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"WALKING INTO THE HEART OF GOD"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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ESSENCE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH IS LOVE

The essence of Christian faith is love.

Let us never forget that. This is

where we begin and come into the first of three points. Love is the essence of our Christian faith. And hear again some selected words from First John:

"Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us....that we should be called the children of God. For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. This is how we know that God loves us, because He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Little children, let us love - not in word or speech - but in truth and action".

Now I think that a person reading John's words here from this Epistle might conclude that at the very heart of the Christian Gospel is LOVE...and he or she would be exactly right.

Ah, but you and I know it's not always easy to love. I'm told there's a new bumper sticker that's been seen. ~~Maybe~~ you've seen it. It says,

"Perform an unnatural act. Love somebody!"

Many years ago while Dr. Albert Beaven was in college, one of his friends did something that hurt him deeply. He was so angry with this person that he swore he would get his revenge. Walking around the campus, he thought of various ways to even up the score. He came across a sticky burr that covered some very sharp, porcupine-like thorns that had fallen from a tree and so he picked it up and put it into his pocket with the plan of carrying the burr with him until he came across the person who had hurt him and THEN...he would put the burr down his friend's back and rub it over him thus causing great pain. Not as bad as caning, but it would be a step in the right direction...so he thought. We can all identify with Albert Beaven. When someone hurts us we want to hurt them back - right? And we look for ways to do it. We want to hurt them just a bit more than they hurt us...right? You better believe it.

But something interesting took place that day as Albert walked around the campus with that sticky burr in his pocket looking for the opportunity to get even. The only trouble with his plan was that every time he took a step the burr was sticking and catching his leg. Every time he sat down, it hurt even more. Finally at the end of the day, Albert pulled the burr from his pocket and discovered that all the thorns were gone. They were all in his leg.

He had wanted to even the score, but instead he discovered that he had only hurt himself. That happens sometimes. When we want to hurt someone else, we end up hurting ourselves even more. On the other hand, if we took the teachings of Jesus a bit more seriously, we wouldn't have that problem.

So remember, first, that the heart of our faith is love. And just as Christ laid down His life for us, so we, too, ought to lay down our lives and our time for others. That means loving all people - yes, even those who misuse us. It means doing good to all people, even those whom we may not approve of. It means leaving our little "comfort zones" from time to time for some deeds, some acts of extraordinary concern.

But let's move on to something else we need to be reminded of.

"WALKING INTO THE HEART OF GOD"

INTRODUCTION

Dick Van Dyke in his delightful book, Faith, Hope and Hilarity, tells of a Sunday School teacher who asked his students how they felt about their church. The boys and girls responded in the usual ways. Some said something silly to get the rest of the class to laugh while some others tried to be serious. Kids can be kids...but,

There was a new girl in the class and she was a little shy and hesitant about entering into the discussions, so she never lifted a hand or offered an answer. But that Sunday she did have an answer for her Sunday School teacher and it was beautiful and unforgettable. Going to church, she said, for her was like "walking into the heart of God".

DEVELOPMENT

I like that. It's a description of the church as it ought to be. It's like...."walking into the heart of God". You and I know that not every church fits that description. Churches do fall short and some are like a certain spoof that I came across in a church magazine. Written by someone familiar with our educational system, it goes like this:

"And then Jesus took His disciples up the mountain and gathering them around Him, He opened His mouth and taught them saying,

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are the meek...blessed are they that mourn...blessed are the merciful... blessed are they that thirst for justice...blessed are you when you suffer. Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven.'

Then Simon Peter, said, 'Are we supposed to know this?' And Andrew piped up 'Do we have to write this down?' James spoke up, 'Jesus...I don't have any paper!' Bartholomew raised a hand and asked, 'Do we have to turn this in?' And John leaned over and whispered in the ear of Jesus, 'The other disciples didn't have to learn this!' Matthew interrupted, saying, 'Jesus...may I go to the rest room?' And Judas sneered, 'What does all of this have to do with real life?'

Then one of the Pharisees who was standing near-by asked to see Jesus' lesson plan and inquired of Him, 'Where is Your anticipatory set and Your objectives in the cognitive domain?'"

AND JESUS WEPT! Yes. Jesus wept. And we can't blame him, really....

That may be closer to reality, but nevertheless I still like the image of "walking into the heart of God". You and I know what the church ought to be. And one of the first things we try to teach children in Sunday School is that the church is not a building, but the church is PEOPLE. It's a fellowship, a community of FAITH. Today's scripture lesson was written to encourage church people to be more loving toward one another and to those in need. And if we can't do that, we're in trouble. John, I believe, would tell us that we've missed the very heart of the faith that Christ gave us...IF we can't be loving.

LOVE: OUR PRIMARY WITNESS TO THE WORLD

witness to the world. "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary... use words". I like that line from St. Francis.

Secondly, let's always try to remember that love is our primary

And if the day ever comes when the Christian Church is as loving as its Master, the world, I believe, will beat a path to our door. John asks that searching question,

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"

Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. Love is feeding the hungry, its clothing the naked, its visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not some sort of a passive verb, but an active one. It's the primary way we share Christ with the world. Remember those words of Wesley (John, that is):

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can". (Thanks to one of our choir members, I have printed copies of that quote...if you'd like one)

Back in November, our United Methodist Reporter, carried a story that caught my eye. Entitled, Call From Russia: Shall I Baptize the Prisoners?, it came across my desk just about the same day that I had a letter from Dr. Robert Harmon who you'll recall preached here on World Communion Sunday. He was letting us know that he was directing a check we had sent him for coming to us to a new program of the Board of Global Ministries of the UM Church called RUSSIA INITIATIVE

The article went on to describe a small church in Russia that is in the hometown of Boris Yeltsin, Russian president. The lay pastor of this little church is a woman by the name of Lydia Istomina. This little church wanted to show their LOVE toward others by starting a prison ministry, but they had problems getting it off the ground. The prison staff told Lydia that the program was a waste of time. The men in prison, so said the officials, were hardened criminals who certainly wouldn't be interested in church people coming by. But Lydia and her group persisted. Finally, they were allowed to enter the prison to pray with the prisoners.

The results of this outreach prison ministry were surprising to everyone, including Lydia, the pastor. The men were receptive to the church's ministry and one day Lydia placed a call to their "sister church" down in Louisiana and said,

"The prisoners want us to baptize them and have regular services with them....shall I baptize them?"

Yes, of course - baptize...she was told. She should certainly baptize them. And so with this, this prison ministry entered a new phase. In two years, over 200 prisoners have been baptized by this woman....and by the Louisiana pastor who visited the church last summer. During his stay he baptized 49 of them. 20 members of the church's choir visit the prison every weekend to lead prayer and worship. The prisoners, in turn, make regular offerings from the rubles they earn making products in the prison shop. Their offerings go back to the little

Daniel walked toward his brother. His brother saw him...stopped...turned... and started to run. Daniel quickly caught up with him and grabbed him. And expecting only the worst, the brother was taken completely by surprise when, instead of having his throat crushed, he found himself in a giant hug. And the brothers stood in the middle of the crowded sidewalk and wept.

Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever.

CLOSING

Said John in his epistle,

"And this is His commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus and love one another, just as He commanded us."

For when the love of God truly abides in our heart, we are able to look into the faces of others and see the very face of God, our Father. As you depart and go from here, go remembering then that:

LOVE is the very essence of our Christian Faith.
LOVE is our primary witness to the world in which we live. A gift from God. We love because God first loved us. And only as we abide in Him, can His LOVE abide in us.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these moments, O God. May we feel that we have walked into your very heart here this hour. Wrestle with each of us in the dark and shadowy corners of our lives where love is absent, where hate and distrust and unrest now lurk. Let the light of Your great love touch us and brighten our lives. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: April 17, 1994

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We welcome the VISITORS who have joined us....and we hope.... greet you in a more personal way. Please, be free in the sharing....fill out a visitor card, or sign one of the Guest... Come, worship with us....come, work with us...
- B. Doing the Lord's work here at this busy corner...since 1837. Roots are deep....recently celebrated our 157th birthday as a church. Minister "in the name of Jesus" and it is in His loving spirit....
- C. Members: wear your name tags. Go out of your way to make one or two new friends....remember how someone reached out and made you feel at home...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are "lifted up" for you in the bulletin....in the flyers....also in the monthly news sheet. Review these concerns on your own...noting that the HOUNDS meet Tuesday night...about 12 persons present last week. Finance Committee. Membership Committee...both meeting on Thursday evening.
- B. A week from this evening we'll be holding our Spring "MEMBERSHIP CONVERSATIONS"...for new friends of recent months who may be tempted to "come in closer" and strengthen a tie with our church. New members will be received on Sunday, May 22nd...a month from now. Next Sunday evening....6:30 pm...sponsored by our Membership Committee....a good way to learn more about our church.

"IF YOUR HEART IS AS MY HEART IS...THEN
GIVE ME YOUR HAND" (John Wesley)

Hearts and hands are needed to keep these city churches going. Don't be bashful. Don't end up being a LONE RANGER CHRISTIAN in this city. Come along, learn about us....get involved.

- C. Keep the ADULT FELLOWSHIP outing in mind....a trip to the Bronx Zoo...this coming Saturday. Be in touch with Cynthia Litherland, Coordinator for such outings..meet at the church at ten o'clock.

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit, let us now worship God with our morning offering.

PASTORAL PRAYER: April 17, 1994

HEAR OUR THOUGHTS, O GOD, as we come together once again in this hour of prayer and this place of worship for all people....

MAKE US SENSITIVE to your spirit. Make us conscious of your nearness, of your healing power and **lifting** presence.

WITH GRATEFUL AND JOYOUS HEARTS we come into your presence. For the warm and delicate beauty of a Spring day, we are thankful. It serves to remind us that this is Your world and that every good and perfect gift comes from You.

AS the sun warms the earth on this April day, so, too, may Your spirit of love be warming our hearts.

AS WE WITNESS the miracle of growth and new life taking place in the world of nature, we pray that we may also be showing signs of growth and new life in our inner life.

Growing in our faith, our trust in You and in each other.

Growing in our understanding of Your word for us and for our world.

Growing in our commitment to Jesus Christ and to all He represents in our life together.

Growing in overcoming those deadly sins of the disposition - anger, greed, lust, prejudice, pride, selfishness.

LOOK DOWN on us as we worship You this hour.

Help us to look deep into our hearts and to root out those things that dishonor You and prevent us from living at our best.

OUR PRAYERS THIS DAY reach out to include those carrying heavy responsibilities of leadership in our land.

MAY THE INFLUENCE of this Lord's Day be strong in our city. May all who worship You this day and call upon Your name be given:

Strong hearts to bear their burdens;
Willing hearts to bear the burdens of others,
Believing hearts to cast all of their burdens upon You.

Give to each of us the **gift** of Faith. In the name and spirit of the Risen Christ, we pray.

TEACHER RECOGNITION SUNDAY

INTRODUCTION

I would like to add my words of gratitude to those already expressed...words of deep appreciation to those who give of themselves in this very important area....of teaching the boys and girls of this church in our Sunday School.

Some churches pay their Sunday School teachers to teach! Can you imagine that? We do not. We feel it is a great privilege and an exciting adventure...challenge....to do this. Some of are teachers seldom get down to church....some have been teaching for eight months....seldom being absent. I admire greatly that type of commitment. IT DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

On behalf of the entire church, let me say how DEEPLY GRATEFUL we are to those of you whose names appear in the bulletin...for your many labors of love. Let me read their names to you and if they are present, ask them to stand so that you may know who they are.

TOM DE BOW (quietly and most effectively serves as our Sunday School Superintendent)...with a tremendous assist from his wife, SUZANNE DE BOW. JANE CHANEY. CARL CONDRA (Chairperson of our Education Committee). DIANE KELLER, GARY AND JULIE KLEIN (adding so much to the program through their musical gifts). CYNTHIA SHANNON WEICKERT. BRENDA AND DUANE THOMPSON.

THANK YOU

That's been the team this year. Thank you. My first year out of seminary, I remember hearing someone say that:

"CHRISTIANITY IS ONLY ONE GENERATION AWAY FROM DYING OUT...."

What the person was suggesting was that if we miss teaching the Good News of Christ to one generation then it's pretty much over...curtains for the Gospel. If we miss sharing those marvellous insights and abiding truths found in the Bible....then we might as well "Fold up our tents" and move on...in our case, close down our churches.

I believe that we all have a responsibility to PASS THE FAITH ON to others....and I HONOR AND RESPECT those of you who have "answered the call" to do this here in our church. It means giving up many Sunday mornings...missing church....but I would challenge others of you to think seriously about taking on such an assignment in this parish. You know...one of the best teachers we have ever had, loyal and faithful and concerned....often reminded me that I touched her conscience years ago in a sermon that ended with three little questions.

IF NOT HERE....WHERE?
IF NOT NOW.....WHEN?
IF NOT ME.....WHO?

We need more teachers and hope that some of you sitting here...further on down the road...perhaps in the Fall, will answer the call. Hymn 314 "In the Garden"....sang it last Sunday and sang it so well...a favorite of many of you.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: April 24, 1994

O THOU who art the SOURCE of all things good, grant that we who are so often inclined to remember what we LACK may not forget what we have!

WE BLESS THEE for the warming quality of Spring: for green grass, budding trees and longer days; for parks and paths and bicycles, and for all the scents and colors that edge us each day toward the days of Summer...

AND WE THANK THEE for the interflow of ideas, for the sharing of convictions, for man's ability to receive and to infuse hope, and the lifting play of Divine Truth on the human spirit.

OUR HIGHEST PRAISE we reserve for YOU - our God - whose mercy is the same from age to age, and whose life-giving grace has been declared and revealed to us in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

CENTER OUR far-ranging lives in YOUR eternal love, O God, that in whatever time or circumstance in this city we may know and feel and celebrate Your PRESECNE, Your POWER, and YOUR PEACE.

TO LOOK at us as we sit here this morning, Lord, it would appear that our grip on life is firm and that we're managing things quite well, that we have come to terms with our fears, our failures, our frustrations....

AND YET, in our eyes as in Your sight, we are not the masters of our fate that we so often pretend to be.

LORD, we are anxious, deeply anxious about the well-being of our loved ones - children, parents and grandparents. Our jobs, our wives, our husbands, our health. We worry, too, about...

THE NUMBER and the power of our sins and the tug of these temptations with which we constantly wrestle behind closed doors.

AND SO IN THIS HOUR OF PRAYER THIS MORNING, show us each once again the connection between our anxious, restless minds and our lack of faith in YOU.

MAKE REAL in us the glorious, risen life that Jesus brought, lest the cares of either self or society rob us of the joy of life.

AND ANXIOUS though we be about the long view, help us to take without fear the short step immediately before us, knowing that of such the story of life is so often written. All this we now dare to pray in the name and spirit of Christ.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, April 24, 1994

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors in today's congregation! It's good to have you with us and we hope we'll have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way before you depart - either at the door or (time permitting) downstairs at the coffee hour.

Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card. Sign one of the guest books. Come, worship with us on other Sundays....come, work with us in the outreach programs of our church. Be involved. Lend a hand.

- B. We've been doing the Lord's work at this busy corner of God's Kingdom since 1837...a long time....fourth building out of which this congregation has ministered. We like to say that we minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit....we greet you!

- C. Members: be sure to wear your name tags...make some new friends. Reach out and greet the young men from Regis High School who are in the congregation....a "field work" assignment as part of a course - 9th grade - in Christian Theology. Boys, remember the paper is due this week. And I have a quotation from John Wesley - founder of the Methodist Church - that I shall put into your hands at the door....it will impress your teacher...

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are in the bulletin. Review them on your own noting that the HOUNDS meet on Tuesday evening...the GREAT FICTION series...Thursday evening....date of SPRING RUMMAGE SALE....May the 14th.
- B. Tonight we shall have another of our MEMBERSHIP CONVERSATIONS... one in the Fall, one in the Spring...for new friends...to help them get to know our church a bit better...some there are who would like to come in closer and strengthen a tie with the church. Come this evening...around 6:20...6:30...and enjoy an evening together with present members who will speak to different concerns. New members are planning to join on May 22nd....
- C. Note that today at 1:30...a Memorial Service to celebrate the life of William Scott...brother of Bobbie Heron.

OFFERING

A. Jesus said:

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

In this spirit, let us worship God
with our morning offering...our gifts,
our tithes....