

"WHEN CYNICISM TEMPTS US"

by

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

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PARK AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

New York, New York

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INTRODUCTION There was an article in one of our papers this past week that caught my attention and helped to launch today's sermon. Entitled "Poll Finds Surge In Public Cynicism", it stated that public cynicism toward government has risen so sharply this past year that two-thirds of the American people now feel they can trust it only some of the time, and one-half believe that quite a few people running the government are crooked. Polls in recent years have chartered a gradually rising cynicism since the 1960's, but never have they registered so drastic an increase as this past year.

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DEVELOPMENT This word "cynic" was first applied to a Greek school of philosophers that took their start from a part of the teachings of Socrates. They taught that "only what is in a man - his reason and virtue - can give value to life" - so they preached and practiced self-control, austerity, and independence. Respectable enough at the start, the cynics became increasingly separate, pessimistic and sharp tongued. Until today a cynic is a man without hope, without confidence and without trust. To be cynical, says the dictionary, is to question the sincerity and goodness of people's motives and actions; it is to be "contemptuously distrustful".

Now few of us will deny that such a mood of cynicism hangs heavy about us in our time. When Dr. Kissinger was holding a news conference back in late October around the time of the mid-east conflagration, a reporter asked him if the military alert might have been prompted "as much by American domestic requirements as by the real requirements of diplomacy in the Middle East". That is cynicism, and the Secretary of State labeled it as "a symptom of what is happening to our country."

This crisis of credibility caused by events of this past year has only intensified a mood that was building in our land during the sixties. The generation gap or the racial gap or "this or that opinion" was often a no-man's land across which the opposing camps stared in hostility and cynicism - "contemptuously distrustful" of one another. Even within one's own camp or kind, there was a pervading cynicism, with such cynical statements as "every man has his price", or "every person has his or her moral breaking point", or "every institution is corroded and corrupt".

Last June, in his Baccalaureate Address at Yale, President Kingman Brewster said,

"When my contemporaries ask me, 'what is the impact of the Watergate scandal on the young?' - I have to reply, 'Very slight...they're not surprised; their basic response is 'what would you expect?'. If I were to characterize what I believe to be the greatest threat to the moral capacity of this land, I would call it 'the devolution of declining expectations'".

Which I would interpret as a close relative of cynicism. Not unrelated to it.

It is this climate of cynicism that is perhaps the worst pollution of our time. It hangs over us and threatens to envelop us like a thick fog, in which we see nothing...do nothing...hope nothing. And from such a gloomy atmosphere, we come into church and hear suggestions of another climate, like that word from the first Psalm,

"Happy is the man who does not...  
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Or other words from the New Testament, like "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". "There are three things that last forever - faith, hope and love - and the greatest of these is love". The Christian interpretation of life makes it tough for a person to settle for cynicism, for it conveys a persistent word that there is something beyond this gray, gloomy moral fog that he may mistake for the only reality.

I'm suggesting this morning that we should examine cynicism before we give it lodging space in our lives, and in so doing we discover some important things regarding it. Let me mention several.

CYNICISM: A POOR RECORD IN RETROSPECT For one thing, cynicism in retrospect has a pretty sorry record of accuracy and prophecy. Remember there were cynics present on the day that Jesus was crucified, and they were having a field day. In Matthew, we read,

"And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads...  
so also the chief priests...mocked Him, and the robbers who  
were crucified with Him also reviled Him..."

There they were...in the presence of the best and most influential person in human history and all that they could see was His death and the disgrace of that moment. They would have sneered at any suggestion that this Man would tower above them in time and that His cross would shine in lands unknown to them. But they were wrong, as confirmed cynics usually can be.

The cynics said there could never be a United States of America, but that there would always be warring, jealous sovereign states. The cynics said that we could never get rid of slavery. They said we could never establish public schools. They said that man would never fly in an airplane. As I read about the Wright Brothers of the Vikings who will be flying in the Super Bowl this afternoon, I was reminded of that cynical response of the Dayton, Ohio news editor who, when he was informed of the first flight by the Wright Brothers (natives of Dayton), said:

"I don't believe it. Nobody's going to fly...ever. And even  
if they did, it wouldn't be anybody from Dayton, Ohio!"

Today, I for one would not care to identify myself with the cynics of America about democracy, or the church, or some form of world order, or the expression of any man's finest ideals...simply because the batting average of the cynic's club has never, never been very high. Said Dr. Fosdick years ago,

"Cynics always start by posing as hard-headed wise men,  
and they always end up by being proven soft-headed fools"

This lack of vision is one of the problems of the cynic.

CYNICISM: FEEDS ON GENERALITIES

some important particulars.

Another thing about cynicism is that it tends to feed on generalities and overlooks

Listen for a moment to the talk of cynics and see how they are apt to deal in group judgement. "All politicians are crooked". "All church members are hypocrites". "All young people are irresponsible". Finding one in a group, they proceed to condemn the entire group. And if we're part of the group being condemned, we feel how unfair and untrue it is.

Back in the early 1950's, about the time I was in seminary, Elmer Gantry was made into a movie. It was the portrayal of a charlatan, philandering preacher, a wolf in shepherd's clothing. I doubt not that Sinclair Lewis knew some cleric who was the fact behind the fiction! But cynics were quick to conclude that Elmer Gantry was typical of all preachers, and that you couldn't trust them. But while undoubtedly there was a real Elmer Gantry somewhere in America, there was also an Albert Schweitzer, pouring out his life and talents in the name of Christ in Africa. There was a Fosdick and Sockman and a Buttrick, preachers whose intellectual honesty and Christian character and witness and dedication made them towering, untarnished figures, gracing pulpits in this City. There were men like my own father and a lot of other preachers and parsons scattered across this land, going where they were sent, representing sheer goodness, men of great integrity, that was given solid substance by their personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

We should be on guard against cynicism about any group or institution in general. A lot of people these days are cynical about marriage. They see so many homes that are broken, so many couples taking vows lightly that they conclude that no marriage can have the seeds of permanence in it. I decline to be cynical about marriage, as long as I observe and experience the great wonder and deep joy of two people growing older together, and growing in their love for each other.

So many folks we bump in to are cynical about government these days, seeing the tarnished figures who proved to be considerably less than they appeared. And in our disillusionment, we're apt to say, "That's the way they are". But, that is not the way they all are, and we should be fair-minded enough not to overlook or under-estimate the men in public life who are not violating conscience, who abide by principle, who serve out of a sense of responsibility and with great conviction, who practice what they preach...in public life.

Especially in these troubled times, we need to be cautious in damning all politicians, or all any-thing for that matter...for that kind of mass judgement is another of the faults that makes cynicism such a deadly sin.

CYNICISM: CONTAGIOUS

A third thing to note about cynicism is that it is contagious. It spreads. It's like an infection that can soon get out of control. This little disease germ can make you sick all over. If a person finds himself becoming cynical about one institution, he soon can become cynical about all institutions. If a person becomes cynical about a few of his fellow-men, he soon finds it easier to become cynical about all people. If he plays around with cynicism outwardly, he is almost bound to catch it inwardly.

Granted, there are reasons in our time to be cautious and concerned about situations and people, but given the choice between trusting and hoping too much on the one hand - and total disbelieving and distrusting on the other hand, I should prefer to be remembered for being overly optimistic than obsessively pessimistic!

CYNICISM: NEVER KEEPS COMPANY WITH JESUS CHRIST Finally, cynicism never keeps close company with Jesus Christ. I believe that no person who is closely related to Jesus can be cynical because it is the opposite of his spirit, contrary to his faith.

When you come right down to it, I suppose that if ever there was one who had an excuse for being somewhat cynical, it was the Man from Nazareth. His family thought him crazy, his friends regarded him as a flop, a failure, his church regarded him as a heretic, his country a traitor, It would be pretty tough to keep steady, serene, confident, trusting with all of those forces lined up against you. But the thing is, He was close enough to the heart of the Eternal that He never gave in to the temptation to cynicism.

And we really cannot walk in His company very far without sharing something of His spirit. He reassures us that there are sources of power beyond our present perplexities, that God loves each of us with a love that does not waver, nor gives up, that today's headlines are not tomorrow's final verdicts, that there is always more to come.

And so He leads us from the "soul-blight" of cynicism to the "soul-sight" of hope. To share life with Jesus Christ is to be lifted up to see another view and to receive His gifts of love, hope and faith!

CONCLUDING ILLUSTRATION One foggy, rainy, windy morning last August, I flew out of Maine's Portland Airport, heading back to NYC. It was a terrible day in Maine, so wet, damp and foggy that you couldn't even see two hundred feet in front of you. After a delay of more than one hour on the runway, during which I thought more than once about the plane that had crashed in the fog in Boston 48 hours earlier, we finally took off. For a few minutes we were enveloped in clouds and then wonder of wonders, within a few more minutes we were up above the clouds, now looking down on that pure, white cotton-puff blanket beneath us and looking over and up into a sky of brilliant blue. I don't think that I have ever been aware of such a sudden and complete contrast in my entire life.

I recall thinking to myself... "minutes ago you were thinking only of the miserable morning...and here you are...glorying in the sheer beauty and magnificence of this day". And isn't life like that. We can be at the brink of despair and cynicism because all that we see is dark and foreboding, and then we come into the light of Jesus Christ who reminds us of another view of ourselves, of life, of people, of the future. And it can come to us even on a January morning. It comes clear again and again to the companions of Christ. And it is this that saves a person from "taking his seat among the scornful", and it keeps restoring a singing faith that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet!"

PRAYER In the midst of the moral confusion and the contagious cynicism, O God, of these days, show us thy way. Help us in all our dealings with other people to be honest and trustworthy ourselves and give us that deep regard and respect for people as people which we find in Jesus, Our Lord and Master. Amen

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