

"THE PITCHER IS NOT ALONE IN THIS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 22, 1995

"THE PITCHER IS NOT ALONE IN THIS"

INTRODUCTION

A bright yellow Highway Department truck creeps along a quiet city street. A worker slowly climbs out of the truck and laboriously digs a large hole between the sidewalk and the street. A few minutes later, a second worker gets out, fills in the hole and stamps down the dirt. A few yards down the street they repeat the same procedure, then again and again...digging a large hole and then filling it up.

An elderly lady has been watching. She walks over and asks one of the workers, "What in the world are you doing?" And the worker responds, "Lady... we're part of an urban beautification project." "Beautification?" she asks with dismay. "What's so beautiful about all those filled-in holes?"

"Well, you see" says the worker...."the man who plans the trees in those holes is out sick today".

To be sure, a rather ridiculous little story that helps to remind us that different people play different roles. When one person fails to show up and to do his or her job, there is a hole.

DEVELOPMENT

There was an interesting story in the papers last Summer that caught my attention. The story was datelined Arlington, Texas.

Kenny Rogers of the Texas Rangers baseball team had just pitched the 12th perfect game in modern major league history. The opposing team had no hits, no runs and no one even reached first base. The game featured a diving catch by rookie outfielder, Rusty Greer, in the ninth inning to preserve this perfect game. Greer, a center fielder, made a sensational catch of a lead-off line driver in the ninth inning by Rex Hudler. Greer later said,

"I was going to give it my best effort whether I caught it or not. No matter what, I was going to dive. I got a pretty good jump, dove and it fell into my glove".

Now here's the question I want to ask you? Did that pitcher hurl a perfect game, or was the entire team - particularly Rusty Greer - responsible for that no-hitter? The answer, of course, is that pitcher could not have done it alone.

And so St. Paul's in today's Scripture Lesson is writing to the church and he says that we are a team. He doesn't compare us to a baseball team, but to the human body. Some of us are hands, says St. Paul, some of us are eyes, some of us are toes. But all of us are important. All of us have a place.

ALL OF US ARE IMPORTANT

Let's put that down as the first point of this three-pointer. Ralph Daniel is a salesman out in Singapore. Ralph moves briskly about on foot and by bus, going from client to client. About a year ago while at home playing and running with his dog, he accidentally hit the small toe on his left foot hard against the corner of a wooden door pillar. The doctor told him to rest the foot and not to wear his left shoe for two weeks. Ralph had to cancel all appointments for eighteen days. Consequently he closed no sales and earned no income.

He was healthy and fit in every way yet incapacitated by that injured little toe for nearly three weeks. A hurt little toe prevented him from earning income. This experience did teach Ralph to appreciate the words of St. Paul about the importance of all of the members of the body - whether they be hands, eyes, ears or even toes.

We are all important in the work of Christ. There are no first or second class citizens in the Christian community. The hand cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of thee". We are all important whether we are singing in the choir or teaching a class or welcoming visitors or receiving the offering and counting it or whatever our role may be. We all matter in the enterprise to which Christ has called us.

The wife of Jerome Kern and the wife of Oscar Hammerstein II were guests at the same party. Jerome Kern had written the music for the successful Broadway musical Showboat while Oscar Hammerstein had written the lyrics.

A lady came up to Mrs. Kern and gushed,

"Oh my goodness, your husband is the man who wrote that wonderful song, 'Old Man River'"

And Mrs. Hammerstein spoke up and said,

"No doubt...my husband wrote 'Old Man River'. Her husband wrote, 'Dum-dum-dum-dum, da-dum-dum-dum-dum....'" And that's true....both lyricist and composer are necessary to produce a successful Broadway musical....as is the director, the costume designer, the person who takes the tickets, etc.

Each is important in his or her own way. The world-renowned contralto, Marian Anderson, was once asked why she always used the first person plural, "we" instead of a simple "I" when she spoke about herself. Here is what she said.

"Possibly," she said, "because the longer one lives, the more one realizes that there is no particular thing that you can do alone. With the execution of the work that we do there are many people...those who wrote the music, those who made the piano on which the accompanist is playing, the accompanist who lends support to the performances...so the 'I' in it is very small indeed."

That is also how it is in the church. Each of us is important...regardless of what our area of service might be. And this brings us to the second thing that needs to be said.

EACH OF US NEEDS SOMETHING TO DO FOR CHRIST

Each of us needs something to do for Christ.

We are not only important, but we are essential. If our hands take the day off, how shall we eat? If our eyes decide to go on strike, what is to keep us from bumping into things? Or, if our feet decide they have carried an unfair share of the load and resign, how shall we move about?

We are part of a team and everyone has something they can do. Unfortunately not everyone is doing his or her part.

Part of the problem, as I see it, is that there are many people in our city who think of themselves as "Lone Ranger" Christians. They tend to think of themselves as Christians who can serve Christ without being part of a team. Someone has recently designed a "Do It Yourself Worship Kit" for the Lone Ranger Christian. Here's what you'll find in each carefully planned package.

"One portable, lightweight seat, shaped like a church pew. It can be set up anywhere. One small, paper covered hymnal containing one dozen well-known hymns, word and music. One harmonica or m~~ou~~ther organ...to take the place of the church organ. (You may find it difficult to play and to sing at the same time, but you can master it, and after all there must be something of a challenge in this kit). One abbreviated New Testament with familiar selections designed to be read in less than one minute each. One small offering plate...to be held in the left hand while putting coin in with the right. (Denomination of the coin is unimportant as you will get it back anyway.)

One brief sermon entitled, 'What a Good Boy Am I'. Your will feel much better after using this sermon. It may be read aloud or silently."

Now those who have used our "Do It Yourself Worship Kit" says the designer, "tell us they get an extra lift from their own service if at the close they rusk to a mirror and shake hands with themselves, but this, says the designer, is optional".

Unfortunately, this is some people's ideal of the Christian faith. Just me, myself and I, but this is far from the Biblical ideal. Need I remind you that Biblically, to be a follower of Christ is to be part of a family, part of a body, as it were. Community is not optional for the Christian. The Christian community is a reflection of the Jewish community out of which it was born. To be a Jew is to be part of a covenant people. It is to be part of a holy nation. So it is with those who follow Christ. We are part of a family. We are members of a royal priesthood. We are hands. We are eyes. We are toes on a distinct body. Metaphorically, the body of Christ.

We all have something we need to be doing to help the body survive and grow according to the gifts that God has given us. Some of us are compassionate listeners. We could be visiting the shut-ins. Some of us have outgoing personalities. We could be more active than we are in the evangelism work of the church. Some of us work well with children. The list goes on. We have unique gifts and it is important that we use those gifts to serve the entire body.

It's like a trio that Frank Messenger and his family heard one Sunday in an African church in Zimbabwe. Midway through the service two young men came forward to sing. They were awful. People began to snicker and began to even laugh out loud. A third young man stood up in the congregation and came forward and joined in the singing. When the trio filled out they sounded great! They received an enthusiastic response when they finished.

Frank saw this as a parable of peace, a parable of harmony. All the parts of the Body of Christ are needed to make this beautiful music. And it is true. Our church cannot be the church that God has called it to be if each of us is not doing our part.

SUM IS GREATER THAN THE INDIVIDUAL PARTS

This brings us to the final thing to be said and that is this that because we are the body of Christ, the sum is far greater than the individual parts. That is, the church is not simply another human institution. We are not like the Lion's Club or the Kiwanis or the Rotary. They are great organizations but organically they are different from the church. The church relies not only on the commitment of its members. The church relies also on the Spirit of the Living God. And because the church relies on the Spirit of the Living God, we accomplish far more than human institutions can ever hope for.

There's a beautiful story that I have always been fond of about an ancient King of Babylon who came back to life and visited one of our modern cities. His host took him around and showed him the underside of the city: brothels, gambling and drug hang-outs, bars and the like. The king was polite but bored. He said,

"We had all these in Babylon three thousand years ago, and on the whole, we did it better. Have you nothing new to show me?"

So his guide reversed his field and took his guest to churches, to Day Care Centers, to libraries, schools, hospitals, public health centers, research laboratories, transient centers, institutions for the disabled, soup kitchens. Said the king,

"Ah.....all this is new. We didn't have these things in Babylon".

No, they didn't have those things in Babylon because they did not have the Church of Jesus Christ. I challenge you to go into any non-Christian nation in this world and find the level of ministry to the intellectual, social, physical and spiritual needs of people that you will find in those countries in which Christians are the majority. Search out the histories of our great universities, our great hospitals, our great benevolent centers and you will find, more often than not, that they were begun in the name of Christ. The Church is an institution unlike any other in this world and the reason is that our founder is still with us. It is He who breathes life into His weary followers; it is He who still beckons with the call to come and "Follow Me".

✓ So go forth from here this hour rememberin: we are His body. All of us are important. There is something each of us can do in His service. And most importantly of all, He is alive and He is here with us.

"THE PITCHER IS NOT ALONE IN THIS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 22, 1995

"THE PITCHER IS NOT ALONE IN THIS"

INTRODUCTION

A bright yellow Highway Department truck creeps along a quiet city street. A worker slowly climbs out of the truck and laboriously digs a large hole between the sidewalk and the street. A few minutes later, a second worker gets out, fills in the hole and stamps down the dirt. A few yards down the street they repeat the same procedure, then again and again...digging a large hole and then filling it up.

An elderly lady has been watching. She walks over and asks one of the workers, "What in the world are you doing?" And the worker responds, "Lady... we're part of an urban beautification project." "Beautification?" she asks with dismay. "What's so beautiful about all those filled-in holes?"

"Well, you see" says the worker...."the man who plants the trees in those holes is out sick today". And so it goes...perhaps you can identify.

To be sure, a rather ridiculous little story that helps to remind us that different people play different roles. When one person fails to show up and to do his or her job, there is a hole. Someone has to fill it.

DEVELOPMENT

There was an interesting story in the papers last Summer that caught my attention. The story was datelined Arlington, Texas.

Kenny Rogers of the Texas Rangers baseball team had just pitched the 12th perfect game in modern major league history. The opposing team had no hits, no runs and no one even reached first base. The game featured a diving catch by rookie outfielder, Rusty Greer, in the ninth inning to preserve this perfect game. Greer, a center fielder, made a sensational catch of a lead-off line drive in the ninth inning by Rex Hudler. Greer later said,

"I was going to give it my best effort whether I caught it or not. No matter what, I was going to dive. I got a pretty good jump, dove and it fell into my glove".

Now here's the question I want to ask you? Did that pitcher hurl a perfect game, or was the entire team - particularly Rusty Greer - responsible for that no-hitter? The answer, of course, is that pitcher could not have done it alone.

And so St. Paul's in today's Scripture Lesson is writing to the church and he says that we are a team. He doesn't compare us to a baseball team, but to the human body. Some of us are hands, says St. Paul, some of us are eyes, some of us are toes. But all of us are important. All of us have a place.

ALL OF US ARE IMPORTANT

Let's put that down as the first point of this three-pointer. Ralph Daniel is a salesman out in Singapore. Ralph moves briskly about on foot and by bus, going from client to client. About a year ago while at home playing and running with his dog, he accidentally hit the small toe on his left foot hard against the corner of a wooden door pillar. The doctor told him to rest the foot and not to wear his left shoe for two weeks. Ralph had to cancel all appointments for eighteen days. Consequently he closed no sales and earned no income.

He was healthy and fit in every way yet incapacitated by that injured little toe for nearly three weeks. A hurt little toe prevented him from earning income. This experience did teach Ralph to appreciate the words of St. Paul about the importance of all of the members of the body - whether they be hands, eyes, ears or even toes.

We are all important in the work of Christ. There are no first or second class citizens in the Christian community. The hand cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of thee". We are all important whether we are singing in the choir or teaching a class or welcoming visitors or receiving the offering and counting it or whatever our role may be. We all matter in the enterprise to which Christ has called us.

The wife of Jerome Kern and the wife of Oscar Hammerstein II were guests at the same party. Jerome Kern had written the music for the successful Broadway musical Showboat while Oscar Hammerstein had written the lyrics.

A lady came up to Mrs. Kern and gushed,

"Oh my goodness, your husband is the man who wrote that wonderful song, 'Old Man River'".

And Mrs. Hammerstein spoke up and said,

"No dear...my husband wrote 'Old Man River'. Her husband wrote, 'Dum-dum-dum-dum, da-dum-dum-dum-dum....'" And that's true....both lyricist and composer are necessary to produce a successful Broadway musical....as is the director, the costume designer, the person who takes the tickets, etc.

Each is important in his or her own way. The world-renowned contralto, Marian Anderson, was once asked why she always used the first person plural, "we" instead of a simple "I" when she spoke about herself. Here is what she said.

"Possibly," she said, "because the longer one lives, the more one realizes that there is no particular thing that you can do alone. With the execution of the work that we do there are many people...those who wrote the music, those who made the piano on which the accompanist is playing, the accompanist who lends support to the performances...so the 'I' in it is very small indeed."

That is also how it is in the church. Each of us is important...regardless of what our area of service might be. And this brings us to the second thing that needs to be said.

EACH OF US NEEDS SOMETHING TO DO FOR CHRIST

Each of us needs something to do for Christ.

We are not only important, but we are essential. If our hands take the day off, how shall we eat? If our eyes decide to go on strike, what is to keep us from bumping into things? Or, if our feet decide they have carried an unfair share of the load and resign, how shall we move about?

We are part of a team and everyone has something they can do. Unfortunately not everyone is doing his or her part.

Part of the problem, as I see it, is that there are many people in our city who think of themselves as "Lone Ranger" Christians. They tend to think of themselves as Christians who can serve Christ without being part of a team. Someone has recently designed a "Do It Yourself Worship Kit" for the Lone Ranger Christian. Here's what you'll find in each carefully planned package.

"One portable, lightweight seat, shaped like a church pew. It can be set up anywhere. One small, paper covered hymnal containing one dozen well-known hymns, word and music. One harmonica or mouth organ....to take the place of the church organ. (You may find it difficult to play and to sing at the same time, but you can master it, and after all there must be something of a challenge in this kit). One abbreviated New Testament with familiar selections designed to be read in less than one minute each. One small offering plate...to be held in the left hand while putting coin in with the right. (Denomination of the coin is unimportant as you will get it back anyway.)

One brief sermon entitled, 'What a Good Boy Am I'. You will feel much better after using this sermon. It may be read aloud or silently."

Now those who have used our "Do It Yourself Worship Kit" says the designer, "tell us they get an extra lift from their own service if at the close they rush to a mirror and shake hands with themselves, but this, says the designer, is optional".

Unfortunately, this is some people's ideal of the Christian faith. Just me, myself and I, but this is far from the Biblical ideal. Need I remind you that Biblically, to be a follower of Christ is to be part of a family, part of a body, as it were. Community is not optional for the Christian. The Christian community is a reflection of the Jewish community out of which it was born. To be a Jew is to be part of a covenant people. It is to be part of a holy nation. So it is with those who follow Christ. We are part of a family. We are members of a royal priesthood. We are hands. We are eyes. We are toes on a distinct body. Metaphorically, the body of Christ.

We all have something we need to be doing to help the body survive and grow according to the gifts that God has given us. Some of us are compassionate listeners. We could be visiting the shut-ins. Some of us have outgoing personalities. We could be more active than we are in the evangelism work of the church. Some of us work well with children. The list goes on. We have unique gifts and it is important that we use those gifts to serve the entire body.

It's like a trio that Frank Messenger and his family heard one Sunday in an African church in Zimbabwe. Midway through the service two young men came forward to sing. They were awful. People began to snicker and began to even laugh out loud. A third young man stood up in the congregation and came forward and joined in the singing. When the trio filled out they sounded great! They received an enthusiastic response when they finished.

Frank saw this as a parable of peace, a parable of harmony. All the parts of the Body of Christ are needed to make this beautiful music. And it is true. Our church cannot be the church that God has called it to be if each of us is not doing our part. Think about it...are you doing your part? Be honest.

SUM IS GREATER THAN THE INDIVIDUAL PARTS

This brings us to the final thing to be said and that is this that because we are the body of Christ, the sum is far greater than the individual parts. That is, the church is not simply another human institution. We are not like the Lion's Club or the Kiwanis or the Rotary. They are great organizations but organically they are different from the church. The church relies not only on the commitment of its members. The church relies also on the Spirit of the Living God. And because the church relies on the Spirit of the Living God, we accomplish far more than human institutions can ever hope for.

There's a beautiful story that I have always been fond of about an ancient King of Babylon who came back to life and visited one of our modern cities. His host took him around and showed him the underside of the city: brothels, gambling and drug hang-outs, bars and the like. The king was polite but bored. He said,

"We had all these in Babylon three thousand years ago, and on the whole, we did it better. Have you nothing new to show me?"

So his guide reversed his field and took his guest to churches, to Day Care Centers, to libraries, schools, hospitals, public health centers, research laboratories, transient centers, institutions for the disabled, soup kitchens. Said the king,

"Ah.....all this is new. We didn't have these things in Babylon".

No, they didn't have those things in Babylon because they did not have the Church of Jesus Christ. I challenge you to go into any non-Christian nation in this world and find the level of ministry to the intellectual, social, physical and spiritual needs of people that you will find in those countries in which Christians are the majority. Search out the histories of our great universities, our great hospitals, our great benevolent centers and you will find, more often than not, that they were begun in the name of Christ. The Church is an institution unlike any other in this world and the reason is that our founder is still with us. It is He who breathes life into His weary followers; it is He who still beckons with the call to come and "Follow Me".

So go forth from here this hour remembering: we are His body. All of us are important. There is something each of us can do in His service. And most importantly of all, He is alive and He is here with us.

PRAYER

Help each of us to take to heart these wonderful words of St. Paul. Wrestle with us in the deep places of our hearts and help us to see that we each have a place on His team and a role to play. Take our lips and speak through them...our minds and think through them, our hearts and set them on fire. In His name, we pray. Amen.

PARK AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

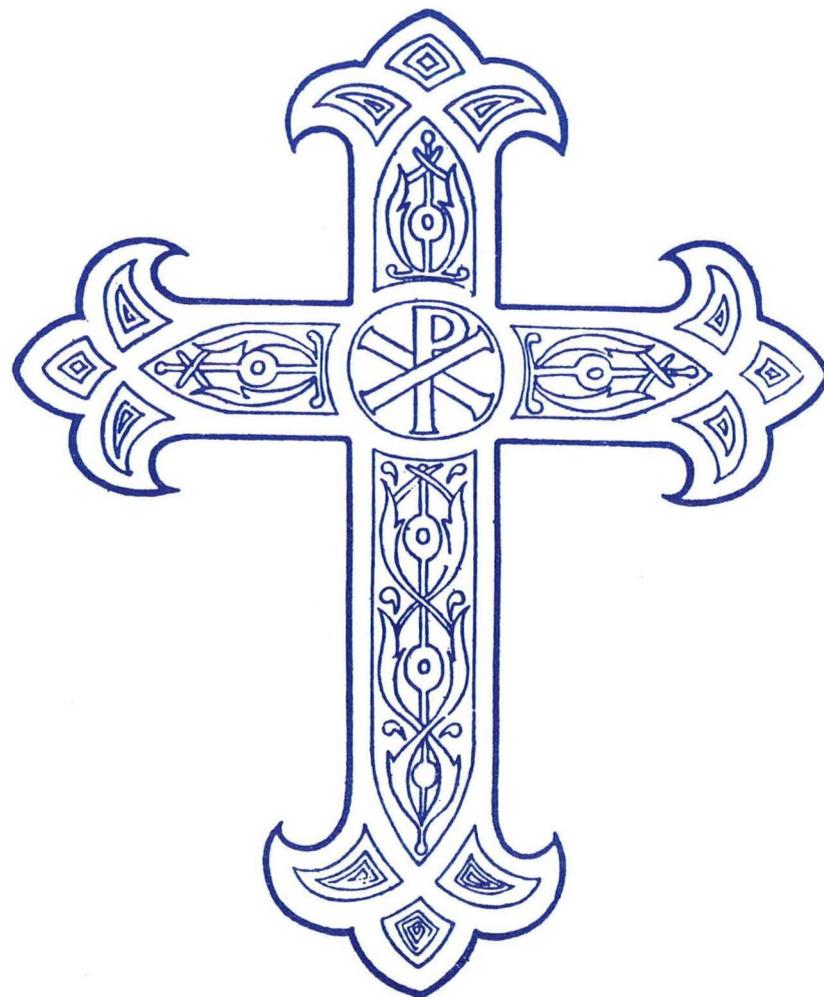
106 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028
AT 9-6997

CHURCH DIRECTORY

Philip A. C. Clarke Minister
William Bonwitt Assistant Minister
Lyndon Woodside Organist-Choir Director
Joseph Cifuentes Business Manager
Judy Ferland Secretary
Judith Keisman Day School Director
Roberto Meriles Custodian

GENERAL OFFICERS

Lay Members, Annual Conference Edward J. Brown
Larry Morales
Lay Leader Larry Morales
Associate Lay Leader Eric de Freitas
President, Board of Trustees Michael Schaffield
Chairperson, Administrative Council Grace Thomas
Chairperson, Education Committee Carl Condra
Chairperson, Finance Committee Dan Boone
Chairperson, Membership Committee Douglas McPheters
Co-Chairpersons, Outreach Committee Janet Ernst
Jim Perkins
Chairperson, Worship Committee Jane Chaney
Chairperson, Publicity Committee Sam Wilson
Chairperson, Day School Committee Anna Delson
Chairperson, Ushers Effie French
Superintendent, Sunday School, Tom DeBow



PARK AVENUE
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH