INTRODUCTION  
I had intended to bring the final sermon in this series of three sermons in which we have been taking a look at those distinctive services for which people turn to the church: baptisms, weddings, and funerals. However, after completing the first draft of the sermon on the Christian funeral, I felt it was too long for this beautiful Spring Sunday when we also pause to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Perhaps it will be more appropriate for the last Sunday of this month which falls on Memorial Day weekend.

DEVELOPMENT  
When you look at the New York skyline from either the Jersey side or the Long Island side, your gaze usually searches out the familiar landmarks like the Empire State Building - and your attention may never come to rest on some of the less conspicuous buildings, which are nonetheless solid and substantial, vital parts of a vast metropolis. It's something of what Christopher Morley was saying in the following lines:

"Out for my evening stroll
I discovered on 84th Street
A powerhouse - quietly humming to itself,
And though I lived near-by
I had never known it was there.
Some people are like that"

Some of the parables of Jesus are like that, too. Mention the "Parables of Jesus" and right away we're inclined to think of the sky-scrapers among them - the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Parable of the Talents. And so it is that sometimes we overlook the less conspicuous word pictures of Jesus which are nonetheless an important part of the Gospel. "And though we lived near-by, we had never known they were there". It never hurts to take a look at some of these sturdy powerhouses among the parables that we may have neglected to examine over the years.

One such parable is found in those few verses of scripture which Mr. Lawrence read earlier in the service, and it has been called "The Parable of the Empty House". Cast in the thought-patterns of Jesus' time when everyone believed in evil spirits, this parable tells of a man who has successfully ousted an evil spirit from his life. Overjoyed to be free, the man sweeps and polishes the house of his life, but leaves it empty. The evicted spirit waners around for a while, gets tired of being without a home and then returns. He finds his former home not only unoccupied, but even more desirable than it had been before - and so back he comes - this time accompanied by seven other evil spirits. They all move in to take possession - and as Jesus says: "The last state of that man becomes worse than the first". In other words, the man is in worse shape than he was before.

In all probability Jesus had the Pharisees in mind when he told this short story. In so many respects, the Pharisees had cleaned and polished their lives. They had swept out idol worship, for example. Murder and adultery and sabbath desecration were sins that were shunned by any respectable Pharisee. But the antiseptic emptiness of their lives brought in seven other devils - like self-righteousness, money greed, hypocrisy, meanness, and littleness of spirit. And said Jesus: "The last state of that man becomes worse than the first".

GOOD FOR OUR TIME  
I think we have a simple parable here that speaks to our 20th century situation. Set your mind free and it doesn't take long to see how often it is enacted in our time. We diligently work to get rid of
one evil - and then having cast out that demon, we congratulate ourselves on a clean, but empty house - until presently we are confronted with an invasion of evils more insidious than the evicted tenant.

Some of us remember VE Day and VJ Day when impromptu bands formed and played and the people of this country danced in the streets. The war was over. Hitler was dead. Japan had been brought to her knees. We had evicted the evil spirits, and the word was free and clear. But a quarter of a century later, we are dealing with a whole family of evil spirits in the wake of that war - materialism and secularism, cynicism and indifference, nuclear terrorism, communism, racism, anarchy.

Or ponder the progress that we have witnessed in this past quarter of a century in the way of automation, speed, exploration. Look at the marvels of computers and color television and "747" airplanes. We have eliminated so much inefficiency and ignorance and parochialism. But we have harvested, so it appears, a new crop of problems and headaches - boredom and anxiety and alcoholism and drug abuse and pollution of the air, the water, the earth. And it just could be that this "last state of man becomes worse than the first" - or the former.

Or in more subtle ways, the parable keeps being played before our eyes. There is a great deal of contemporary zeal to attack the devil of the Establishment and the Institution. With good enough reason, in many instances. But the emptiness of the resultant anarchy begins to appear in some of the senseless destruction and disruption at many places, irresponsibly across our land, in cities, on campuses...

At the opposite end of the ideological spectrum, there is often the same kind of over-simplification. Get rid of the people who do not look like us, or think like us, deny the right to dissent, push the problems out of town, or sweep them under the rug. There was a very conservative church-related college out in the mid-west that in its catalogue described its campus as located "seven miles from any form of sin". There is the parable of Jesus in action - what a perfect breeding place for some other sins of self-righteousness and smugness and withdrawal from a world that Jesus deemed worth dying for.

IN PERSONAL LIVES But most of all - in so many personal lives today - the parable is a mirror. There has been a clear rebellion in our time against Puritanism and traditionalism and moralism. People have declared their independence of old standards and old values and old creeds. They have cleaned house. But in their new found freedom, they have become slaves to habits and attitudes that are beginning to assume a far greater threat in their personal lives than any previous bondage.

Someone overheard a couple leaving a play that had lampooned small town life in America with its sometimes over-simplistic and over-dogmatic answers. Said the husband, "Well, baby, that's where we came from". To which she replied, and "Yes... I sometimes wonder where we're going..." How many "liberated" people there are today - young and old - for whom the emptiness of life is a sad reality...a life without any commitments or real disciplines. "And the last state becomes worse than the first".

The eternal point of this less known parable of Jesus is that it is never enough just to clean the house. "Nature abhors a vacuum" - and the law applies in the moral and spiritual realm as well.
The deeper question that has to be faced is: what do we put in place of the old patterns and the old faults that we have rebelled against and driven out? To date, I am not convinced that we have found a satisfactory answer.

One of the classic sermons of the centuries is one preached by Thomas Chalmers, a Scottish divine of more than a hundred years ago, who preached a sermon in St. Giles Church in Edinburgh, entitled, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection". Think about that title. It was what Phillips Brooks was writing about in that hymn we sing at Christmas:

"Cast out our sin - and enter in;
Be born in us today....."

And this is what Paul was celebrating when he could say, "It is no longer I who lives, but Christ - who lives in me". Most of us would hesitate to say that.... but we still need to be reminded that this is what the Gospel is all about - the persistent appeal and invitation of one who still says to us:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sup with him and he with me".

Then it is that the house of a man's life is empty no more. Perhaps there is some one person in our congregation this morning that needs to hear that invitation....

**SHALL WE PRAY**

As we come to thy table this morning, Our Father, may our eyes be opened to the deeper meaning of what is taking place. Bind us more closely to each other and to Thee.

Where there are sorrowful hearts, bring comfort.
Where there is lingering illness, bring healing.
Where there is crippling fear, bring hope.
Where there is doubt, bring faith.

Lift our minds and hearts to thee, that we may go out from here renewed in body, and soul - fed, nourished with new life. May we depart from here determined to live each day as it comes, to do our very best, and to leave the rest to thee.

We ask this remembering the life and love now brought to mind by the bread and wine - the life and love of Jesus of Nazareth, in whose name we pray.
PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
106 East 86th Street
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AT 9-6997

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FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER
May 3, 1970

ORDER OF WORSHIP
11 a.m.

ORGAN
"Come Holy Ghost" Armsdorff

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 49 "Now Thank We All Our God"

APOSTLES' CREED

GLORIA PATRI

***

SCRIPTURE Matthew 12: 43-50
ANNOUNCEMENT OF CONGREGATIONAL CONCERNS
ANTHEM "Laudate Dominum"

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY
HYMN NO. 341 "Jesus! The Name High Over All"

MEDITATION "The Perils of Progress" Mr. Clarke

PRAYER

***

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION
The Kyrie (Choir)
The Invitation (No. 832)
The General Confession
The Prayer for Pardon
The Prayer of Consecration
The Prayer of Humble Access
The Agnus Dei (Choir)
The Parktaing of the Elements
The Prayer of Thanksgiving

HYMN NO. 483 "Rejoice, the Lord Is King"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN "A Mighty Fortress" Pachelbel

*** Interval for Ushering

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. Hostesses today are Miss Bruhn, Miss Hagar, Mrs. Harley, Miss Poynter, and Mrs. Sieg.

USHERS

The ushers for today's service are Mr. Wood, Mr. Davis, Dr. Hull, Mr. Proudfoot, Mr. Scutt, and Mr. Tyler.

CHURCH SCHOOL

Sessions of church school meet every Sunday morning from 10:50 to 12:10 on the fourth floor under the direction of Mr. Cook and Miss Brenes. Child care service for infants and toddlers is available in the fourth floor lounge. Mrs. Levy is in charge.

YOUNG ADULTS IN THE CONGREGATION

Young adults in the congregation are invited to share in the "Dutch Treat" lunch at the "Red Blazer" on Second Avenue. The group will form at the end of the coffee hour in the Community Room.

NEXT WEEK

Next Sunday, as part of our Mother's Day observance, we shall celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism and also receive a special offering for the Methodist Church Home of New York City. Envelopes will be in the pews.

TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY - MAY 17

Two weeks from today our friends from the Park Avenue Christian Church will join with us here in worship and fellowship. In addition to the coffee hour, we plan to serve a Sunday noon lunch in Fellowship Hall. Tickets, costing $1.50, will go on sale next Sunday.