

"WHEN BOASTING IS IN GOOD TASTE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 8, 1998

INTRODUCTION

Boasting and bragging can be so boring. Don't you agree? It's a turn-off for most of us. A few years ago a large chess tournament was being held here in our city and most of the players had gathered in the hotel lobby where they were bragging about how smart they were and who they had defeated and what strategies they had devised. The hotel manager came on the PA system and invited the hotel guests to please go to their rooms...right away. He didn't give any reason for the announcement, but as the area quickly emptied, his assistant quietly said to him, "You were right....to send them away and to clear the lobby". And the manager replied,

"YES....who wants 'chess nuts' boasting in an open foyer?"

DEVELOPMENT

Ministers when gathered together in a group have this urge, this tendency to boast. And I've noticed too that grandparents enjoy this same weakness. A man once said to Winston Churchill,

"You know...Sir Winston....I've never told you about my grandchildren". Churchill replied by clapping the man on the shoulder and replying, "I realize it, my dear fellow, and I can't tell you how grateful I am!"

Well...granted...perhaps a bit insensitive. After all, what grandparents doesn't like to brag about their children's children?

And parents? They have been known to boast. But parents need to be careful. It reminds me of the mother who came to the office of a youth worker - counsellor and bragged a bit about her 14 year old daughter's spiritual maturity. She said rather proudly,

"I've finally gotten her to listen to Christian music. She loves listening to that guy who wears a cross....the one who made that album called 'Faith'. In fact, she's going to see George Michael in concert tonight!"

Well, I don't know much about George Michael...but the youth counsellor said he didn't know whether to laugh or cry and in a grand "bubble-bursting" moment he showed the mother the lyrics to Michael's lusty hit song, "I Want Your Sex"...not really contemporary Christian music. So be careful, just wearing a cross doesn't make you a solid Christian.

PAUL'S TENDENCY TO BOAST

St. Paul had a tendency to boast and on occasion to brag just a bit. We know this from some of his writings, but this time his boasting is in good taste. For he is not boasting about himself, but about somebody else and that's good! In today's scripture lesson that Donna read, he is bragging "on the church" at Thessalonica. Hear his words:

"Grace and peace to you from God, the Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. We ought always to thank God for you, my brothers and rightly so because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing" (Isn't that good. Let me repeat that...)

"Therefore, among God's churches we BOAST about your perseverance and your faith in all persecutions and the trials you are enduring."

You know it's always good to hear someone boast or brag about their church. But it's rare to hear someone brag about someone else's church. I think that Paul here was boasting on the little church at Thessalonica as a way of offering encouragement. The church was undergoing a period of intense persecution from civil authorities and then, too, there were some internal problems.

One problem or one issue had to do with the anticipated return of Jesus. They were sitting around...waiting...they had quit working, but when Paul compared the church at Thessalonica with the church at Corinth...well, he came to appreciate the Thessalonians. Corinth, a cosmopolitan city, was so immoral that it actually spawned its own word..."to corinthianize"...which means to live a wicked, immoral lifestyle. Even some of the churches in Corinth were infected with some of this immorality. But the church at Thessalonica had remained faithful to the Gospel as they had come to understand it. In fact, Paul was hearing good things about them even while he labored in Corinth.

#### REMAINING FAITHFUL

Remaining faithful. It is so important that a church remain faithful and that its members remain loyal. That is the first thing we need to see that is important. It is so important that a church keep providing those services that only the church can offer whether that church is in Thessalonica or in New York City.

A church growth expert by the name of Peter Wagner polled hundreds of pastors in order to compile a list of measurable factors in the life of a congregation that said this is a quality church. Let me give you some of the factors that this survey turned up. As you listen, think about this church...

1. Bible knowledge. Church members are increasing in their grasp of the teachings of the Bible and they are integrating this with a theological system that enables them to apply Biblical truths to every day life situations.
2. Personal devotions. Members spend some time daily in prayer, Bible reading, meditation and other personal spiritual exercises.
3. Worship and Witnessing. Members REGULARLY attempt to participate in worship services of their church and members REGULARLY attempt to share their faith in Christ with others, especially unbelievers.
4. Giving. Members give an appropriate portion of their income to the local church and / or to other causes.
5. Missions. The church activity supports missions, organizing and sustaining a strong program for recruiting, sending and financing home and foreign outreach.

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3. Worship and Witnessing. Members REGULARLY attempt to participate in worship services of their church and members REGULARLY attempt to share their faith in Christ with others, especially unbelievers
4. Giving. Members give an appropriate portion of their income to the local church and / or to other causes.
5. Missions. The church activity supports missions, organizing and sustaining a strong program for recruiting, sending and financing home and foreign outreach.

6. Fellowship. Members are growing in their personal relationships with each other through regular participation in church fellowship groups of one kind or another.
7. Attitude toward religion. Church members regard their involvement in the church primarily as a service to God rather than a means to fulfill personal needs.
8. Social service and social justice. Members are serving others outside the congregation...direct personal involvement with the poor and needy, or in programs designed to help the needy. And either through the congregation as a whole or through specialized Christian agencies, members are trying to make changes in structures that will contribute to a more moral and just society.

And the list goes on, but this is sufficient to get us thinking as to what are the characteristics of a faithful church. It would be hard, I believe, to improve on this list. It is so important that a church be faithful in providing those services that only the church can offer.

#### AND BEING EFFECTIVE

Moving on...and even more important is that a church be effective. I know of many churches that are most faithful, but at times I wonder if that is their only virtue. Being faithful. Important! Doors are open on a Sunday morning. They may even have a Sunday School and perhaps a token youth program and a lot of good pot-luck suppers across the year...fellowship events, but they are having so little impact on their community. No one outside the immediate fellowship of forty or fifty is being touched by the claims of Christ through those churches and that's the way it's been for many years. Faithful, but not very effective.

It's a bit like a huge steam locomotive that stands in a museum upstate. Beside this complicated piece of heavy machinery is a sign showing boiler pressure, size and number of wheels, horsepower, length, weight and more. The bottom line indicates that 96% of the power generated was used to move the locomotive and only 4% was left to pull the load. Well, some churches, as you know, are a bit like that. Ninety-six percent of effort expended by church members is spent looking after the church. Barely four percent is expended bringing others to Christ.

How effective are we in getting our message of God's love for all people out to the city and community....to inject Christian values into the air we breathe. Church growth experts tell us that in order for us to reach our community, one of the first steps is that we must be willing to change. Some one has defined insanity as repeating the same action time after time and expecting a different result. If we do as we've always done, we will get what we've always gotten. To move ahead, churches - just like businesses or clubs or any other organizations - must be willing to change.

And change is not always an easy thing to bring about in the church. It's a bit like the lady who had been a member of her church for twenty-five years and who after one service approached her pastor at the door and it was apparent she had something on her mind and on her heart. She complained,

"REVEREND...if God were alive today, He would be shocked at the changes in this church!"

Well, that's just the point, isn't it? God is alive and God is a God of change. If some new ways of doing things are needed to win the world for Christ and Christian values as we move into a new millennium, then God expects us to embrace those changes. 'Course, we may be like the church that was struck by lightning...sending rafters crashing down on the church altar. The pastor commented how lucky they were. Said he, "Fortunately we're insured against acts of God".

There are too many churches "out there" that are insured against the "acts of God"....or at least inoculated against such acts. I hope and pray that we are not one of them. I hope that we are ready to move when the spirit touches us and says "move".

Paul praises the faithfulness of the church at Thessalonica and he prays for their continued effectiveness, but it's not enough just to be faithful. We must be serving our city, our community, our country, our world....always spreading through word and deed the love of Christ to those outside our doors.

AND HAVING LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER

And note one more thing before we wrap things up and head downstairs for a bit of food and fellowship. Paul boasts about one more thing: the love they have for one another.

The church at Thessalonica was not a perfect church, but it was a loving church and love can make up for a host of sins. Right? Ours is not the perfect church, but the love and the affection and the regard that we have for each other in this place can make up for a lot of our deficiencies and shortcomings. Again, hear some of Paul's words:

"We ought always to thank God for you, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the LOVE every one of you has for each other is increasing."

And I'd like to think the same thing goes on here. To me, that's something good to brag about.

Remember Laurel and Hardy, that old time comedy team. Some of you do. I came across something about them that touched me. Toward the end of his life, Oliver Hardy suffered a stroke that left him unable to speak. When Hardy was able to have visitors, Stan Laurel went to Ollie's house where he was met at the door by Ollie's wife. She showed Stan to the room where Ollie was sitting in a chair. She left the two comedians alone together in that room.

About ten minutes later, she noticed that she couldn't hear anything from that room and wondering what was wrong, she looked in on them and saw a most beautiful sight. Stan and Ollie were having a spirited conversation without uttering a word. Both men were masters at pantomime from their early years in silent films. And this skill was never put to better use and it also illustrates the deep affection...call it brotherly love...that existed between these two men. Stan Laurel had determined that he would not underscore Ollie's inability to speak by talking to him and Ollie, I'm certain, was grateful to Stan who thus helped Ollie to maintain his dignity.



CLOSING THOUGHTS

Some closing thoughts. What a beautiful analogy of what ought to happen in the church...to care enough about one another's needs that we not only are sympathetic, but empathic....we quietly enter into the hurt of others and minister to them where they are most hurting.

So, this is Paul's boast and to me, it's in good taste...right? And let's make this Christ's prayer for our church, too...that we will continue to be FAITHFUL in coming days, that we will continue to be EFFECTIVE, too, in our word and witness to others outside the church, and finally that we will put extra effort into LOVING ONE ANOTHER even as Christ has loved us. If we do these three things, we'll have lots to brag about, I'm sure!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness, O God, in these quiet moments... sensitive to Your peace, your presence, your power...at work in our lives. Again, wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our hearts...below the surface where indifference, disloyalty, laziness and negative attitudes so often lurk and take away our faithfulness and our effectiveness as modern day disciples of Him in whom we see life's highest hope and in whom we experience life's deepest meaning. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.