

"THE JOY OF BEING DIFFERENT"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

I heard a wonderful story recently about Pete Rose who use to be with the Cincinnati Reds, then the Philadelphia Phillies, then the Montreal Expos, and now has returned to Cincinnati as a player - manager. Rose, as many of you know, is one of the "over-40" baseball players still playing and has fewer than 100 hits to go to break Ty Cobb's all time record for the most base hits...ever. Well, it seems that one night Rose was here in New York for a banquet in his honor and one of the gifts they gave him was a huge grandfather clock. He rose to receive the award, to say a few words, and became a bit flustered at the microphone. He said something like this. "I really don't appreciate this, but I certainly do deserve it."

He returned to the hotel carrying the grandfather clock awkwardly in his arms. He entered the revolving door of the hotel just as another man was leaving. And, of course, the door got jammed. After they finally got it unstuck, the other man said to Pete Rose, "Why can't you wear a wristwatch, like everybody else."

DEVELOPMENT

I don't think anybody really enjoys being different. Oh, I guess there are some who do....in fact, I think I know some who do. But I don't. I think there's something in each of us that wants to be liked and wants to be accepted, wants to fit in. There are benefits to that. Those who are well liked and who fit in well in any situation generally are the ones who are successful in this life.

A few years ago there was a study of successful Harvard graduates. W. T. Grant, back in the thirties, gave a fund to Harvard to study a particular graduating class and to follow them over the length of their careers, to determine the ingredients of a successful life in this world. They were thoroughly interviewed and even examined physically before they graduated, some 300 or more of them. Every year a questionnaire was sent to them to fill out and send back. When they were approaching retirement...this was in the 1970's....a psychiatrist at Harvard named Valliant undertook the project of compiling all of the statistics, all of the information, which must have filled a room with cabinet files. He put it in the form of a book, the title of which is Adaptation To Life. That's the secret of success...the Biblical terminology that would read, "conforming to the world".

People magazine ran a story of Dr. Valliant after the book was published in 1977. It showed him standing in front of a movie screen on which an overhead projector had thrown two words, "mature" and "neurotic". Under mature were listed the characteristics of a successful life, and under neurotic the characteristics that lead to failure. And you couldn't help but notice that under the category of neurotic were those qualities quite similar to those which Jesus was talking about in His Sermon on the Mount.

Paul was right in his Letter to the Corinthians where he said, "What we preach is foolishness to the world". And...I know that and it bothers me. I am a Christian - at least I try to be. But I also try to live in the world, and I try to get along in the world. I don't want to be considered "a fool". I'd like to live "comfortably" in the world, as a matter of fact. So I don't come easily to these messages that say the Christian life is set over against the world. Paul says, "To the world the Christian life looks like foolishness". But hold to it anyway, he said. To be a Christian, he said, is to be different. And there's no way to get around that. To be a Christian is to be different.

THE BEATITUDES

You turn to the Gospel lesson for this morning, those verses from Matthew, and there's no comfort there. It's even worse. The passage is the preface to the Sermon on the Mount. It's called the Beatitudes...you know that. It's even more disturbing when you realize that the Sermon on the Mount was a summary of the teachings of Jesus put in the form of a catechism for the early Church. So to the question of somebody coming to the Church and wanting to be a Christian, what does it mean, what's it look like to be a Christian. This was their answer. They would hand them the Sermon on the Mount. "Here, friend, read this...this is the 'key' to it all...." And it's disturbing reading, if you like to be liked.

The Beatitudes are a sort of summary of what's inside the Sermon. You read them and you know what Paul said is true. What we preach is foolishness. This is what he was talking about. Let me take it a step further.

Use your imagination a bit and think of this as the text for some motivation seminar. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" - that means the humble. Blessed are those, in other words, who think of other people first. "Blessed are those who mourn", which means those who worry about the state of the world - all of the pain and the suffering - and carry it around in their hearts, as a personal burden. They mourn for the world, the way it is. "Blessed are those who are meek", those who don't manipulate the other people in order to get ahead, and those who don't assert themselves in order to take advantage of other people. They are the meek.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness", those who live by the highest standard that they know and care not what other people live by. "Blessed are the merciful", those who can and do forgive. "Blessed are the pure in heart", those who don't live divided lives, but who give their loyalty to God alone. "Blessed are the peacemakers", those who refuse to accept violence and war as something inevitable in this world and work faithfully for reconciliation among people. And "Blessed are you when men persecute you", which seems to imply that if you do all of the above you aren't going to have a very easy time of it.

I don't think you can get around it. I just don't think you can. If you live the way the Beatitudes say we're to live then you're going to be different. I think that's why Flannery O'Connor paraphrased that saying of Jesus (John's Gospel) - "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" to be, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you odd".

Paul says it's foolishness to the world, but then he says something else. And this is important. He says it's not foolishness to the believer. To those who believe, he says, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men". We are all believers, so we know that. We know that what Christ taught is the way the world should go and be and the way we should live is the way things ought to be. So maybe the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount are set against the world for a reason. Maybe they are saying that to be a Christian is to do something about the way the world is now....to make it the way Christ wants it to be.

And we know, do we not, we who believe - that if Christ came to renew the world then we ought to be a part of that renewing...that He was crucified not because there was something wrong with Him, but because there was something wrong with the world. Therefore, we know, do we not, we who believe, that if we can't live this way it's not because it is foolishness...it's because we don't have the

courage to be different. Because we who believe know that what the world considers foolishness is wisdom, and what it considers weakness is the strength of God. I wonder...what would it look like if we were to follow the Beatitudes all the way. How would we live? Let me take you off on a little detour...

THIS SUMMER One of the highlights of our time in Maine during August was a trip to LL Bean in Freeport. It's a lovely little town and I enjoyed it. Joan Benoit comes from there, the marathon runner. It was soon after her Olympic victory and there were signs all over the town welcoming her home. There were a lot of people there that afternoon we were in Freeport at LL Bean. As some of you know, people go there to shop at those many marvellous "outlet stores" and I stopped in at Ralph Lauren and several others. My wife and daughters did the buying; I just looked and then came out and sat on the bench in front of LL Bean...did some people watching. The people and the families all look alike in a setting like that...NIKE shoes, label jeans, T-shirts with Addidas or some other brand name written across them.

I don't wear those shirts. If I wear a shirt with a brand name on it I feel I shouldn't have to pay for it...they should pay me. Sometimes I think America has become a nation of sandwich boards. You know what I mean.

Anyway, as I sat there in front of LL Bean "people watching...and enjoying it", I noticed two families that seemed to stand out from the rest of us. They caught the attention of people; everyone seemed to stare at them..the way they were dressed. Yes, the first thing you noticed about them was the way they were dressed. The girls and the women - there were two women and four girls, ranging in age from pre-school to teenage - and they all had dresses on, long dresses clear down to the ankle, plain... full so as to be shapeless. And they all had long hair, except it was tied up and hidden under a bandana. And the boys were different, too. They all had on overalls; and working boots, the men with long beards. And people looked at them. They were different from the rest of the people going in and coming out of LL Bean.

But that's not what really caught my attention. I noticed that at first, but that's not too much different really than what you see almost anywhere in this city or other parts of the country. You can find people around who dress that way. It may be some sort of a protest against the way everybody else dresses, or maybe a touch of nostalgia for rural life. I don't know. But there was something else about these people...the thing you noticed was how quiet they were. The other kids were running all over the place, shouting, and the parents were shouting at the kids. You know how it's apt to be. But these two families were so quiet. They talked softly when they talked, which wasn't an awful lot. They seemed so gentle and meek, the way deer are meek. I wondered why they were there...they seemed out of place...but then I thought... well, maybe they need some outdoor clothing or equipment from LL Bean.

I'm not one to strike up conversations with strangers at LL Bean and ask them why they look so different. And so to this day, I don't know who they were, but I suspect that the way they dressed had something to do with the way they believed. I wasn't attracted to them because of their dress, which seemed a bit eccentric to me. But there was another quality about them that haunts me even today. It's hard to describe. It's something like this. They hadn't adapted to the world, but they did seem to be more at peace with it. And there seemed to be something like joy in their lives. They stood out in a way I remember... a quietness, a calmness...as the crowds went in and out of the store.

JOY As I prepared this sermon on the Beatitudes, I remembered that the word "beatitude"...although it's translated in our English Bible as "blessed", more accurately means joy. And to me, joy is something that is deeper than happiness. Happiness is dependent on things outside yourself. If things go right outside of yourself, if you think you've had a good day, then you're going to be happy.

Joy is the result of things being right inside of you. It's the result of having your life the way it should be. When your deepest human longings are fulfilled, when you are loved, when you know you are loved, that's joy! When your life has meaning, that's joy. When you know that you are somebody and that what you do is important, that's joy. And maybe that's what was so hauntingly beautiful and attractive about those people. They seemed to have less than we had, but they also had more. I wonder...I wonder if that's what the Beatitudes are talking about. If you give yourself to the life that Christ taught, you may end up with less than what others have, but you'll have more. Joy is what you get when you are living the life you are supposed to live, when you are doing what is right because it's right.

ILLUSTRATION AND CLOSING

Alan Paton, the great South African Christian, and also a marvelous writer of great books like Cry The Beloved Country told in his autobiography about a person who had great influence on him in his early years. They were fellow students at school in South Africa. The other man's name was Railton Dent. He was a little older than Paton, and Paton admired him. Paton saw something in Dent's life that was different and it attracted Paton to him. Railton Dent's parents were missionaries in Africa. He almost venerated Dent. He wrote this:

"He did not make me into a good man, that would have been too much. But he taught me one thing - that life must be used in the service of a cause greater than oneself. This can be done by a Christian" he said, "for two reasons. One is obedience to His Lord, and the other - truly pragmatic, namely that one is going to miss the meaning of life if one doesn't."

That comes close to calling it a Beatitude. Joy is what results in doing what is right because it's right. Our world has become a bit cynical about all of this. Even people in the Church have a tendency at times to be a bit that way. Take giving, for instance. Somebody gives generously and people are suspicious of it. They wonder....what his real motive in giving. Is the IRS after him? People don't give in the world without getting something in return. They don't believe that somebody could give for the sheer joy of giving. The world asks, "what are other people doing?" "How much are other people giving?" That's apt to be the norm. The Christian asks, what will Christ have me do? And does it. And if you don't believe, that is apt to appear as foolishness. If you do believe, you know it's what you should do.

I want you to see how Matthew puts this. It may surprise you. He doesn't say that Jesus needs you. He doesn't say that the Kingdom of God depends on your being loyal to it...hanging in there with it. You'd think that that's the way it would be...the way you'd make the pitch and the appeal. You'd think that he would say that if we don't do what we are supposed to do that the Kingdom of God is going to suffer. He doesn't say that. No where does he say that. He says the Kingdom is going to come, in spite of us, if that's the way it has to come.

What he does say is this: you need to give yourself to the Kingdom of God if you want joy in this life. If you are willing to take the risk and to try it, you'll pay a price. There are lots of warnings in the Scriptures about that. You're going to pay a price. But the Beatitudes say you are also going to receive a reward - the joy of doing what you are called to do.

Paton had it right. There are two reasons for giving yourself to a cause greater than yourself. One. obedience to Jesus. That ought to be reason enough and it is for many of you. But the other is this. You're going to lose out on the real meaning of life if you don't. And the longer I live, dear friend, the more I am convinced of that!

LET US PRAY

Now move in our hearts, O God, and speak to each of us the word we need to hear. Help us in our lives to give ourselves to causes and concerns greater than ourselves, for in so doing we shall find joy and meaning in this life. Help us to find that joy of being a bit different from others because of our love for and our loyalty to Christ and His way. In his strong name we would dare to pray. Amen

ANTHEM: "Jesu, Meek and Lowly"

"Jesu, meek and lowly, Saviour, pure and holy, On Thy love relying, Hear me humbly crying. Jesu, meek and lowly. Prince of life and power, My salvation Tower, On the Cross I view Thee, Calling sinners to Thee. There behold me gazing At the sight amazing; Bending low before Thee, Helpless I adore Thee.

By Thy red wounds streaming, With Thy lifeblood gleaming, Blood for sinners flowing, Pardon free bestowing. By that fount of blessing, Thy dear love expressing, All my aching sadness, Turn Thou into gladness. Lord, in mercy guide me, Be Thou e'er beside me; In Thy ways direct me, 'Neath Thy wings protect me. Amen. Jesu, meek and lowly."

ANTHEM: "All Creatures of Our God and King"

The words for this anthem of praise are taken from the familiar hymn, numbered 60, in our hymnal.

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 evening at 6:15 pm in downstairs Choir Room.

WELCOME

We welcome Carol Tweedy to our Church this morning. Executive Director of the Stanley Isaacs Neighborhood Center located at 415 East 93rd Street, Ms. Tweedy will highlight the work being done by YEA - the Yorkville Emergency Alliance. This weekend and next many of the Churches and Synagogues of Yorkville will turn their attention to the plight of the poor and hungry living in the shadows of our apartment homes.

"HOUNDS OF HEAVEN"

This is the name of the Tuesday evening study group that meets at 6:30 pm in Fellowship Hall. The book that serves as the text for this Tuesday evening study group is The Meaning of Prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick. George Leopold is leader. New friends are always welcome.

NEW MEMBERS TO JOIN

New members will be received into the Church in early December. Persons interested in strengthening a tie with the Church this Fall are invited to be in touch with Mr. Clarke in the next week or two.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

Christmas cards are available again this Fall through the United Methodist Women. Take a moment to go over the selection at the coffee hour. Remember, there's no sales tax and half of the cost is tax deductible.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 4

Sunday afternoon, November 4th, at Christ Church Methodist, Park Avenue at 60th Street, we shall welcome Bishop and Mrs. Dale White to the Metropolitan District of the United Methodist Church.

Bishop White recently became our Bishop and this is the first opportunity for our District to welcome him. A special worship service has been planned. A reception will follow.

Members of our Choir are invited to join the Choir that will be singing at the service. A rehearsal will be held Sunday afternoon at three o'clock at Christ Church that afternoon.

Members and friends are invited to attend. That's two weeks from this afternoon at 4:30 pm.

TODAY AT 12:45

Today - following the coffee hour - the Education Committee of our Church is sponsoring a Workshop for those who are in some way involved in the Sunday School program for the children of our parish.

A special invitation is directed to persons who might be tempted to become involved either teaching or helping in some way. This is a fine opportunity to learn about what we are doing and what we hope to do in weeks ahead..

The Workshop will get under way around 12:45, as the coffee hour ends. It will be held in Fellowship Hall and a light lunch will be served after the Workshop.

William Bell, Chairperson of the Education Committee, and Anne Davenport, Sunday School Superintendent, will be glad to answer your questions regarding it. See them at the coffee hour.

We shall welcome as "resource persons" to the Workshop...Elizabeth Nolan of Union Seminary, and Gertha Stephens from the Metropolitan District Office...

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 21, 1984

ORDER OF WORSHIP

11 A. M.

ORGAN "Largo: Andante" Mendelssohn

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 55 "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

PRAYER OF CONFESSION (seated)

Most merciful Father, we have done little to forward Thy kingdom in this world, to foster the brotherhood of man, and to establish love as the law of life. We have allowed self to blind us, pains to embitter us. Pardon our shortcomings; forgive our neglect; give us a pure heart intent on pleasing Thee. Help us in all our seeking to seek first Thy kingdom and Thy righteousness. And make us come, as came Thy Son, not to be ministered unto, but to minister. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

SILENT MEDITATION - WORDS OF ASSURANCE - LORD'S PRAYER

GREETING TO THE CHILDREN

HYMN NO. 79 "Fairest Lord Jesus" (Verses 1 and 3)

ANTHEM "Jesu, Meek and Lowly" Elgar

SCRIPTURE Matthew 5: 1 - 12 Page 838

I Corinthians 1: 20 - 25 Page 991

PASTORAL PRAYER

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM "All Creatures of Our God and King" Shaw

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 185 "More Love to Thee, O Christ"

SERMON "The Joy of Being Different" Mr. Clarke

HYMN NO. 271 "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN "Allegro" Mendelssohn

*** Interval for Ushering

LAY READER

We welcome Michael Hajek to the Lectern today. A native of Bedford, Ohio, Michael is an actor and is studying Opera at Juillard. Here in the church he sings in the choir and serves on both the Membership and the Worship Committees.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar are given by Mr. and Mrs. Anton Sgarro who were married here on Saturday morning.

USHERS

The ushers today are James Padilla, Anthony Alvarez, Richmond Bates, Richard Dee, Ernest Nieratka and Yoshito Oda.

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 warm fellowship made possible for us today by Helen Wilkinson, Karen Fairbrother, Cynthia Heckart, Pauline Marsden, Robert Miller and Kim Olivadoti.

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.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

An Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. The Book of Acts is currently being studied. Anna Delson is teacher for this month. Coffee is available and new friends are most welcome.