

"THE SIMPLICITY OF THE GOSPEL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 10, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Fulghum in his recent book, It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It, talks about Mother's Day. Speaking from his experiences as a son and as a father and also as a minister, he writes,

"For twenty-five years of my life, the second Sunday in May was trouble. Being the minister of a church, I was obliged in some way to address the subject of Mother's Day. It could not be avoided. I tried that. Mind you, the congregation was quite open-minded, actually, and gave me free rein in the pulpit.

But when it came to the second Sunday in May, the expectations were summarized in these words of one of the more outspoken women in the church: 'I'm bringing my MOTHER to church on MOTHER'S DAY, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want, but it had better include MOTHER...and it had better be good!' She was joking, I think...teasing me a bit. But she also meant it."

DEVELOPMENT

Most ministers, I think, do feel a bit of pressure on Mother's Day. Like so many of you, I was blessed with a wonderful mother. Now we don't get to "pick" our parents, but if it were a matter of choice, I would have picked my mother and most of you would say the same. And so on a personal note, I do appreciate Mother's Day.

But as a minister, I am in touch with the fact that not everyone feels the same way about Mother's Day...and for good reason. For such people, just the thought of bringing honor and tribute to their mothers is a bit unbearable. Ministers have to be careful how we approach this particular Sunday for the needs and the experiences of people in the pews of a church are varied and what I might say about my mother might be impossible for someone else to say about their mother.

I'll come back to this idea later on in the sermon, but right now let's take a closer look at today's scripture lesson from John's Gospel, chapter fourteen.

JESUS IS "GOD'S WHO" FOR ALL MANKIND

Here in John 14, we have a pre-crucifixion conversation between Jesus and His disciples. It probably brought a bit of confusion to the disciples as they struggled with some of the things He was saying to them. Try to recall some of the ingredients of this conversation that Antonia read to us earlier. Jesus is saying a number of things:

1. Do not be troubled.
2. I am going to leave you.
3. I will prepare a place for you.
4. I will come again to get you.
5. You will know the way to Me.
6. I am the way, and the truth and the life!
7. No one comes to God, but by Me.
8. I am in God and God is in Me.
9. My words are God's words.
10. Believe in Me and you will also do what I do.

11. Whatever you ask in My name, I will do!
12. God will give you the Counselor, the Spirit of Truth.
13. The Spirit will dwell in you.
14. Love Me and keep My commandments.
15. You will know God.

Fifteen points here here and you can probably add some more. Is there any other passage of Scripture that's "so loaded" as this one? Probably not and trying to keep up with all of the points of emphasis is like staying up all night to finish a paper or to cram for a final. There's a lot to take in here in such a short period of space and time. I'm sure the disciples were a bit confused and bewildered by all Jesus was saying and the fact that He was on His way to the cross the next day added even more confusion, consternation and frustration.

I think this is a passage that is raising certain questions with really very little attempt to give answers. It isn't giving us answers to the questions of where and when, of how and why....yes, there's quite a bit left in doubt. Jesus says, without going into detail,

"I'll be leaving. I'll prepare a place for you. I will return...."

Where is Jesus going? Where is He off to? The disciples don't know and when is He leaving? Again, they don't know. Why is He going. They're not told. How will He return? He doesn't explain this to us. In the midst of this great and familiar passage, there are a number of questions left unanswered.

But - there is for me a unique characteristic to this story that would be most unfortunate to overlook. And that characteristic has to do with its simplicity. Yes - matters of where and when, of how and why are not answered, but the one ingredient that is found throughout this passage answers the question of WHO. Let me explain.

WHO will leave the disciples?
WHO will prepare a place for them?
WHO will come again?
WHO is the Way, the Truth and the Life?
WHO do the disciples go to in order to get to God?
WHO is "in" God?
WHO intends to help the disciples?
WHOSE words are God's words?
WHOSE commandments are they to keep?
WHO will dwell in the disciples even after He's gone?

And the answer to all of these question is JESUS - HIMSELF! The "WHO" question of life is answered for us. The where and when, the how and the way questions are not. The simplicity of the Gospel is that Jesus is God's "WHO" for all mankind...for humankind.

And with that thought firmly in mind, I have but one point to lift up in the time that remains for us. And let me work in to it by sharing with you a story that I came across recently about a church organist and something that happened on Easter.

Cathy Norman is the organist in her church in Elyria, Ohio. She's a fine organist they say but you know she did something a couple of years ago that no organist should ever do. She overslept on Easter of 1989 and missed the first of two Easter services. She was most embarrassed. Well, the minister and the choir and the entire church forgave her. It can happen to anyone, I suppose. Oh, they teased her about it, but it was done lovingly and always in good fun. Which reminds me that in my first couple of years here we had an organist who failed to show up for two services, but it wasn't because he overslept. Anyway - all was forgiven and forgotten until...the next Easter!

The very next Easter...just one year later...her telephone rang loudly early in the morning...6:30 am. And jolted by the incessant ringing of her phone, she scrambled to answer it. It was still dark and it was the minister of the Church on the other end and he said in a loud voice:

"Cathy...it is Easter morning! And the Lord has risen, and I would suggest you do the same!"

Which in a round-a-bout way leads me on to say this: that not a person here this morning got here on their own. You did not give birth to yourself! You had a mother grant you that privilege. And no matter what your relationship with your mother may have been in the past...across the years...or continues to be today...without your mother, you would not exist. And for that reason alone, there is not a one of us who is not indebted to the person who gave us birth. We would have had trouble getting here without a mother. We wouldn't have made it.

Along the way for some of you there may have been step-mothers or adopted mothers, or even mothers who did not know how to love their children. But regardless of how tragic some of your stories may be if we opened up your personal diary, you are never going to be able to repay the mother who gave you birth and granted you existence in the first place.

For some of you, the where and the when, the how and the way of your life story may be touched with the regrettable...not as you would have liked it to be....but the fact still remains that the "WHO" of your life began with your mother and nothing will ever change that fact and nothing should.

The "simplicity" of your existence begins with the fact that you were given birth by a woman - your mother. But we must not stop here.

KEEP GOING

Let's take another step. Maybe you had a great mother, as I did...perhaps you did not. But either way, we need to remind ourselves that although it was our mother who gave us birth, it is God who gives us life.

And dear friend...whoever you are...each day for us is a new "wake-up" call from God. The message is clear enough and it should set the tone for each day:

"The Lord is risen, and I suggest you do the same!"

The truth that dawns here is that it is God who helps us get up and "get on with it"...with our lives and who makes a difference in each day. At times we tend to get "bogged down" in the complexities of our every day human struggle. We ask

ourselves WHERE....but never seem to get there. We ask ourselves WHEN...but sometimes we're not ready or well-prepared. We ask ourselves WHY...and end up by ourselves, standing on a lonely hillside somewhere...waiting for a voice to speak. We ask HOW...and end up wanting to quit because things just aren't manageable, let alone possible. And least we think they're not. These are the complexities of our human struggle.

We may not want to hear such news, but the GOOD NEWS is that you and I have been given the answer to all the questions of WHO. The WHO of our lives is that God...breaking through to us in Jesus is with us every morning when it's time to "get up" and to "get on" with being a human being.

You may be one who demands more assurances and that more answers be given. Let me say this, if I refuse to make a start until I know more information, then I'm living in the complexities of my life and letting them control me. But if, on the other hand, if we're willing to stake a claim that God is with us - guiding us, leading us, sending us, challenging us, teaching us, loving us - then we are willing to act "on faith". Once we know the "who" question about God, then we are in a position to deal with the where, the when, the how and the why and deal with the complexities of daily living.

Take that "leap of faith". "More belief and fewer beliefs" is the way that the late Dean Pike once spoke of it. Faith in God who has come to us in Christ.

TWO WORLDS

A friend tells the story of his mother's death. Her funeral was held in January of 1978 in the middle of a snow storm. Later on that same evening he went to his mother's home. Perhaps it was because he didn't want to let go of her or maybe it was because it was so cold outside, but he decided to leave the heat turned on in her house. Moreover, he didn't take anything out of her home...no chairs or tables or photographs or dishes or anything at all. He just wanted to spend some time there all by himself and tend to one or two items of business. He found it strangely peaceful and so every two or three nights for several weeks he would drop by her house...just to be there all by himself....alone.

Soon after his initial visit, my friend remembers that he began to sense a wonderfully warm and enveloping presence of his mother. It wasn't something that he could reach out and touch with his hands, nor was it something he could see with his eyes or hear with his ears. And yet...as surely as he could sense his own presence, my friend "knew" beyond the slightest shadow of doubt that his mother was there, that she was embracing him in a brand new way.

It was not with his mind, nor with his logical reasoning powers that he knew she was there...but somewhere deep inside of him - in a place and at a level that he could not name or explain, he just knew that his mother was there. And ever since that time, he has been at peace with her death and in no way troubled by it. Here is how this friend concludes this story about his mother and her house,

"There's a physical world and there's a spiritual world" he says. "There's a world and a reality that you can see with the eyes of your flesh and there's a world and a reality that you can see only with the eyes of your faith and the eyes of your heart...."

"There's a world and a reality out there that you can know through your five sense, and there's also a world and a reality out there that lies beyond your senses. But both of these worlds and both of these realities - both of them - are absolutely and utterly real!"

A PERSONAL WORD

I find that I can identify quite easily with my friend's account and perhaps you can, too. My father died in 1949 when I was half wzy through college. My mother died in 1980 and since their deaths I have come to know that they are present and real and recognizeable in those ways that my five senses could never discover. I like to visit them in the little country cemetery upstate where they are buried and I do this every Summer when I'm preaching at Caroga Lake...driving over to Cobleskill and then to Hyndsville in Schoharie County where dad pastored three little churches back in the twenties...and on to that quiet, peaceful place where I can again sense their presence in my life. I feel their presence, too, when I drive by the house that we lived in in Gloversville.

When I get "in touch" with them....I am at the same time "in touch" with the fact that there are really two worlds that we live in. In the one world, we are given birth and what we come to know and believe are those things we can see, and hear, and touch and so on.....but there is yet another world - a world that sees us, that hears us, and touches us in such a way that we are daily given the strength to "rise" and to get going.

Remember this then as we go on from here: your mother gave you birth and for that fact you will always be indebted to her, no matter who she was or how she treated you. But even though your mother gave you birth, it is God who gives you life. These are the fundamental facts of the "simplicity" of the universe that is our larger home. Jesus was teaching the disciples many things and saying many things in this 14th chapter, but most of all, He reminded them as He was among them that He was the Way, the Truth and the Life.

And, dear friend, He still is and if you learned that at your mother's knees, long ago...you have every reason, I believe, to rise up and call her blessed. Amen!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, dear God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments. Deepen our trust and strengthen our faith in Him who is the Way, the truth and the life. For all mothers who have shared with us their belief in Christ, we thank you. Amen.

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The very next Easter...just one year later...her telephone rang loudly early in the morning...6:30 am. And jolted by the incessant ringing of the phone, she scrambled to answer it. It was still dark and it was the minister of the Church on the other end and he said in a loud voice:

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Which in a round-a-bout" way leads me on to say this: that not a person here this morning got here on their own. You did not give birth to yourself! You had a mother grant you that privilege. And no matter what your relationship with your mother may have been in the past...across the years...or continues to be today...without your mother, you would not exist. And for that reason alone, there is not a one of us who is not indebted to the person who gave us birth. We would have had trouble getting here without a mother. We wouldn't have made it.

Along the way for some of you there may have been step-mothers or adopted mothers, or even mothers who did not know how to love their children. But regardless of how tragic some of your stories may be if we opened up your personal diary, you are never going to be able to repay the mother who gave you birth and granted you existence in the first place.

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The "simplicity" of your existence begins with the fact that you were given birth by a woman - your mother. But we must not stop here.

KEEP GOING

Let's take another step. Maybe you had a great mother, as I did...perhaps you did not. But either way, we need to remind ourselves that although it was our mother who gave us birth, it is God who gives us life.

And dear friend...whoever you are...each day for us is a new "wake-up" call from God. The message is clear enough and it should set the tone for each day:

"The Lord is risen, and I suggest you do the same!"

The truth that dawns here is that it is God who helps us get up and "get on with it"...with our lives and who makes a difference in each day. At times we tend to get "bogged down" in the complexities of our every day human struggle. We ask

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You may be one who demands more assurances and that more answers be given. Let me say this, if I refuse to make a start until I know more information, then I'm living in the complexities of my life and letting them control me. But if, on the other hand, if we're willing to stake a claim that God is with us - guiding us, leading us, sending us, challenging us, teaching us, loving us - then we are willing to act "on faith". Once we know the "who" question about God, then we are in a position to deal with the where, the when, the how and the why and deal with the complexities of daily living.

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Take that "leap of faith". "More belief and fewer beliefs" is the way that the late Dean Pike once spoke of it. Faith in God who has come to us in Christ.

TWO WORLDS

A friend tells the story of his mother's death. Her funeral was held in January of 1978 in the middle of a snow storm. Later on that same evening he went to his mother's home. Perhaps it was because he didn't want to let go of her or maybe it was because it was so cold outside, but he decided to leave the heat turned on in her house. Moreover, he didn't take anything out of her home...no chairs or tables or photographs or dishes or anything at all. He just wanted to spend some time there all by himself and tend to one or two items of business. He found it strangely peaceful and so every two or three nights for several weeks he would drop by her house...just to be there all by himself....alone.

Soon after his initial visit, my friend remembers that he began to sense a wonderfully warm and enveloping presence of his mother. It wasn't something that he could reach out and touch with his hands, nor was it something he could see with his eyes or hear with his ears. And yet...as surely as he could sense his own presence, my friend "knew" beyond the slightest shadow of doubt that his mother was there, that she was embracing him in a brand new way.

It was not with his mind, nor with his logical reasoning powers that he knew she was there...but somewhere deep inside of him - in a place and at a level that he could not name or explain, he just knew that his mother was there. And ever since that time, he has been at peace with her death and in no way troubled by it. Here is how this friend concludes this story about his mother and her house,

"There's a physical world and there's a spiritual world" he says. "There's a world and a reality that you can see with the eyes of your flesh and there's a world and a reality that you can see only with the eyes of your faith and the eyes of your heart...."

"There's a world and a reality out there that you can know through your five senses, and there's also a world and a reality out there that lies beyond your senses. But both of these worlds and both of these realities - both of them - are absolutely and utterly real!"

A PERSONAL WORD

I find that I can identify quite easily with my friend's account and perhaps you can, too. My father died in 1949 when I was half way through college. My mother died in 1980 and since their deaths I have come to know that they are present and real and recognizable in those ways that my five senses could never discover. I like to visit them in the little country cemetery upstate where they are buried and I do this every Summer when I'm preaching at Caroga Lake...driving over to Cobleskill and then to Hyndsville in Schoharie County where dad pastored three little churches back in the twenties...and on to that quiet, peaceful place where I can again sense their presence in my life. I feel their presence, too, when I drive by the house that we lived in in Gloversville.

When I get "in touch" with them....I am at the same time "in touch" with the fact that there are really two worlds that we live in. In the one world, we are given birth and what we come to know and believe are those things we can see, and hear, and touch and so on.....but there is yet another world - a world that sees us, that hears us, and touches us in such a way that we are daily given the strength to "rise" and to get going.

Remember this then as we go on from here: your mother gave you birth and for that fact you will always be indebted to her, no matter who she was or how she treated you. But even though your mother gave you birth, it is God who gives you life. These are the fundamental facts of the "simplicity" of the universe that is our larger home. Jesus was teaching the disciples many things and saying many things in this 14th chapter, but most of all, He reminded them as He was among them that He was the Way, the Truth and the Life.

And, dear friend, He still is and if you learned that at your mother's knee, long ago...you have every reason, I believe, to rise up and call her blessed. Amen!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, dear God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments. Deepen our trust and strengthen our faith in Him who is the Way, the truth and the life. For all mothers who have shared with us their belief in Christ, we thank you. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: May 10, 1992

O ETERNAL SPIRIT....FATHER and MOTHER of our spirits....again we would pause amidst the noise and clamor of this great city, and in the routine of our daily life to REMEMBER YOU.

And here we would be still and know that YOU are GOD - our Maker, our Redeemer, our refuge and our strength.

Here we would talk to YOU as children to a parent...and would listen quietly and attentively for that word that touches our lives and makes a difference.

FOR HEALTH, HOME and HAPPINESS - we lift our hearts "in praise" and "in thanksgiving."

Teach us how to be grateful for those darker and more difficult moments that have brought us closer to YOU, that have made us more conscious of spiritual power and inner spiritual resources.

May we live this week that is now beginning as those who have been significantly touched by the Christ-spirit...that His concern, His compassion, His courage and His compassion may flow through our lives...touching others...making a difference in the home, the office...on the street...in the bus.

ON THIS SPECIAL DAY, OUR thoughts turn to the gentle influence of the home,
to the ministry of motherhood,
to the unity of family life.

Teach us the wisdom of keeping family ties sacred and strong through joyous love, mutual understanding, shared concern.

We bless you, O Lord, for the precious ideal of motherhood. And grateful we are for the lasting influence and touch of all good mothers on our lives. For their gentleness, their loyalty, their love and their patience, we give YOU our THANKS.

We bless you, too, Lord, for those who have never had children of their own, but have been as mothers to boys and girls along the way...teachers and nurses.

NOW REFRESH US with a fresh encounter with Christ, the Life-Giver.

Send each of us back to our daily tasks reflecting His love and His singleness of purpose. Give to each of us the gift of adventurous faith. In the name and spirit of Christ, we offer this prayer on this Sunday of Pentecost.

Remembering how the gift of the Holy Spirit touched those early followers of Christ, we say 'amen'.