

"TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER"

A Sermon

By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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TEXT: "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of His power...to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with might through His spirit in the inner man."

(Ephesians 4: 7, 14 - 16)

INTRODUCTION

It seems like only yesterday that Sara and I first saw this Church. It was a rainy, muggy, October afternoon in 1956. The walls were dark and dirty; the pew cushions were torn, falling apart. Building neglect was visible - some 30 years of it. 1956. The Dodgers and the Giants were still in town; Eisenhower was in his second term. And Ralph Sockman, one of America's greatest preachers of this century, was preaching to a full Church in that magnificent cathedral of Methodism located at 60th Street and Park Avenue. We were the little Church up on 86th Street; no one had ever heard of us. We were a mission Church, receiving financial support from the City Society to keep our doors open.

I remember that first Sunday quite well - December 1st, 1956. We had about 35 people here. I preached on the theme, "The Church Has An Altar". Dr. Kim, our tenor soloist, sang "Comfort Ye" from Handel's Messiah. It helped. In the congregation that Sunday were three "old New Yorkers" whose names appear in a membership directory published by the Church in 1904. One of them, Mabel Hawkins Tabor, snored through that sermon and told me at the door, "Young man, you're going to have to speak louder and do better than that if you expect me to stay awake". I remember the coffee hour was held in the fourth floor lounge with about 15 people sharing in it...one or two men, the rest some wonderful older ladies.

This was my first Church. I had ~~little experience in running a Church...~~ practical none. I hadn't preached that much...a few sermons in North Bush in the Adirondacks and a few in Poultney, Vermont. The Bishop didn't know much about me, but he liked my wife...that helped. Those first few months were a nightmare - for me and for you. But I was a pretty fast learner and soon caught on. The five sermons I had "in the barrel" when I arrived (and which I knew by memory) were used up quickly the first two months. And every Sunday morning from that time on I have delivered a sermon from this pulpit which has been fully written out - which exposes me to the criticism of the Scottish beadle who once remarked of a visiting minister's sermon that it was fine....except for 3 things:

"First, it was read. Second, it wasn't well read. Third, it wasn't worth reading...."

I thank my dear Scots friend, colleague and former mentor at New College in Edinburgh, David Read, for supplying me with that light touch. We've had some great Sundays here. I've missed only one Sunday in 25 years because of ill health and for that, I am grateful. I wish I had kept a journal across the years for I'd have the stuff for a best seller. So much has happened here within the walls of this sanctuary and this Church that has been my life, my ministry

for 25 wonderful years. In order to survive in a city church over the long haul, you've got to love people and also have a sense of humor. Perhaps downstairs I'll have opportunity to share with you some recollections of things that have happened around here.

GROWING WITH THE GOSPEL

"Of this gospel I was made a minister...to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ". That's a wonderful phrase. I believe that next to having one's life rooted and grounded in the spirit of Christ, the most important gift of the spirit is the grace to change one's mind. Let me touch on two specific areas where my thinking has undergone change, hopefully matured.

The first has to do with Karl Barth's statement that "the preacher is the one who stands with the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other". My appreciation for that description of a preacher of the Gospel has grown and deepened across the years.

As some of you know, my father was a preacher upstate, in the Albany area. I grew up on the streets of Albany, back in the late thirties and early forties, and remember when I was about 10 or 11 going with him to the George Washington Carver Center on Second Street and remember the ease and openness he felt with black people. He was not what one would call a flaming activist, but more of a devout pietist. My grandfather in Yorkshire, England, was a Lay Preacher in the Wesleyan movement, an evangelical part of English Methodism. Those are my spiritual roots, you might say. But I know I stand to the left of where my parents and grandparents stood, theologically - a result of having to search and find my own way through college years (where I majored in philosophy) and then through four years of seminary - three in Boston and one in Scotland. Those were tough years as I built my own faith convictions...which have undergirded 25 years of preaching in this great city.

I believe that the Gospel cannot be preached, week after week, in fidelity to the Bible without reference to those questions and issues that are agitating us and are reflected in the daily media. The Church can afford to be wrong, but it cannot afford to be irrelevant. I am deeply grateful that you believe in the freedom of the pulpit in this Church and have given me the freedom to move out and tackle different and difficult concerns and issues agitating us.

I would like to share with you a quotation that I heard last month when Senator Mark Hatfield spoke over here at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church Sunday evening on the issue of Nuclear Freeze and Disarmament. It points up once again the importance of speaking out. It's credited to Martin Niemoller, who served aboard a German U-Boat during World War I. He later became a Lutheran minister. When Hitler rose to power, Niemoller opposed him and was promptly thrown into a Nazi concentration camp. At this camp, 76,000 Jews (of which 15,000 were children) were sent to their death. At the time of liberation, only 100 children had survived.

When Pastor Niemoller was released, he was asked, "How did the world let this happen". He responded:

"In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionist and I didn't

speaking up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak for me."

A SECOND AREA Then let me touch on a second area where growth has taken place in my thinking. Although I remain without apology a Christian of the Protestant Church and the Methodist denomination - and in that order - I have learned that it is possible to hold convictions and beliefs without isolating or offending those of other beliefs.

I rejoice in the revolutionary change in the relationships between Catholics and Protestants. Read the latest issue of Our Town and reflect quietly on the voices that are being lifted in concern over the anticipated transfer and re-assignment of Monsignor Harry Byrne, my friend and colleague at St. Joseph's of Yorkville. Protestants and Jews writing letters to Cardinal Cooke on behalf of a neighborhood priest. I'm sure the Cardinal will wonder what's happening, and I doubt whether such a thing could or would have happened 25 years ago, or even maybe 10 years ago. An ecumenical spirit is moving among Catholics and Protestants. I believe the Holy Spirit is at work in ways that perhaps some of us did not predict.

Perhaps the greatest point of change for me has been my deepened understanding of Judaism as a living faith and a dynamic force in the lives of many dear friends and neighbors. I've said it more than once that I feel more in common with a Jewish friend who takes his religion seriously than with a Christian who is only a Christian in name. I think it is so true that we cannot be Christians unless, in a sense, we are Jews first - accepting the revelation of God's mighty acts that come through the Old Testament.

A week ago yesterday, I had the occasion to bring greetings to the people of the Park Avenue Synagogue as our neighbors celebrated the 25th year of service of their leader, Rabbi Judah Nadich. He graciously invited me to speak at the Kidish following the service and it was a wonderful experience. Let me tell you more about it. After I finished speaking, Judah Nadich and I embraced each other with real hug; then he asked his people to wish me "Mazeltov" as I was celebrating my 25th this weekend. Moments later, a young lady in her mid-forties touched my arm and said, "Philip, you and I were in High School together...in Gloversville, New York". I hadn't seen Didi Dorfman in many years; I recall she played a good game of tennis in her teen-age years. And then Ida Rosenberg who is in our congregation today saw to it that I had plenty of food on my plate; her husband, Ben, was a dear friend at the 92nd Street Y Health Club and it was Ben who brought us water from the Jordan River for our baptisms. With us today are a number of friends both from the Park Avenue Synagogue and the 92nd Street Y who bring ecumenical greetings. I rejoice in the warmth and love that flows in and around this Eastside community of Christians and Jews.

Ronald Sobel, of Temple Emanuel had these thoughts in his Temple Bulletin in recent weeks and I share them with you:

"For almost 18 centuries Judaism and Christianity faced each other as enemies. In the past 100 years we have learned much that earlier centuries failed to learn. Perhaps we have now learned that, in a world of many currents and cross currents, Judaism and Christianity are not so much on opposite sides of the fence as on the same side. We are another rabbi who friendship I treasure...)

not so much opposed as we are different from each other, working in cooperation. The helmsmen of the craft of faith are of different persuasion, but through steering carefully across the currents and cross-currents of troubled times that direction may well be toward a mainland of understanding and thereby of blessing to all humanity."

There is my thinking no place for anti-semitism in this Church; in this city; in this country; and in this world.

OUR CHURCH I deeply believe in this Church - in its inclusive nature...in what we are doing, in what we are attempting to stand for, and in the kind of ministry that flows out of here into the lives of many people. Hopefully, it is helping to break down some of those old walls that have long separated people from each other.

I continue to believe that the Church in its gathered life must be a worshipping community, and that those who are a part of that community of believers must be mutually supportive of each other, and that this community of believers in Christ as God's unique revelation of Himself in human terms must be given an ethical vision of the kind of world that would be a better one for all God's children.

The Church continues to offer hope to people, for overcoming two of the major crises of modern life which we all feel keenly in this city. First: the loss of identity. Second; the loss of community. Identity and community - two very important needs this Church has focussed on for years, and will continue to focus on in years ahead.

We are here to remind people of their worth, their value, their human dignity, their origin, their destiny. We are here to remind people in simple, basic ways through word and deed that God does, indeed, love^s them, care^s for them, forgives and restores them. Identity. Then, too, we are here to draw people together...out of their isolation, their loneliness, to give them a sense of belonging in this urban frenzy and anonymity and hopefully to provide them with the tools of survival. We try to put real energy into the attention we place on individuals.

CLOSING There's so much more I'd like to say, but time does not permit it; maybe some other time you'll let me reminisce and reflect on lessons learned from past years. Let me close with an illustration; I've never used it before so you can't level criticism for re-cycling some of my material as Dear Abby has done. (You know in television, re-runs are sometimes heralded as the "new Fall season"...to quote Johnnie Carson).

Several years ago Pele had "his" day and everyone was respectful. When the celebrities and diplomats were introduced, they waved to the crowd and remained silent in deference to his presence; even the unretiring Muhammad Ali stood quietly. After a few speeches, it was time for Pele to speak; they handed him the microphone and the silence covered the stadium like a fog. And then Pele spoke. Maybe you were there and can remember what he said. It went something like this:

"Ladies and gentlemen" putting his hands behind his head as if to support his quivering words. "I am very happy to be

here with you in this moment of my life. I want to thank you all, every single one of you.

I want to take this opportunity to ask you to pay attention to the young of the world - the children, the kids. We need them so much. And I want to ask you because I think....I believe that....love is the, the...

Tears welled in his eyes and he could no longer stem their flow. He tightened his grip on himself and continued...his words shaking, his voice cracking.

"Love is more important than what we can take or ever get in life. Everything else passes. Please say with me, three times - LOVE, LOVE, LOVE."

And as the message board flashed the word, Pele heard the crowd of 75,000 people in the stadium echo his message. Three times: love, love, love. It was all too much for him. He could say but one thing more before his voice was lost in tears. It was "Thank you very, very much."

"One day" said the philosopher, "after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, after all the scientific and technological achievements, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then - for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

PRAYER O Thou, whose nature is love and who hast gathered us together in this day in this house of worship and place of prayer, grant that we may commit ourselves to You and to Your purposes for us. Give us now the courage to do the things we talk about and think about, to practice this faith we preach - in words, and in deeds of loving kindness. Let your light shine through us into our world in days to come. We pray - each in his own way - and many in the spirit of Christ. Amen.