

"WHAT MAKES YOU BLUSH?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

There was an ad that appeared in the "personals" column of a newspaper not too long ago that read like this:

"Married, professional man, 47, with problems in home, seeks dalliance with a married / unmarried intelligent woman."

The ad had been written by some researchers who were curious to know about the sort of person who would respond to such an ad. Much to their astonishment they were swamped with quite a few responses.

For example, here's one:

"I am a 34 year old female, pretty 'rubenesque', brown hair, dark blue eyes. I work as a nurse in a large urban hospital. My friends consider me bright, honest, interesting, conservatively bohemian and sensual. I have the usual vices".

Here's another one:

"I am interested in the same things you are. I am 36, married. Discretion is very important to me. Please call only between 9 am and 4:30 pm."

And this one:

"I'm intelligent and married. I live in a deeply wooded area along the river where deer are an everyday occurrence. I could see you during the week, but never on weekends. I am tall, slim and decent looking. You could be seen with me without shame."

Now that's an interesting way to put it, isn't it? "You could be seen with me without shame". There's a verse in Mark's Gospel, chapter eight, that comes to mind. It goes like this:

"For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed...when He comes in the glory of His Father and with the holy angels".

DEVELOPMENT

Let's think about this today. What is it that makes you blush? That's the question for this morning. Do you still blush. Some of you do. I use to, but I don't much anymore and I think that's the way it is for many of us. "Not much anymore". We've seen it all. Nothing shocks us. Nothing seems to be hidden or forbidden or even looked down upon anymore.

Remember when Elvis first appeared on television on the Ed Sullivan show, the cameras would only show him from the shoulders up. Compare that with some of the programs on Cable TV where little is left to the imagination. Or when Clark Gable uttered a mild oath in Gone With the Wind, it was a nationwide sensation. Today little children use words that would make sailors blush.

When film star Ingrid Bergman abandoned her husband to go off and live with Roberto Rossalini, her film career in this country plummeted. Today, such behavior would hardly cause a ripple. What is it that makes you blush?

Part of the problem is that we no longer have models of morality to inspire us. Frederick Nietzsche, the philosopher, once summed up ethics and morals in the question, "Who are your heroes?" There aren't very many heroes of morality around us anymore. You may be tempted to say,

"But that's the media's fault...they take our heroes apart. They show them - warts and all. We no longer have fantasies about the existence of nearly perfect people. If our fathers and mothers had known everything there was to know about their heroes, they would have been disillusioned, too...."

Well yes and no....

Once there was a man by the name of Will Rogers. Rogers, at one time, was probably the most popular and the highest paid entertainer in the country, perhaps in all the world. He was Bob Hope and Garrison Keeler and Steve Martin all rolled into one. He was so popular that when George M. Cohen produced a Broadway version of Ah, Wilderness, a part was written just for Rogers...to take advantage of his popularity. The play was a smashing success. However, mysteriously...along about the 5th week, the play suddenly closed down. Some faint excuse was given that Rogers was too busy with his growing film career and other responsibilities. But friends knew better. Rogers still had time for many other things that he wanted to do. And sometime later the truth came out about why Ah, Wilderness closed down after five weeks of a successful run.

Eddie Cantor, a longtime friend of Will Rogers, explained what happened. He wrote that,

"Will received a letter from a clergyman. Here's what the clergyman said....(remember it's a different generation)...

'Relying on you to give the public nothing that could bring the blush of shame to the cheeks of a Christian, I attended your performance with my 14 year old daughter, but was deeply embarrassed when you did the scene in which the father lectures the son on the subject of his relations with an immoral woman. I took my daughter by the hand and we left the theater. I have not been able to look her in the eye since'".

Rogers, it's said, saw nothing wrong with the part he was playing in Ah, Wilderness. He never would have done the play if he'd seen something objectionable about it. But it bothered him deeply that a family could not sit through a performance of that play without embarrassment. And so Will Rogers closed down his very successful play rather than cause offense. And Jesus said,

"For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed...when He comes in His glory...."

Whether you agree with Rogers or not is not the point. The point is that he was a genuine American hero who kept his principles. And such things are possible today. I was glad to see that Amy Grant had the number one song on the Rock charts not too long ago, and I'm gratified to read about the strong faith that Whitney Houston has. I like to read about "Born Again" Yankees and Mets. I hope they're able to hold on to their principles. We need models of moral courage. Without such models, society will continue its journey downward into a moral quagmire.

Some tourists were visiting a West Virginia coal mine and were preparing to go down into the mine. One of the ladies was wearing a very dainty, pure white dress. The other people in the party said,

"You're surely not going to wear that white dress down into the mine".

So she asked the coal miner who was leading the excursion if it was alright for her to wear her white dress down there. His answer was,

"There's nothing to keep you from wearing your white dress down into this mine. There is a considerable amount to keep it from being white when you come back up".

I liked that. In a society without moral heroes, it's very difficult to maintain your moral bearings. I'm reminded of something Ernie Banks said to me a couple of summers ago up in Cooperstown. When I told him I was a minister in NYC, he replied with earnestness and with a twinkle in his eye,

"Ohhh....that's a good place to be a minister...there's so much SIN". (Ernie "Let's Place Two" Banks, MVP)

Certainly, we live in a time of great moral confusion. You may have heard about the new book, The Day America Told the Truth - What People Really Believe About Everything That Really Matters. The authors did a survey in which they asked people about their real views on life. They discovered that in this time of moral uncertainty, people are fashioning their own moral codes.

For example, according to this survey only 13 percent of people today believe in all Ten Commandments. Nine out of ten people in this country lie regularly. One-third of all married Americans have been unfaithful to their spouses. One-fifth of American children have lost their virginity by the age of thirteen. Seven percent of Americans would kill a stranger, if enough money were offered - seven percent. What are we to say to such a land, or say about such a land?

Steven Brown says a friend of his saw a bumper sticker on a car that said,

"If it feels good, do it!"

He said he started to ram the car with his car. If the driver dared to ask why he did it, he'd answer,

"It felt good, I did it!"

What are we to say about such a society?

Some time back there was an article in the newspaper about a stock broker, a very affluent stockbroker, who was arrested in our city for putting slugs in parking meters rather than coins. Perhaps this was his pitiful little rebellion against the straight life. Maybe it was a statement of arrogance. Maybe it was the conviction that he was above the law, that he had gotten so used to making his own rules that even when it didn't matter, he cheated. How do you measure up? We all "cut corners"...we're all guilty.

John Killinger once used the example of Sarah Orne Jewett's novel, The Country of the Pointed Firs. In that novel, a woman notices a number of painted wooden stakes around the property of a retired sea captain, Elijah Tilley. She asks the captain why those wooden stakes are driven in the ground. Tilley tells her that when he first bought the farm and plowed the ground, every once in a while his plow would snag on a large rock underneath the surface of the ground. These snags not only slowed his progress, but dulled his plow. So he put up stakes to show where the underground rocks were located, so that he could avoid them.

Killinger says that's what the Ten Commandments are all about. God has said that these are apt to be the trouble spots in life. Avoid these and you won't snag your plow. To the young people present, if you wonder why your parents put so many restrictions on you, remember they are trying to help you avoid some snags, some trouble spots, some heartache-bringers. In some cases they don't want to see you make the same tragic mistakes they have made or someone they love has made.

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES YOU BLUSH?

What is it that makes you blush? Let's return to that original question. Let me ask you a very pointed question. Would it make you blush if people found out you were a Christian? The people you work with, the people you party with, the people you go to school with. Would it embarrass you if people found out you were a follower of Jesus? For you see, our text for the day is the last verse of our Scripture Lesson.

"For whoever is ashamed of me and my works in this adulterous generation, of him will the Son also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels"

Are you ashamed to be associated with Jesus?

There are people with their names on church rolls who would find it easier to utter a string of obscenities than to share with a co-worker their faith in Jesus Christ. Does that sound unbelievable? No, some of you know I'm speaking the truth. When it comes to sharing our faith some of us are like the St. Lawrence waterway in the wintertime: we're frozen at the mouth. What is it that makes you blush? Some of us in this perverted time find it impossible to blush at anything anymore except our faith. How is it with you?

Walter Harrelson once put it like this, referring to the Commandment that Israel was not to make any graven images. He said,

"Israel is to make no image of Yahweh, but Israel is to be an image of Yahweh in the world. When the people of

Israel are faithful to the God of the Covenant, then God has the right kind of representative in the world of humankind."

You and I are not to make images of God, we're to be images of God! We are to have in us the same mind which was in Christ Jesus. And we are to live out the mind of Christ in all we do. In such a time as this, that influence will be felt.

There's an old Finnish proverb that even a small star shines in the darkness. Well, morally and spiritually we are living in a dark time. We need to let our little lights shine. Where do we begin? I'd suggest we begin with the Ten Commandments. We haven't reached that point in life where we have outlived our need for them. With thanks to Dr. Elton Trueblood, let me offer them to you in rhyme and write them down in your heart once again, in that place where you keep the things that are most important...to be taken out at looked at at other times across the year.

"Above all else love God alone,
Bow down to neither wood nor stone.
God's name refuse to take in vain;
The Sabbath rest with care maintain.
Respect your parents all your days;
Hold sacred human life always.
Be loyal to your chosen mate;
Steal nothing, neither small nor great.
Report, with truth, your neighbor's deed;
And rid your mind of selfish greed."

LET US PRAY

Make us sensitive to Your presence in these moments, O God.
Wrestle with each of us in the deep places of our lives.
Let the mind of Christ be in our hearts as we try to follow Your commandments
in our lives, those great rules for living that You gave to us long ago.
Forgive us for our sins...for the "corners we've cut. In Christ's spirit, we pray.
Amen.