away game. And even though we're sincere and filled with good intentions, we may lose here and there because the odds are stacked heavily against us. It's rought out there. The current running against us is strong, swift... Yet, our hope continues strong, for our trust is firmly fixed in God who can "do a lot with a little". He can do a lot with a little. Remember that. And so as we prepare now to depart from our "home court" to take up the game this coming week in other places, remember this. The key word is still "witness". And He can do a lot with a little. He always has. That's the miracle in the Gospel. Take along with you on the road these three questions to ask yourself:

If not now, when?  
If not here, where?  
If not me, who?

PRAYER    Lord, now confirm within each of us those feelings and certainties that run strong in our hearts. Our faith is strong. Let our witness match our faith. We believe in great faith that the time will come when Your will shall truly be done on earth even as it is in heaven. In the meantime, grant us the power to work, the courage and the joy to witness to the truth we have found in You, the patience to wait and to watch, if necessary, knowing that your kingdom grows quietly, silently and yet - persistently. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen
ANTHEM: "I Beheld Her"

"I beheld her, beautiful as a dove rising above the waterbrooks and her raiment was filled with perfume beyond all price. Even as the springtime was she girded with rosebuds and lilies of the valley. Who is this that cometh up from the desert like a wreath of sweet smoke arising from frankincense and myrrh. Even as the springtime was she girded with rosebuds and lilies of the valley."

ANTHEM: "My Eyes for Beauty Pine"

"My eyes for beauty pine, My soul for God's grace, No other care nor hope is mine, To heaven I turn my face.

Our splendour thence is shed from all the stars above; 'Tis named when God's name is said, 'Tis Love, 'Tis heavenly Love.

And every gentle heart that burns with true desire, Is lit from eyes that mirror part of that celestial fire."

ORGAN POSTLUDE

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

PICK UP YOUR COPY

Be sure to pick up a copy of the February issue of "A Word In Edgeways" in order to be up to date on our various church concerns. They're located in the narthex.

ASH WEDNESDAY AND HOLY COMMUNION

Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent, will be celebrated throughout the Christian world this coming Wednesday, February the 20th.

The minister will be available to serve Holy Communion to those who wish to receive it between 7:30 and 9:30 in the morning, and 4:30 to 6:30 in the late afternoon. Come in to the sanctuary and make your way to the front of the Church.

FOR LENT

Copies of the Lenten devotional booklet, The Sanctuary, are available in the narthex. Along with your Bible, it will provide you with daily spiritual nourishment for the coming forty days of Lent.

NEXT SUNDAY

The Annual Meeting/Charge Conference of our Church will be held next Sunday, the 24th of February. Our District Superintendent, Dr. Paul Abel, will preach at the worship service and also preside at the meeting which will convene around one o'clock.

Sandwiches and coffee will be served at the coffee hour next Sunday.

All members of the Church are invited to share in this annual event in the life of our parish. It's never dull! The elections, the reports and a review of the plans for the coming months and the goals for the year ahead make for an interesting ninety minutes. Don't miss it.
PARK AVENUE
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New York, N.Y. 10028
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CHURCH DIRECTORY
Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke .......................................Minister
Dr. Harold C. Metzner ......................................Associate Minister, Emeritus
Mr. Lyndon Woodside ......................................Organist-Choir Director
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Chairman, Membership Committee .............Miss Bonnie Bray
Co-Chairmen, Day School Committee .........Mr. and Mrs. Hughes
Chairman, Ushers .........................................Mr. Kenneth Barclay
Coordinator, Adult Fellowship .................Miss Doreen Surber
SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE LENT  
February 17, 1980

ORDER OF WORSHIP  
11 A. M.

ORGAN  "Ballade"  Clokey

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 66 "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

O God, our Father, who hast set forth the way of life for us in Thy beloved Son; we confess with shame our slowness to learn of Him; our reluctance to follow Him. Thou hast spoken and called, and we have not given heed; Thy beauty hath shone forth, and we have been blind; Thou hast stretched out Thy hands to us through our fellows, and we have passed by. Forgive us our transgressions; help us to amend our ways and in Thine eternal goodness direct what we shall be, in the name and power of Thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

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PSALTER  "The Lord Is My Light"  No. 563

GLORIA PATRI  No. 792

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH  No. 740

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ANTHEM  "I Beheld Her"  Willan

SCRIPTURE  Romans 13: 1 - 10  Page 987

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM  "My Eyes for Beauty Pine"  Howells

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 224 "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine"

SERMON  "The Home Court Advantage"

HYMN NO. 413 "Are Ye Able"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN  "Postlude"  Clokey

*** Interval for Ushering

LAY READER

We welcome Miss Janet Aldrich as our Lay Reader today. A native of West Simsbury, Connecticut and a graduate of Oberlin College, Ohio, Jan is an Assistant Editor in Junior Books at Harper and Row. Here in the Church she serves on the Education Committee, the Membership Committee, sings in the choir and is the new Coordinator for the Adult Fellowship program.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar are given in loving memory of Dominic D'Ambrosio by his wife, Norma, and his daughter, Eugenia.

USHERS

The ushers today are Mr. Morales, Mr. Bates, Mr. Hairston, Mr. Kunishima, Mr. Padilla and Mrs. Williams.

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 made possible for us by Mrs. Whelan, Mrs. Reyno, Miss Berg, Mrs. Balk, Miss Wilks and Miss Schumann.

CHURCH SCHOOL

Sessions of Church School for children are offered every Sunday morning from eleven to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is available on the fourth floor.

AN ADULT CLASS

A class for adults meets every Sunday morning from nine-thirty to ten-thirty in Fellowship Hall.
"THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE"

INTRODUCTION  Sport enthusiasts have been arguing for years over the worth of the Home Court Advantage. Most will agree that the home team does enjoy certain advantages over the visiting team in any athletic contest.

For one thing, the home team has the backing of a partisan crowd. And this can lift a team emotionally, for we always do better when people are cheering for us on the sidelines. Bill Bradley of the Knicks in speaking of the loyal fans that fill Madison Square Garden recently suggested that "the crowd is our 6th player", and he went on to add that on occasions "perhaps they should be awarded the game ball" for an outstanding performance.

Then, too, the home team will not be weakened by the rigors of travel, and it will benefit from dining in rather than eating out. Athletes say that the "steaks all taste the same on the road, and the french fries go limp, and the hotel rooms soon close in on you". Also, the home team is more accustomed to the peculiar features and idiosyncrasies of the stadium, the court, or the rink. They are more accustomed to the climate. Then, too, the home team has been known to get an odd break now and then from the officials, especially in the final moments of a closely contested game.

HOME COURT FIGURES IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE  Have you ever stopped to consider that this Home Court Advantage and its corollary - the Away Game Disadvantage - also figures in our relationships with people. In a way, it is part of the "gamemanship" that runs through all of life.

Consciously or not, we try to have others meet us on our terrain. We like to deal from power, preferring subjects that we can handle and that we know something about, formats in which we're comfortable, settings that are congenial to our strengths. The corporation executive is not at his best on the beach where brawn and physique matter more than brains and titles. Prize fighters as a rule do better in the ring than they do before the microphones. The university president is hard put to maintain his poise on the barricades.

I think we all tend to get a bit uneasy when some social conversation in which we're involved drifts into a field that takes us away from our area of competence and knowledge, and so for our ego's sake, we try to change the subject... and change it quickly.

A friend of mine who is high up in academic circles was telling me last summer how he and his wife had some friends in one evening. The conversation around the dinner table was intellectually oriented and sophisticated. His two small children were completely shut out, save for the food, but they did a fine job of behaving. The same calibre of talk continued on into the living room. Finally, toward the end of the night as the guests were preparing to leave, my friend's seven year old son looked up and asked one of the guests, "Do you know that a brontosaurus weighs 200 tons?" It was simply his way of trying to get these folks to play for a minute or two on his home court. The Home Court Advantage - we try for it every time... even as adults.

But - good things like growth and understanding can come to us when we muster the courage and develop a sense of adventure to play on the other fellow's court.
I can remember back to the Summers of 1957 and 1958 when our church was so poor that we didn't have enough money to hire painters to paint some of the rooms of the church. We had to make use of the time and talents of both men and women in the church if the job was going to get done. And so we would plan Saturday work sessions and Sunday afternoon work sessions. We were to bring our own paint brushes, our own ladders, our old rags and putty knives. Our church back then, while not as strong as it is today, had a predominant number of book oriented, verbal types — accountants, young lawyers, teachers, singers, actors, nurses, social workers. An interesting thing happened as we began to go to work in scraping the floors and painting the rooms. The usual aristocracy was inverted. Those who were strong with words and books were at a bit of disadvantage. We stepped back while our manually skilled and oriented brothers came forward to direct the traffic and manage the operation.

I remember two or three men leading the way for the rest of us. They worked harder than all the rest of us. They knew how to work the sanding machines, and they knew how to put paint on the walls without getting it all over themselves. They knew how to clean up afterwards. I fear that in most of the Protestant world those who work with their hands have been kept in the background while the more cerebral types have moved into positions of leadership and prominence. I can only say that through this common work experience a new dimension of fellowship was realized that proved for many years to be more important and longer lasting than the paint that was applied to the walls. Good things can come from playing on the other fellow's court.

Let's consider another aspect of this theme. The Home Court Advantage also figures in the kind of service that Christians render in the world. The negative models here that I would use to open up this second point would be the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. Remember, they were the men who came upon the mugging victim on the open road and chose to play it safe and pass by on the other side.

Now these men were not bad human beings. Presumably they were trained and dedicated men, prepared under proper circumstances to bring men to God and God to men. On their home court within the Temple at Jerusalem, they were probably effective, but not in Samaritan territory. Not where physical dangers lurked. Perhaps the robbers were still there. They were not able to function effectively without their robes and away from their symbols of authority. Out there, on the road, they were totally disfunctional. Their religion didn't travel very well.

Enough of them. What of us? Many of us tend to be enthusiastic, strong and active here in the church, on the home court — but out there, on the road, when we sense that we're playing an "away game", we tend to be ineffective and uncertain.

And no one I think is caught in this frustration more than the professional minister. Let it be confessed for most of us that we function best in our place of power — behind a pulpit, near the altar, in a robe, in circles where we are surrounded by a friendly climate of respect and appreciation. But frequently we are less than scintillating and relevant out there in the unprotected, rough and tumble of daily life.

I find it helpful to deliberately take myself into situations where I do not have everything going for me that I have within this church. I think it is good for a minister to be in situations where he must get through on the strength of his humanity, rather than the virtue of his ordination.
I recently completed an intensive five hour a day, three week teaching experience - teaching a group of bright high school students, most of whom were non-Christian, a course on the Religions of Man. In our studies we read, talked, and discussed Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And as a part of the course, we also took a number of interesting field trips, trips in which we were exposing ourselves to an "away game" perspective. In the past three weeks, along with the students, I have found myself worshipping in two different Temples of Judaism, as well as at the Hindu worship center, engaged in conversations with a guru, a yogi, and a swami of Hinduism, with a minister of Buddhism as well as a trip to the Zen Buddhist Center on East 67th Street, and also sharing in a call to prayer with a Muslim leader last Monday afternoon at the Islamic Center. Away games for me, and I have gained a great deal in terms of understanding and spiritual aspirations and claims of many non-Christians.

As I read the life of Jesus I sense that he did not seek the Home Court Advantage. He met people where as as they were. He took his chances on being hurt, crossed up, confronted, questioned. He did not decree that they should meet Him at some central holy place where He had his power and the presence of his followers.

And what of you? What is your "away from home" record? We all need the church. We need the inspiration, the reinforcement, the enrichment that comes from joining with others of like persuasion in fellowship, and this is why the Apostle Paul exhorted us to not "forsake the assembling of ourselves together". But the critical question concerns what you do when you are "out there" - where the climate is not one of encouragement, but criticism, where the mind of Christ counts for very little? What do you do, for example, at work when someone comes out with a racial slur or says something with an anti-Semitic overtone? What do you do when someone with whom you are associated curses the futility of life, or signals his need for love and acceptance? What do you do when you are part of some corporate decision in the private or public sector that you sense is going wrong and away from the will of God?

Our road games are every bit as important, if not more so, then our home games. It doesn't take much to build a good Christian track record within the life of a congregation through a few committee assignments. But out there - where it's at - where it's happening - this is where the record needs to be written in word and deed. Jesus dislodged us permanently from the familiar and the friendly when he said: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth". In other words, he wants us to take the show on the road!

Finally, there is a sense in which the Home Court Advantage figures in our understanding of how the church relates to American society.

Some Christians blithely assume that they live in a Christian country. They believe that the nation is more or less controlled by the mind of Christ, that our overall leadership is sensitive to His spirit, that the ethos surrounding us is, in the main, friendly to the Gospel and the claims it makes on our values. I think many Christians assume that as they "do their thing" in this country as Christians, they are playing a "home game". I have trouble with this interpretation and find it difficult to accept. Are we a Christian nation?

To start with that assumption is to head down a long trail of misguided expectations, disappointments and futility. It is one thing to believe that democracy as a political system comes closer to what we understand the will of God to be than any other system, and something else again to claim that this is a Christian nation.
It is my growing conviction (and perhaps you share this feeling) that we live out our faith in this country in an alien culture; that every game we play in these United States is something of an "away game"; that this country is one of the prime mission fields of the world for taking seriously the Christian interpretation of life. The climate at best is neutral, and at worst, hostile. The prevailing sentiment is a rather self-assured, self-confident, pragmatic secularism that has little time for the transcendent - Christian or Jewish.

Some of the Scripture we heard this morning may have sounded a little strange to our ears; perhaps we have the feeling that we have moved beyond the position of those Roman Christians to whom Paul wrote and their need to submit to the powers of their day. I wonder, at times, if we have moved at all from that minority status. Are we a Christian nation? How do you see it?

It is vital for us to consider this, lest our expectations as to what we can achieve in society be exaggerated. We are not going to change very much by ourselves. I think the key word is still the word "witness"; we simply bear witness to the powers concerning the truth that we have found in the person of Jesus Christ. Pragmatically this means that to get some things done that need doing we will have to form coalitions with others of like mind, non-Christians, and be willing to play a supplementary role....Jews, Moslems

CLOSING IT UP I was in a minister's study last Summer up in Maine, and was struck by a piece of bric-a-brac that graced his desk. It was a plastic replica of Peanuts baseball team. What a bedraggled, non-descript, unlikely lot they were. And underneath was this legend: "How can we lose when we are so sincere?"

We can lose in a way and for a time because the odds are stacked heavily against us. Each game in which we're involved as Christians now-a-days, I feel, is played away from home. Yet, our hope continues strong - for our trust is firmly fixed in God who can do a lot with a little. And so, dear friend, as we prepare now to depart from this home court to play the away game this coming week, let each of us remember that the key word is still "witness", and take with you three simple questions to ask yourself:

If not now, when?
If not here, where?
If not me, whom?

PRAYER We labor and pray in faith, O God, believing that the day will one day come when thy will shall truly be done on earth even as it is in heaven. Grant us, in the meantime, the power to work, to witness, to wait and watch. To thy name's eternal praise and through the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen.
FIRST ANTHEM: "Serenity"

"O, Sabbath rest of Galilee! O calm of hills above, where Jesus knelt to share with thee the silence of eternity interpreted by love. Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace."

SECOND ANTHEM: "The Lord Will Not Suffer"

"The Lord will not suffer thy foot to be moved, and He that keepeth thee will not slumber. The Lord that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold! He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

SPECIAL MUSIC PROGRAM

Tomorrow evening, at 7:30 pm, our choir will present another in its series of special music programs. Under the direction of Mr. Woodside, the evening will include the Alto Rhapsody by Brahms, the Mass in C by Schubert and Ein Jeder Läuft by Telemann.

Plan to attend and bring a friend to share in this evening of fine music.

GROUP EXEGESIS

Mr. Danley will be preaching February 11, on "Jesus and the Church", using as a text the account of the rending of the Temple Curtain in Mark 15:38. You are invited to share in a period of discussion concerning both the theme and the text on Sunday, February 4th, at 9:45 on the third floor. A feed-back session is also planned to mutually de-brief sometime shortly after the sermon.

This sermon will serve as a kick-off to a study of the Gospel of Mark beginning February 18th, and running through Palm Sunday. The group will meet on the third floor at 9:45. See Mr. Danley for more information.

THE ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the benediction. We invite you to remain to share in it. If you must depart either before or during it, a quiet departure will enable a spirit of worship to be maintained in the sanctuary.
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
AT 9-6997

CHURCH DIRECTORY
Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke .................................................. Minister
Dr. Harold C. Metzner ............................................ Associate Minister, Emeritus
Mr. John Danley .......................................................... Assistant Minister
Mr. Lyndon Woodside .............................................. Organist-Choir Director
Mrs. John R. White .................................................. Secretary
Mrs. Walter Longacre ................................................ Day School Director

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Chairman, Finance Commission ....................... Mr. Edward Brown
Chairman, Membership Commission .................. Mr. Walter Longacre
FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
January 28, 1973

ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 A. M.

ORGAN
"Flutes" Langlais

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 14 "From All That Dwell Below the Skies"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

O God our Father, who hast set forth the way of life for us in thy beloved Son; we confess with shame our slowness to learn of Him, our reluctance to follow Him. Thou hast spoken and called, and we have not given heed; thy beauty hath shone forth, and we have been blind; thou hast stretched out thy hands to us through our fellows, and we have passed by. Forgive us our transgressions; help us to amend our ways and in thine eternal goodness direct what we shall be, in the name and power of thy Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

PSALTER
"May Righteousness Flourish" No. 577

Gloria Patri

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH No. 740

ANTHEM
"Serenity" Ives

SCRIPTURE
Romans 13: 1 - 10

PASTORAL PRAYER

ANNOUNCEMENTS OF CONGREGATIONAL CONCERN

ANTHEM
"The Lord Will Not Suffer" Bach

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 67 "The King of Love My Shepherd Is"

SERMON
"The Home Court Advantage" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 470 "Father Eternal, Ruler of Creation"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN
"Chant de Joie" Langlais

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Community Room after the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of fellowship made possible for us today by Mrs. Montaneli, Mrs. Emy, Miss Newsom, Mrs. Russell, Miss Stadler, Miss Terrey, and Miss Wilcox.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the Altar today are given by Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Tower in memory of Mrs. Tower's parents.

USHERS

The ushers today are Mr. Hughes, Mr. Bierbaum, Mr. Harley, Mr. Heaton, Mr. Sieg and Mr. Smith.

CHURCH SCHOOL

Sessions of church school are offered every Sunday morning from eleven to twelve on the fourth floor. The nursery care for infants and toddlers is provided on the third floor of the church building.

NOMINATING COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Nominating Committee will meet on Tuesday night at seven o'clock in the Community Room.

TRUSTEES TO MEET

The Trustees of the Church will meet on Thursday evening of this coming week at eight-thirty in the Community Room.

CHURCHES ARE VULNERABLE

The churches of the city are vulnerable to theft, so please exercise care and caution with your belongings while in the building. Not everyone who passes through the open doors of the church has been converted!