

"WELL...I WAS A LITTLE CONFUSED"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
March 29, 1998

"WELL...I WAS A LITTLE CONFUSED"

### INTRODUCTION

With the baseball season getting under way this coming week, it seemed time to launch a sermon with a baseball story. One of the strangest plays ever in baseball took place years ago at Ebbets Field, home of the old Brooklyn Dodgers. As I remember it (and Jan Ernst may correct me on this...), the Dodgers had men on first and second with NO OUTS. The batter hit a towering fly to deep right center. The runners stayed close to their bases, waiting for the ball to be caught. However, the batter...ignoring the men already on base...lowered his head and charged around the bases like a stampeding bull. The two base runners were bewildered. What were they to do? They couldn't let him pass them on the bases or they would be out!

NOW...to add to the confusion the center fielder dropped the ball and with that the two base runners knew what to do...they took off. But unfortunately, all three of them - the two base runners and the hitter - all arrived at third base at the same moment. Meanwhile the center fielder caught up with the ball and fired it to home plate, thus cutting off further advance. In the confusion, down at third base...all three runners stepped off the base. The opposing catcher fired the ball to the third baseman who promptly tagged all three runners out, completing a bizarre triple play.

It had to be one of the most inept plays in the history of baseball and I'm sure that when the hitter was confronted by the manager, he probably said something like this...."Well....I just got confused!"

### MODERN LIFE'S CONFUSING

Modern life can be very confusing. Perhaps you've noticed....many spend their lives feeling confused about what's going on. It seems the world is changing...fast. Why even the weather patterns seem to be changing...children trying to ice skate yesterday at Wollman Park. Five inches of snow last Sunday. And on Friday a record high of 83 degrees in Central Park.

England had its warmest November two years ago in 300 years. The plants thought it was still summer and hibernating birds and animals which usually go south decided to stick around. Holland got it, too. Those beautiful daffodils and tulips sprouted and trees began to blossom. No wonder Europeans are alarmed about global warming. When the flowers and the birds are confused about nature, what are the rest of us to think? Should we be doing more about global warming than we are? But that's just one of the many confusing issues facing us in today's world. There are others. Some people are confused about morality.

What was it that Billy Crystal said the other night at the Academy Awards show? It was a great line, I thought...how did it go? "A year ago Washington was deeply concerned about LA and Hollywood...this year LA is deeply concerned about Washington!"

Bruce Larson's daughter shares a humorous true story. It seems her sister-in-law is a conservationist and she and her husband and their young five year old son were driving up the coast of Florida on a vacation. They happened to see a sign saying NATURIST CAMP and they assumed this was the same as a NATURALIST CAMP and they drove in parked their car, got out and headed to the beach....and quickly

realized that this "naturist camp" was actually a nudist camp as they came upon a group of people, standing around and all stark naked. Some of them were even riding bikes along the beach which prompted their five year old son to stare in amazement and say, "Look dad...look mom....they're not wearing safety helmets."

You may have noticed, as I have noticed...on late television...people wearing safety helmets but no clothes. And gutter language is apt to be the rule and not the exception. For a number of years now, our heroes and heroines on TV have been hopping into bed indiscriminately. One doesn't have to belabor the point. But...it's no wonder our young people are a bit confused about right and wrong with regard to their bodies and the sanctity of sex. They're receiving confusing messages all around and maybe it's time to remind folks once again that,

"God didn't call them the TEN SUGGESTIONS, but  
He called them the TEN COMMANDMENTS....."

#### TRANSITION

Yes, it's a confusing world and that's why I was drawn to that verse in John's Gospel, chapter sixteen, verse thirteen:

"But when He, the Spirit of Truth, comes....He  
will guide you into all truth.....all truth"

If there's one thing we need today, it is to be led by the Spirit of truth. How do we discern the truth about the moral and spiritual issues of life today? How do we know the right things to do? If it is true that Christ has sent us the Holy Spirit to guide us into knowing and into applying truth to our lives and to the issues facing us in society, how can we then know that truth and make some sense out of the confusing world in which we live?

#### GO TO THE SCRIPTURES

For me, the first rule for discerning spiritual and moral truth is to go to the Scriptures, especially to the teachings of Jesus. That little question, "What Would Jesus Do?" has been a very reliable one for many of us across the years and still is. "WWJD". And so, too, has this question, "What does the Bible say?"

Ed and Joyce Johnson lost their daughter, Karen, in a terrible car crash and if it hadn't been for their strong religious faith, they would have had a tough time making it through that experience but it was their faith that brought them through that crisis....even brought them out stronger and more committed than before. Ed Johnson, in responding to how his faith impacts on his life and business, put it this way. He said that the Bible for him serves as a "benchmark" in life. You may be familiar with the concept of "benchmarking" in business...but he explained it this way:

"A benchmark" he said, "is a surveyor's mark made on a permanent landmark that has a known position, a known altitude. It is generally a bronze plug used as a reference point in determining other altitudes within a given line of levels".

Across the country, there are various benchmarks which engineers consult before erecting a building. The "benchmark" is the primary reference point in everything they build. It must be consulted before any work begins. And this is how Edward Johnson views the Bible - "the WORD of GOD".

The Bible continues to be the "benchmark" for moral and spiritual issues and questions. And the first question we must ask when confronted with a moral or spiritual issue is: is it consonant with Scripture, with the spirit of Christ? It's not a question of "who's right", but "what's right". The first rule for finding truth is to spend time with the Word of God, with the Bible.

GO TO OUR KNEES

The second rule for discerning spiritual and moral truth is to go to our knees. If it is true that Christ has given us the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth...doesn't it make sense that time spent alone in prayer would be a helpful and a necessary part of finding that guidance that Christ long ago promised us? I think so.

Back in January I was called to officiate at the funeral for the father-in-law of the actor Alan Arkin. Returning to the city that Thursday afternoon from Kensico Cemetery, we had opportunity to visit and talk. Remember him from that wonderful role in The Russians Are Coming? And The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter? And others. Two of his sons were there, but the third son, Adam Arkin, couldn't be there...he's out on the coast and has a lead role in Chicago Hope. Since then I've followed a few segments of Chicago Hope and remember a scene in an emergency surgical procedure where the TV doctor says to others in the operating room....

"Those of you who are in touch with the Infinite, now would be a good time to open communication...." "What's he talking about?" whispers one of the new doctors. A nurse whispers back, "PRAY....if you know how, STUPID!"

What do you think? Would that make a good bumper sticker? "PRAY...if you know how, STUPID!". Well...maybe not.

But I do believe, however, that people who seek to live according to the Scriptures and the spirit of Christ and who spend time consistently in the presence of God through prayer, will make better decisions than people who do not.

Will we be perfect in making right decisions? No....we'll still make a few mistakes along the way. We'll still be "sinners". We will still be human, but I believe we will make better decisions. We'll be better parents and better citizens and better people if we focus on those two traditional vehicles of truth - the Word of God and secondly - prayer.

"But when He, the spirit of truth, comes....He will guide us into all truth."

COME TO THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

And the third rule for discerning spiritual and moral truth is to come around to the community of faith - the Church. This promise of Jesus given to us here about being led into "all truth" was not something that was spoken to the Kiwanis Club or Rotary or the local Chamber of Commerce. It was spoken to the Church. When you are wrestling with moral and spiritual concerns, bring them to Church with you and hopefully some light will be shed that will enable you to make your way and find answers to tough questions.

I realize that most people in this country...even Church people...take great pride in their independence of thought. That's what most surveys show. We don't like for the Church to do all of our thinking for us. We don't like for the Church to tell us what to do. According to a recent Gallup Poll, when people have a pressing spiritual or moral concern, only a small minority will consult their priest, pastor or Rabbi. And I understand that, but still...when you are struggling with a moral or spiritual question, it doesn't hurt to run it by or discuss it with at least one other Christian person. Jesus said,

"Again....I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for...it will be done for you by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three come together in MY NAME, there I am with them....."

YES...yes....most of the great moral tragedies in this world have been performed by what we call "loners". A lonely madman, the so-called Unabomber, takes out his anger on innocent people who offended him just by the positions they held in society. In Oklahoma City one man's paranoia is fed by a few isolated individuals who convince themselves that a freely elected government is the enemy of the people. These people are outside the "main-stream"...on the fringe. And that is just the point.

If only people would bring their moral and spiritual concerns to church and air them with people who are committed to and connected up with Christ...then truth and reason will emerge.

CLOSING

A University of Southern California professor wrote an article for The Christian Century a few years back....tracing his religious pilgrimage that took him away from the Church for a large part of his adult life and then brought him back to it again. In the concluding paragraph he wrote some lines which I appreciated...and clipped...and have kept and often go back and read them and review them and reflect upon them.

"One thing" he said, "that brought me back to the Church was asking simply....what are the alternatives to the Church? Where are the communities that sanction the pursuit of meaning and truth as a legitimate enterprise? ....that have material and personal resources to assist in this search? ...that provide regular occasions for confession of failures? ....that renew and inspire? ...where social issues can be debated? ....There are a number of institutions that deal with one or several of these questions, but historically the Church has demonstrated its ability to energize all of these activities....."

Confused? Truth is available. Look to the Scriptures. Look to the spirit of Christ. Go to your knees and look for Christ's guidance from within. Share your concerns with others, friends and fellow church members. Don't overlook the benchmarks and the guideposts upon which our life has been built. Your decisions may not be perfect, but I'm sure of this that you will make better decisions and your judgements and conclusions will stand the test of time. That, I feel, and I believe, you can count on. For me, Christ has guaranteed it!

PRAYER

Help us, O God, to be sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet moments. Take our confusion and wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love and Your truth. Help us to amend our lives that order may be brought out of the chaos of our confused thinking. May we hear Your voice speaking to each of us - reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to dedicated and victorious living. Set our eyes on Your abiding values. Capture us with a vision of the Christian life...a life that lifts us out of our littleness and pettiness into the grandeur of Your truth. In the spirit of Christ, our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.