

"WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE WE DOING HERE?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 29, 1989

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes it is hard to get our act all together. Somewhere I read about a concert held in Philadelphia.

One of the movements featured a flute solo that was to be played as if coming from a distance. The conductor had instructed the flutist to stand off stage where he was to count the measures precisely in order to come in at the exact moment, since there could be no visual contact between the conductor and the soloist. On the night of the performance when the time came for the flute solo, the flutist began exactly. And the fine, lilting notes floated out beautifully. Suddenly, however, there was a pinching sour note and the soloist was silent. The conductor was outraged and at the end of the piece he rushed off stage to find the poor flutist. The flutist was prepared and said,

"Maestro...before you say anything let me tell you what happened...you're not going to believe it. You know that I came in accurately and everything was going beautifully, when suddenly...this enormous stage hand ran up to me, grabbed my flute and pushed me back, saying....'Shut up, you idiot! Don't you know there's a concert going on out there...'"

DEVELOPMENT

Have you ever asked yourself, "What in the world am I doing here...and what does it all mean and what's it all adding up to? What's expected of me and how will I know when enough is enough? How far do I take this religion business? How far do I go? What does God expect of me?"

Few verses in the Old Testament or the New Testament are better known than Micah 6: 8...our text for today:

"He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

Now I suspect that this text is well known for a couple of reasons. One, it has three easily discerned sections which make it easy to preach on - do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. Secondly, it deals in a simple but solid way with that age-old question, "What does God expect?" of us.

One of the reasons I like this text is that it's as relevant to our world as it was to the world in which Micah lived. So let's consider these three Biblical demands upon our lives and ask, "What in the world am I doing here?"

TO LOVE KINDNESS

Let's begin with the call to love kindness. Here is the most basic, the most minimal requirement of all religion - that we should treat other people as we would like to be treated. A great Quaker gentleman expressed it well over two centuries ago when he wrote:

"I expect to pass through life but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again."

All good religion begins here. We may not be able to agree on everything. Indeed, we may have some areas of our lives in which we are in sharp conflict, but we can at least treat each other with civility, with simple human kindness. And of course, the Bible places no limits on our kindness. The Old Testament Law as well as the very heart of the teachings of Jesus required that kindness be extended even to one's enemies. Exodus 23: 5 requires the children of Israel not to oppress strangers...with the reminder that they were once strangers themselves. And Jesus, of course, said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you". There are to be no limits even toward persons that we may deem undeserving. For Christians this is particularly significant because we believe that God "poured out His love on us" when we were undeserving.

Kindness is among the most basic requirements for the believer. Yes, sometimes that kindness meets with cold ingratitude from the recipient. Still, it must be extended. Fortunately, there are occasions when it is richly rewarded.

There's a true story about a very ragged and unkempt man who presented himself at the door of a Christian couple. His request was for a drink of water. They did better than that...they brought him in and gave him a cup of tea. They gave him a hot meal and allowed him to take a bath and finally took him into their home to live for a while with them. They did not suspect it, but the old gentleman was well off. When he died he left all of his money to them. They used the money they received to send their son off to the university. That son became a well-known Methodist minister in England, and his son, by the way, is the famous television personality - David Frost.

Our acts of kindness are usually not that well rewarded, but still our faith requires us to make the effort. As someone once said, if you were given a dollar for every kind word or deed which you said or did, and then had to give back fifty cents for every unkind word or deed - would you be rich or poor? Think about it. First, we are to love kindness.

WE ARE ALSO TO DO JUSTICE

We are also to do justice. Justice is a much larger and more complicated concept than kindness. Kindness is an individual act. I see a person in need and - like the Good Samaritan - I try to help. That is kindness.

Justice concerns the passion that you and I must have to see that every person everywhere has a decent opportunity for a healthy, wholesome and rewarding life. It is the passion that Lincoln had when he saw a slave girl being sold on an auction block like a horse or a cow. She was being sold away from her family and he saw the fright and terror in her eyes. "This thing must go" said Lincoln at an early age. He was referring to the institution of slavery; and he dedicated his life to the destruction of that barbaric institution.

No concept is more Christian or more American than is the demand for justice. Wherever there are people who are oppressed - whether it be politically, economically, racially or whatever form that oppression may take - we must raise our voice.

That is not a popular theme in our present world. After all, we are the ME generation. Paul Stookey - in a "Peter, Paul and Mary" reunion concert; spoke to our present obsession with our own needs and desires. He reminded

us that three decades ago there was a magazine called LIFE. Now LIFE is big. It takes in everything and everyone. You could file almost anything imaginable under the topic of "Life". Then a decade or so ago was born another publication called PEOPLE. Now PEOPLE is pretty broad - after all there are all kinds of people - but people is not as broad as life. There is much of life that must be excluded if we only deal with people. Now, he noted, we have a publication called US. No longer are we dealing with life, or even people - we are only dealing with US. And before long he expects another publication called - ME! That, it seems to me, is the trend of our times - to concern ourselves only with our own needs and our own desires and to shut the rest of the world out.

For people like ourselves who recognize that their lives have been bought with the blood of the Cross, who believe in the doctrine of redemption, such turning inward is repulsive and un-Christian. We are here today because, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..." We are here today because the Man from Nazareth cared more about us than He did Himself. And if our response to that is only to shut ourselves off in our little designer cocoons with our luxury automobiles, our expensive wrist watches, and an 8 Day programmable VCR's while the rest of the world goes to Hell, we are in deep spiritual "doo-doo". Friends, it will not work. As our President reminded us last week in his Inaugural Address,

"My friends, we are not the sum of our possessions. They are not the measure of our lives. In our hearts we know what matters. We cannot hope only to leave our children a bigger car, a bigger bank account. We must hope to give them a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend, a loving parent, a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood and town better than he found it."

SCHWEITZER'S STORY

Many years ago the great Albert Schweitzer told a beautiful parable concerning our responsibilities to others. He told about a flock of wild geese that had settled to rest on a pond.

As I recall the story, one of the flock had been captured by a gardener, who had clipped its wings before releasing it. When the geese started to resume their flight, this one tried frantically, but vainly to lift itself into the air. The others, observing his struggle, flew about in obvious efforts to encourage him, but it was no use. Thereupon, the entire flock settled back on the pond and waited...even though the urge to go on was strong within them. For several days they waited until the damaged feather had grown sufficiently to permit the goose to fly. Meanwhile, the unethical gardener, having been converted by the ethical geese, gladly watched them as they finally rose together and all resumed their long flight.

Schweitzer's point, of course, was that we are responsible for one another. Whether it be in Etyiopia or India, South Africa or Afghanistan, Nicaragua or Chile, where there are people who are suffering, we have a mission. That mission had to do with the souls, the minds, the bodies of God's less fortunate children. And if we offer them bread without Christ, I think we are at fault. But, as the Epistle of James reminds us, we dare not offer them Christ without bread either. Doing justice is much more complicated than loving kindness...but it is equally a part of Christian witness, deeply rooted in a Biblical faith.

WALK HUMBLY WITH OUR GOD

Of course, there is one more requirement of our faith and that is to walk humbly with our God.

Few characteristics are as appealing in a person as genuine humility.

Newscaster Tom Brokaw recently told a good story on himself. When he first came here and went on the TODAY program as co-host, he felt that he had reached the pinnacle of success. And one day he was wandering around Bloomington and happened to notice a man who was staring at him, watching him closely. Finally, the man approached him. "Oh, well..." thought Brokaw to himself..."such is the price of being a celebrity". The man pointed a finger at him and said, "Say...didn't you use to do the morning news on KMTV in Omaha?" Brokaw said, "Yes, that's right.. I did". Brokaw was sort of enjoying the moment...being recognized now as a national television personality. "I knew it the minute I spotted you" said the man. He paused and then added, "Say...whatever happened to you?"

I guess we all have our crash landings, don't we. We love genuine humility in a person. But Micah here is talking about a special kind of humility. It is "like unto" the meekness Jesus was praising in the Beatitudes when he said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". I don't think that Jesus was talking about the shy, timid mouse of a person who is content to serve as a doormat for the world to step on. That most humble man or woman - the meekest man or woman - from a Biblical standpoint is the person who has SURRENDERED his or life completely to God as He comes to us in Christ. "It is not I who lives" writes St. Paul, "But Christ Jesus who lives in me." That is true humility - true meekness - to be crucified with Christ. That kind of humility or meekness leads to tremendous power and effectiveness in life. Loveless power versus powerless love.

A Methodist colleague in the South once described such a man - a humble man. He wrote,

"On top of Red Mountain overlooking Birmingham, is a gigantic symbol of the wealth and riches in the great Jones valley that stretches below. It is an iron statue of VULCAN, the God of Fire. All the basic ingredients needed to produce steel are found in this valley - dolomite, coal and iron. During the 19th Century, the great industrial complex and the wealth it brought were developed here. The economy built around the steel industry is symbolized by the statue of VULCAN."

"Down from atop Red Mountain, in the heart of Birmingham, is a park in front of a church. In that park is another statue - the figure of a little man on his knees with his hands raised to heaven. He had been the Pastor of a small Presbyterian Church. Brother Bryan was a humble preacher who was often seen kneeling hand in hand on a streetcorner praying with someone. He pastored in Birmingham for more than a quarter of a century. He was a servant to all. And when he died, businesses closed, flags were hung half-mast, and the whole city wept in sorrow at his departure. They built a statue to memorialize this servant."

"When the statue of Vulcan has tumbled to dust, and Red Mountain is worn flat, the witness and the work of Pastor Bryan will remain."

That is the kind of humility or meekness that God is seeking in each of us. So, I leave you with the question with which we began this sermon: what in the world are you doing here? Perhaps there is a clue for each of us in those words of Micah, often referred to, as "the greatest saying in the Old Testament". Indeed, there is a take-home message for each of us and that is I do hope you are "doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God".

SHALL WE PRAY

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, January 29, 1989

I. VISITORS / GREETING

- A. A word of warm welcome to the visitors in the congregation this morning. Delighted to have you here. Make yourself known to us. Be free in the sharing of your name...
- B. Sign a visitor card or leave your name in one of the Guest Books in the narthex. Join us down stairs for coffee. Worship with us on other Sundays. Work with us, too, in the many programs of service in which we as a parish are involved.
- C. You worship today in a Church whose roots are deep in the soil of this part of NYC. On March 12th we'll be celebrating our 152nd birthday. Founded in 1837...a neighborhood church. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. February approaches. Another busy month. Rummage Sale on Saturday, the 4th...this coming Saturday.
- B. Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. February 8th. Communion in the morning as well as in the evening.
- C. Meetings: Membership, February 2nd. Trustees, February 6th. Administrative Council, Feb. 14th. Outreach, February 13th. Education, February 9th.
- D. Adult Fellowship Retreat, February 12, 13, 14. Fellowship Supper, Sunday evening, February 14th...in honor of last year's new members.
- E. Last Sunday to pick up your box of offering envelopes. We'll start to mail them out to people who requested them. On a table in the rear of the Russell Room.

III. SPECIAL DAY / FEBRUARY 1, 1989

- A. This coming Wednesday, February 1st, Paul Russell celebrates his 90th birthday. Performed some miracles around this church back in the fifties and the sixties which have blessed all of our lives. Now living in Orlando, Florida, Mr. Russell still holds membership in this church.
- B. Asked Edward J. Brown to say a few words about this remarkable man as we all join in wishing him a very Happy Birthday.

B. (continued)

Ed and Paul worked closely together on a number of important concerns here. We are "tapping" this part of the service and it will be sent to Paul Russell along with the card that you're invited to sign which is being circulated.

IV. OFFERING:

- A. It is more blessed to give than it is to receive. In this spirit let us worship....

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SHALL WE PRAY

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 22, 1989

ETERNAL GOD IN CHRIST, grant us grace to worship Thee in spirit and in truth.

We believe that in these moments of worship the deepest things within us are being stirred up...and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be.

Wrestle with us, O God, until we are conquered by Your love.

And grant us such spiritual wealth that we will be made aware of ETERNAL REALITIES...that captured by a vision of the Christ-like life, we will be lifted out of our littleness by our dedication to abiding values and to Your everlasting purpose for us.

CLEANSE US, O GOD...from our evil ways, our ugly egotism, our indifferent apathy, our sinful lusts...that we may be ready for this transforming experience.

GRANT US HONESTY in confronting and confessing our sins.

We do not mean to live...oblivious...to the perplexities and turmoil that surrounds us or the hunger and the tragedies that fill our world.

Forgive us, Lord, for having shunned costly involvement.

We like our relaxation, our comfortable living style, our full stomachs. With our preoccupation with things, we haven't really sensed any great need of You.

We confess that we have been slow to pray...until the odds mounted against us. We have been neglectful of justice and couldn't care less about human rights for others until the oppressed have made a scene and embarrassed us. We have been short on charity until it was legislated for us.

Our hypocrisy is self-evident, Lord. We have accepted the Gospel's high demand with our lips but not with our lives.

BUT IN SPITE OF OUR HUMANNESS, our weaknesses, our self-indulgence, our neglect, YOU dared to entrust Your Kingdom to us. Admittedly, the paradise we have built is organizational and institutional. And we have succeeded in perfecting the market place, but not your Kingdom of Kindness. We have instant communication worldwide, but not the reconciling word for our neighbor.

HEAR, O GOD, our confession of confusion. And by Your Holy Spirit, touch us, and renew within us, each one of us, the heart of grace.

MINISTER TO OUR PERSONAL NEEDS, DEAR FATHER, IN THIS TIME OF WORSHIP.

Walk through this community of great faith now and be the help
and comfort, the inspiration and sustenance of our souls.

Comfort us in our bereavement. Steady our spirits in sickness.
Keep our hearts steadfast in practical distress.

In temptation, in illness, in disappointment and depression, in defeat
when we are tempted to give up....in success when we are tempted
to be proud and haughty - O God, restore our souls.

May we hear YOUR voice speaking to each of us, reassuring us,
challenging us, summoning us to great things in days ahead, to
dedicated and victorious living.

ALL THIS WE NOW PRAY in the name of the Good Shepherd who gently brings us
HOME to Himself.

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to _____ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink...nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."