

**"WHERE'S GEORGE?"**

**A Sermon By**

**Philip A. C. Clarke**

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
September 20, 1998**

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### INTRODUCTION

Back in the early days of television, George Burns and Gracie Allen were enjoying moderate success with their new television show...but they weren't drawing in the audiences like they wanted to. They needed some way to get people interested in their show and the solution came from one of Gracie's scatterbrained comedy routines.

George knew that one way to get Gracie "going" was to ask her about her brother, George. Gracie was a master at weaving together some "tall" tales about her brother, who actually was an accountant for an oil firm. Burns hit upon the idea of starting a search for George, as if he were really missing. It became a running gag line on their show and even carried over into other popular shows. Gracie would pop up unexpectedly on some other star's show, telling them...telling the people...that she was looking for her missing brother, George. Viewers never knew when Gracie would appear in the midst of other show's story lines and announce her search. People all over the country were charmed by the joke and the George Burns and Gracie Allen show really took off.

But there was one unfortunate side-effect to this publicity stunt and that was that George Allen, Jr., Gracie's brother, wasn't "in" on the joke. He was a rather private man, not at all use to this publicity. Suddenly, his sister's gag had yanked him out of obscurity and made him the center of national attention. He was so uncomfortable that at one time he actually did leave town and disappear for a while, causing a repentant Gracie to suppress the publicity. But finally, George Allen, Jr. came out of hiding and resumed his life as an accountant, but he remained the butt of jokes for a long time to come.

### DEVELOPMENT

"Where's George?" is what many were asking and wondering. I think that one of the problems of our time in looking for lost coins or lost sheep is that a lot of those coins and sheep really do not want to be found and this makes it difficult. Let's look at today's text.

The busy-bodies were criticizing Jesus once again...this time for the kind of people He associated with. Tax collectors and other sinners came to listen to Jesus teach. This irked the religious leaders. So Jesus told the religious leaders a couple of parables. The first was about a shepherd who left ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness and went to find the one that had gone astray. The other was about a woman who swept out her house to find a lost coin. His point was that the best way to make God happy is to find someone who is hurting, someone who is lonely and desperate and out of relationship with Christ - and to bring that one person, that one who is lost back home!

### OUR WORLD IS FULL OF LOST PEOPLE

Let's take it a step further. Our world is full of lost people. They're everywhere. People who have lost their goals, their enthusiasm, their direction, their joy, their hope. They're all around us.

Back in 1992 there was an amusing article in the papers about Atlanta Braves right handed pitcher, Pascual Perez. Not only did Perez receive national attention, but he also got stuck with the nickname "I-285" after he got lost while driving to Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium. Heading for a scheduled start during the pennant race, he circled Atlanta for hours. He finally arrived at the stadium after the game had begun, missing his starting assignment.

The world is full of lost people and most of these lost souls have problems far worse than missing an exit on the Interstate. They've missed the meaning of life. In his book, Blue Highways, William Least-Heat Moon suggests that our native Americans believe that the "road of life" is always a series of irregular journeys deeply shaped by cosmic forces and he explains that the Hopi Indians believe that all humankind evolves through four worlds. They are:

- First: A shadowy realm of contentment.
- Second: A place where people worship material goods.
- Third: A place where people forget their history and fear their future...a mysterious being called The Spider Grandmother then comes to tell them they are lost and must begin a long and difficult journey.
- Fourth: The Hopi struggles to find their true way.

Think about it...sort of sounds like people you and I know. Contented. Worshipping material goods. Forgetting their history and growing fearful of the future. Struggling to find their way. The world is full of lost people. They're everywhere. They look at you with hollow eyes and they slink into alleyways so you won't notice them. They hunch over in the halls as if they're carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. It's true that the Church is one enterprise that will never go out of business for lack of prospects.

But we are confronted with a troubling question. If there are so many lost souls out there in the world, why then are we doing such a lousy job of reaching them for Christ? Let me offer a couple of answers...

#### LOOKING IN THE WRONG PLACES

Part of the answer may be that we are looking for them in the wrong places. Have we been focussing more on enlisting new members and making converts rather than finding lost people? Think about it. It may be that we have been trying to find people who will "fit in" with our group and build up our church rather than asking ourselves: where are the people who are really in need.

Actually, some of us don't even like people. They look different from us and they talk different from us and they may even smell different from us, and boy - can they ever get their life into a mess. Family problems you cannot believe. Dangerous dependencies and obvious obsessions. They have a tendency to be ruled by their emotions rather than good sense. That's one reason they're lost. In short...they are not our kind of people and that is why we tend to avoid them and fail to see them. We get our "jollies" from winning people who are like us. After all, we say...they have problems, too. Isn't it possible to be "up and out" as well as "down and out"?

And meanwhile, the one hundredth sheep wanders farther and farther from the fold and the lost coin lies under the cabinet, slowly covered by the dust and grime of life, corroding of self-esteem and hope.

#### THEY DON'T WANT TO BE FOUND

But, there's another reason we are not very good at finding lost sheep and uncovering lost coins. They simply don't want to be found!

Where's George? He doesn't want to be found! At least, not by us. For some reason, he doesn't perceive our concern as real. Some anonymous cynic put it this way:

"I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and dismissed my hunger. Thank you. I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release. I was naked and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless and you preached to me of a spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me. You seemed so holy, so close to God...but I'm still very hungry and lonely and cold!"

Ouch. That hurts! And here's another that hurts and comes even closer to where you and I sit. A recovering alcoholic said that, after his life-changing experience in AA, his local church was unbearable. He said (and these are his words):

"After I had at last been part of a real community where we loved each other enough to be honest, to sacrifice our time and energy to aid others in their struggle with alcohol, the sweet superficiality of my church was repulsive. When I tried to share with them some of the insights gained from my own personal struggles, they looked at me like I was crazy, like my struggle was a purely personal problem."

One wonders...could he be talking about a Methodist Church, yes, perhaps even our Church?

We are faced with a dilemma, aren't we? The world is filled with lost people....if we are willing to look for them, and we have what the world needs most - the love, the forgiveness and life-changing power of Jesus Christ. At times I feel that we are doing a poor job of communicating to the world that we are for real. And I search for and seek a solution...

WE NEED TO ALLOW OURSELVES TO BE FOUND BY CHRIST

selves to be found by Christ. I have the feeling that the reason we do not have hearts "pierced" with the world's need is, to a certain extent, due to our own lostness. We have never truly given our hearts to Jesus. Therefore, we do not have His passion for finding the lost sheep and discovering the lost coin of the world.

Who knows? Maybe it is for us to allow our-

CLOSING STORY

Let me close with a story that touched me and almost had me in tears. It was a cold and snowy January night and on the floor where Nurse Sue Kidd worked, things were quiet. She stopped by Room 712 to check on a new patient who answered to the name of Williams.

Mr. Williams had been admitted with a heart attack and he seemed very restless and anxious that evening. But he perked up when the door to his room opened, but then a look of disappointment came across his face when he saw Nurse Sue Kidd walk in. As Sue Kidd checked the chart of Mr. Williams and asked about his condition, she sensed that he wanted very much to ask her something. Finally, with tears in his eyes, Mr. Williams asked Sue if she would make a call to his daughter and tell her of his heart attack. She was the only family he had left and he seemed anxious that she know of his condition. Sue Kidd promised to make the call right away. Before she left, Mr. Williams reached for a piece of paper and a pencil which was on the stand next to his bed.

When Sue that evening reached Janie, the daughter of Mr. Williams, she responded with a scream, "NO! Is he dying?" Her reaction startled Sue Kidd and Janie blurted out that she hadn't talked to her father in about a year. Apparently an argument over a boyfriend had led them to close off communication with each other. Janie's last words to her father had been "I hate you!" And ever since then, she had desperately wanted to hear the word of forgiveness.

After reassuring Janie, Sue Kidd, the nurse, hung up and quietly breathed a soft prayer and whisper that God would work a miracle of reconciliation between father and daughter. Her heart was so burdened with the telephone conversation that Sue felt an urgent need to return almost immediately to Mr. Williams' room, which she did where she found him unconscious, suffering from another heart attack, and within seconds, Sue's CODE 99 alerted staff and doctors and nurses soon filled the room to work on Mr. Williams. As Sue performed CPR on his lifeless form, she sent up a desperate one line prayer to God that Mr. Williams wouldn't die before he found peace with his daughter, but no amount of medical attention would re-start his heart and Mr. Williams lay there in the bed - dead.

In the hallway of the hospital, Sue Kidd saw a doctor talking to a young woman. Shock and grief mingled on her face. Yes, it was Janie, the daughter. Sue ushered Janie into the lounge area and tried to comfort her. Janie said, "I never hated him, you know. I loved him." Although Sue thought it unwise, Janie insisted on seeing her father and as she leaned over his body and cried, Sue glanced around the room and happened to notice a piece of paper on Mr. Williams' night stand. She picked it up and glanced at the top of it and saw his name and handed it to Janie. The young woman read it aloud.

"My dearest Janie....I forgive you. I pray you  
will forgive me. I know that you love me. I  
love you, too. Daddy."

Where grief and shock had contorted Janie's features and filled her eyes, now there was only peace. Sue Kidd slipped out of the room and headed to make a call....a call to her own father.

SUMMARY If we could go back in time....and somehow gaze on the cross that held the dying body of our Lord, Jesus....we would see a sign mounted above His head and on it would read the simple line: "This MAN is the SON of GOD", and if we could read the back of that sign, we might find these words:

"My BELOVED.....and there would be your name....my name...  
the name of someone. I forgive you. I know that deep in  
your heart you do love me. And I love you! Signed,  
Jesus".

Let me leave this thought, this question with each of you. Are you in  
danger of losing a sense of meaning of your own salvation from sin and from  
death. Remember this that Jesus has a passion for the lost and lonely of our  
world. It includes us. And it includes everyone with whom we come in  
contact with. Ask yourself: are you doing your part to reach out to the  
least and the lowly as Christ has reached out to us.

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved  
a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now  
am found, was blind...but now I see."

May that be our prayer as we depart and "go from here in peace".

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your peace, Your presence and to Your power  
in these moments that come at the end of this service. Wrestle  
with each of us...in the deep and hidden corners of our lives. Wrestle with  
us until we are conquered by Your love. For in these moments we believe that  
the deepest things within us are being stirred up....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. Renew within each of us the heart of grace.  
In the spirit of Him who came seeking the lost and the lonely, we pray. Amen.

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