

*Just
draft*

"THIS IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
October 4, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

Recently I heard about a bright young man who had applied for a job that had been advertised in the papers. The manager greeted him at the door with discouraging news.

"Young man, you're too late. We've already received over a thousand applications..."

This bright young man was quick with his answer, "Well...how about hiring me to classify the applications?" Some people recognize an opportunity when they see one.

DEVELOPMENT

John Glenn was the first man in space. Before that historic flight Glenn knew that the first astronaut would be the one the world would remember. Thus, he dreamed up a scheme to improve his chances of being first. While a major in the Marines, Glenn decided to make a coast-to-coast flight at an average speed greater than Mach 1. Everybody knew it could be done, but nobody bothered to do it until Glenn did. And because he did it first, he positioned himself to also be first in space. Glenn not only recognized his opportunity, but he also reached out and seized it.

Remember the movie, "The Dead Pots Society"? Robin Williams plays the part of English teacher John Keating in the movie and in his first class session Keating takes his students into the hall to the trophy case and shows them pictures of heroes from the past history of the school. He says to the students,

"All of these young men were as you are today, starting life with great promise. All of you will some day be as they are. They're all dead and so will you be. What do you think they would say to you? Get up close to the glass."

And as the class of young men leans toward the glass, Robin Williams in a raspy voice says, "Carpe diem...carpe diem". Carpe diem. Seize the day!

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

That is the message of the Gospel. The disciples of Jesus asked him, "Lord, will only a few be saved?"

And Jesus answered,

"Strive to enter by the narrow gate, for many.... will seek to enter and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up and has shut the door, and you begin to stand outside the door and to knock, saying, 'Lord..Lord...open the door', he shall answer, 'I know you not!'"

Many of us are uncomfortable with this passage of Scripture. Most of us, I think, are closet universalists at heart. God is a compassionate God. He would never close the door on anyone. So we say. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches there is an open door that will not always be open. And we need to deal seriously with this teaching, for there is an important truth here for our lives.

THE LIFE OF FAITH IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

For one thing, we need to see that the life of faith is not for everyone. We might as well go ahead and admit it. Not everyone wants to come to Jesus. Not everyone wants to follow Him.

Now for some people, there are intellectual obstacles to overcome. Linus of Charlie Brown cartoon strip is philosophizing with his little sister. He says to her,

"Life is peculiar...wouldn't you like to have your life to live over if you knew what you know now?"

She stares off blankly and then asks, "What do I know now?"

There are some people who would respond just as she did, "What do I know now?" Particularly with regard to God. They just don't see enough evidence to cause them to radically alter their lives. They have nothing against faith. It's just that they demand more information before making a commitment.

Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State from 1933 to 1944, was reputed to be an extremely cautious man. Once, on a train trip, Hull and a companion watched while the locomotive dragged its load of cars slowly past a large flock of sheep. Making conversation, Hull's companion said,

"Those animals have been recently sheared".

Hull stared thoughtfully at the animals and then said,

"Appears so. At least on the side facing us."

Skeptic. Agnostic. Cynic...like so many non-believers. Not hostile to the faith. They're just unconvinced. Since God has never bowled them over with some indisputable evidence, they try not to bother themselves worrying about whether God exists or not.

Others have actually had negative experiences that have colored their attitude toward the life of faith. Something traumatic happened at a critical moment in their life and soured them toward God. That can happen and we can all sympathize. Others had pious parents who abused parental responsibility. Scars remain. Some others associate faith with a legalistic system that would restrict human freedom and happiness. They dismiss it as being undesirable...even if it is true. They would rather do their own thing in the hopes that God - if there is a God - is like an indulgent parent who will overlook their prodical wanderings even if they never do go home.

The life of faith is not for everybody. And that's rather sad. For without God, our lives can never be complete.

Father Lawrence Jenco was a hostage in Lebanon. On the day of his abduction, he was blindfolded, beaten and taken away to an unknown place. His captors then stripped him of everything, right down to his shorts. As his clothing and jewelry were ripped off, Father Jenco managed to hang on to a small button from his coat. He kept it clenched in his hand. If his captors had known he had it, they would have taken it from him.

Next, he was thrown into a vacant room that smelled of dust and sewage. He was chained to the wall. And this was how Father Jenco spent his captivity - in solitary confinement, sometimes not seeing his captors for days, and not knowing whether he would live or die. The button he held in his hand was the only link he had with the outside world. Hours turned into days, that turned into weeks, that turned into months. Father Jenco prayed constantly for his freedom, but he remained a captive. With each unanswered prayer God seemed ever farther away than the outside world. Father Jenco began to think that God wasn't keeping His promise to see him through this ugly nightmare. Then he felt the bottom. While still chained to the wall, Father Jenco threw the button across the room and yelled to God, "Take that! You've already taken everything else!"

As quickly as he had said it, he had a flash of inspiration. Without the button, he had absolutely nothing! Father Jenco realized that he had been relying on a button as his source of hope. Without it he was truly dependent on God and God alone to see him through. At his lowest moment, he had given up his crutch and experienced the power and the presence of God - the only One who could see him through his captivity.

Everybody holds on to something in life. It may be family. It may be a job. It may be the vitality of our bodies, the beauty of the world, the esteem of our friends. Can we not see that they are all buttons? Can we not see that they are but substitutes for that which is really vital in our lives?

GOD IS THE SOURCE OF ALL THAT IS GOOD

John Powell, in his book, Happiness Is An Inside Job, tells about some

researchers who decided to study happiness in a purely scientific way. They sought out the 100 most successful and contented people they could possibly find. Then they went to work interviewing these 100 blessed souls. All information gleaned from these interviews were fed into a giant computer. The hope was to discover what all these people might have in common.

At first the search was discouraging. These contented people did not seem to have anything in common. Some were grade-school dropouts, while others had received doctorates. Some had come from wealth, while others had to rise above poverty. Of all the categories, the nearest thing to a common denominator was that 70 of the 100 persons interviewed had come from small towns, populations under 15,000. However, in the final tally of all the information in the computer, the search was rewarded with success. The scientists found that each and every one of the 100 subjects was what they termed a "goodfinder".

They were people who found good in life. My guess is, they also found God. For God is the source of all that is good. He is that which binds all of life into an integrated whole.

The life of faith is not for everybody. And that to me is so sad. Life is never complete without God. It is He who gives meaning to life. It is He who is still there when all the buttons have slipped from our grasp. This brings us to the last thing to be said.

TODAY IS OUR OPPORTUNITY

the way that life is.

Today is our opportunity. There is a door that is open, but it will not be open forever. That is

In Meredith Wilson's Music Man, Professor Harold Hill tries to get Marian, the librarian to go out with him. He asks her to meet him at the footbridge across the stream running through the park. She wants to, but says no.

"Please, some other time" she says. "Maybe tomorrow".

The professor persists, yet she continues to put off their meeting. Finally, in exasperation, he says,

"Pile up enough tomorrows and you'll find that you've collected nothing but a lot of empty yesterdays."

Dear friend, whoever you are. Remember this. Life is a moving stream and we can never step back in at the same place. Today is the day. This is the moment. There will never be a moment quite like this one.

The life of faith is not for everyone. Is it for you? Are you searching for something more in life? Are you trying to put things together...to get all the pieces to fit together? Here is where life really begins. It is where lives are redeemed, marriages restored, families renewed, lives changed. There is no other place quite like this one, and there is no moment quite like this moment. This is your opportunity. The door is open. Why not take that little step and enter today?

PRAYER

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"Young man" he said. "I'm sorry....you're too late. We've already received over a thousand applications".

But this bright young man was quick with his answer and he responded, "Well...then. How about hiring me to classify all those applications?" Some people recognize an opportunity when they see one.

DEVELOPMENT As you know, John Glenn was the first man in space. Before that historic flight John Glenn knew that the first astronaut would be the one the world would long remember. And so he dreamed up a scheme to improve his chances of being first in space. While still a Major in the Marines, Glenn decided to make a coast-to-coast flight at an average speed greater than MACH I. Everybody knew it could be done, but nobody bothered to do it until Glenn did. And because he did it first, he positioned himself to also be the first man in space. Glenn not only recognized his opportunity, but he also reached out and seized it!

Remember that movie of a couple of years ago, "The Dead Poets Society?" Robin Williams plays the part of the English teacher, John Keating, in the movie and in his first class session he takes his students down into the front hall to look at the trophy case and he shows them the pictures of heroes from the school's past history. He says to his students,

"All of these young men were as you are today, starting life with great promise. All of you will some day be as they are. They're all dead and so will you one day be. What do you think they would say to you? Get up here close to the glass...."

And as the young men lean toward the glass, Robin Williams in a raspy voice says, "Carpe diem...carpe diem." Seize the day!

TODAY'S GOSPEL MESSAGE This is the message of the Gospel lesson. The disciples of Jesus have asked Him, "Lord...will only a few be saved?" And Jesus answers them with this word,

"Strive to enter by the narrow gate, for many...will seek to enter and shall not be able! When once the master of the house is risen up and has shut the door, and you begin to stand outside the door and to knock, saying, 'Lord...Lord...open the door', he shall answer, 'I know you not!'"

Wow! Now, many of us are uncomfortable with this passage of Scripture. I think that most of us are closet "universalists" at heart. God, we feel is a compassionate God and He would never close the door on anyone...so we say. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that there is an open door that will not always be open. And we need to deal with this teaching...seriously.

THE LIFE OF FAITH IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

There is an important truth here for our lives. For one thing, we need to see that the life of faith is not for everyone. We might as well go ahead and admit it. Not everyone wants to come to Jesus. Not everyone wants to follow Him.

For some people, there are intellectual obstacles to overcome. Linus of Charlie Brown cartoon strip is philosophyzing with his little sister. (I guess that's what you would call it). He says to her,

"Life is peculiar...wouldn't you like to have your life to live over if you knew what you now know?" She stares off blankly and then asks, "And what do I know now?"

We all know of people who would respond just as she did, "And what do I know now?" Particularly with regard to God and religion. They just don't see sufficient evidence to cause them to radically alter their lives. They have nothing against faith; it's just that they are demanding more information before making a commitment. We all know of people like that.

I once read somewhere that Cordell Hull, our Secretary of State back 1933 to 1944 was something of a cautious man...extremely cautious. Once, on a train trip, Hull and a companion watched while the locomotive dragged its loads of cars slowly past a large flock of sheep. In an effort to make conversation, Hull's companion said, "Those animals have recently been sheared".

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Others have actually had negative experiences that have colored their attitude toward the life of faith. Something traumatic happened at a critical moment in their life and soured them toward God. That can happen and we can all sympathize.

Others have had pious parents who abused parental responsibility. And the scars remain, down to the present. Some others associate faith with a legalistic system that would restrict human freedom and happiness. They dismiss it as being undesirable, even if it is true. They'd rather "do their own thing" in the hope that God - IF there is a God - is like an indulgent parent who will overlook their prodigal wanderings even if they never do come back home.

The life of faith is not for everybody. And that's rather sad. For without God, our lives can never be complete, whole, at rest...at least that's what I believe.

Father Lawrence Jenco was a hostage a few years back in Lebanon. On the day of his abduction, he was blindfolded, beaten and taken away to an unknown place. His captors then stripped him of everything...right down to his shorts. As his

clothing and jewelry were ripped off, Father Jenco managed to hang on to a small button from his coat. He kept it clenched in his hand and if his captors had known he had it, they would have taken that button from him, too.

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TRANSITION

The life of faith is not for everybody. And to me, yes - that is sad. Life is never complete without God. It is He who gives meaning and richness to life. It is He who is still there when all the buttons have been torn off and have slipped from our grasp. And this brings me to the last thing I would say before we take communion.

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Today is our opportunity. There is a door that is open, but it will not be open forever. That is the way that life is.

In Meredith Wilson's Music Man, Professor Harold Hill tries to get Marian, the librarian, to go out with him. He asks her to meet him at the footbridge across the stream running through the park. She wants to, but says "no". "Please...perhaps some other time" she says. "Maybe tomorrow.". The professor persists, but she continues to put off their meeting. Finally, in exasperation, he says to her,

"Pile up enough tomorrows and you'll find that you've collected nothing, but a lot of empty yesterdays"

Write that down and take it with you. Remember that life is a moving stream and we can never step back in at the same place. Today is the day. This is the moment and there will never be a moment quite like this one. The life of faith is not for everyone. I wonder...is it for you? Are you searching for something more in life? What brought you here this morning? Are you trying to put things together...to get all the pieces to fit together?

Here is where life really begins. This is where lives are redeemed, where relationships are restored and families renewed and lives changed. There is no other place quite like this one and there is no moment quite like this moment. The door is open. This is your opportunity. Take the step and enter in.

PRAYER

Lord, we feel that "tug" in our lives...as we hear Your voice speaking to us..."if not here, where? If not now, when". Wrestle with us in the deep places of our lives. Confirm those resolutions and decisions, those feelings that we may be experiencing in these moments...here in this church, in this city...on this world communion Sunday.

And let the bread and the cup "seal" this moment for each of us that we may depart, renewed, restored, forgiven, and made ready for an adventure with Christ.

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your love...especially Carolyn Kooyer, stepmother of Brenda. Also Vera Allick, Sarah Irene Bradshaw, Kathryn, * mother of Gary, and Willie, mother of Ann Pearl Gary. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming and healing presence...especially Catherine Hummel, who in recent days has lost her father, and Andrea Cawelti, whose grandfather, Donald Gene Cawelti, passed away. Be close to those shut-off from life's experiences - Daisy Herrick, Ada Kinney, Ethel Rose.

Elvira de Freitas, sister-in-law of Eric.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, October 4, 1992

WORLD COMMUNION / INVITATION / APPEAL

- A. Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday...always celebrated on the First Sunday of October. For the benefit of visiting friends, I would mention that the TABLE OF OUR LORD is open to all...one does not have to be a member of this Church, nor of this denomination...
- B. His TABLE is open to all and we invite you to receive the Sacrament and trust that this may be an occasion of spiritual renewal, rededication....of your life to the will of God as it comes to us in the LIFE and LOVE...
- C. The elements will be served to you in the pews...upon receiving them, please hold them until all have been...
- D. It has long been CUSTOMARY to receive a special offering on Communion Sunday for the Fellowship of Suffering and Service. Appeal is described to you in the bulletin insert, along with an envelope for your gift. Place this on your hearts and hope you will want to respond...

GREETING TO THE VISITORS

- A. We greet the visitors in today's congregation. We invite you to be free in the sharing of your name and to join us downstairs. Fill out. Sign a Guest Book. Come, worship...
- B. Roots of this church are deep in the soil....minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit....members: wear name tags....

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Be sure to pick up your copy of our monthly news sheet...with thanks to Melanie Kirkpatrick for preparing it for us.... Review the bulletin, too, and note all that is going on.... study groups, service opportunities, fellowship functions. Remember the needs of the Rummage Sale and the Church Fair. Note, too, the meetings scheduled for this week. Trustees. Finance Committee. Budget process begins.
- B. Right now we're in the midst of preparing for our October 21st Church Conference....most important meeting of the Fall with a lot riding on it in terms of our program goals for 1993...plan to be present to help elect new officers and committee members.

- C. Our thanks to Doreen Morales, Coordinator of our Fall Picnic...for yesterday's good time at Rockland Lake State Park...and while I think of it, remember to support the Yorkville Common Pantry....the October need is for.....

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive...."

Let us worship God with our offerings and our special gifts this hour for the Fellowship of Service and Suffering.

ON THE MOVE

- A. You've often heard me say that we minister to a "parade" of people in this church...coming and going...dear friends "on the move" to other places. Well, today is the last Sunday for Kim and Scott Taylor...ushers today. They're moving back to South Carolina...Spartanburg...they met in college and did a bit of serious courting up here in this city...and were married here on December 1st, 1990...glad they passed through this way and our thoughts and prayers go with them as they leave us and move back to South Carolina.

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