

"WHY JOIN THE CHURCH?"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Fourth Sunday After Easter
April 27, 1986
Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York, New York

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INTRODUCTION

"Why join the Church?" It's an appropriate Sunday for us to consider this question.

Occasionally I'll hear people ask that question. Most of your friends and your neighbors in your apartment building, if they were to see you on a Sunday morning all dressed up would probably wonder where you're going. If you were to tell them you're going to Church, they'd probably be shocked...for not everybody does this in New York. They might wonder what's happening to the neighborhood. It would be all right to visit the Church once in a while...on Holy Days or for weddings and baptisms and funerals, but why would one want to join a Church. They would consider it unnecessary. Once upon a time, people felt embarrassed if they didn't go to Church; now, many feel embarrassed if they do.

Some people are suspicious of organized religion. I have a friend who tells of a team of visitors from his Church calling to invite people to come to Church. One man they called on said, "I don't believe in organized religion." He said, "Good, you'll love our Church". Organized religion, I guess, is to be contrasted with private religion - doing your own thing, believing your own beliefs, saying your prayers privately out in the park. That's certainly possible. There's nothing wrong with it, except it's not Christianity. You can't be a private Christian. To which one says "Amen". Amen!

Several years ago I came across the word, "oxymoron". Now that's a marvelous word. An oxymoron is a phrase in which there are two contradictory words, such as "cruel kindness", or "jumbo shrimp". Oxymoron. "Postal service" - that's one, too. You can think of some. How about "airline food". I would add one more to the list and suggest "private Christianity". Two contradictory words in one phrase. You can't be a Christian and keep it to yourself, although a lot try.

COMMUNITY OF FAITH

I want to suggest some reasons why this is true. And the first is that to be a Christian, an effective Christian, is to be a part of a community of faith with a heritage that stretches back four thousand years to the time of Abraham. From Abraham through Moses and the prophets down to Jesus of Nazareth, then the disciples and the apostles and all the saints of the Church.

To be Christian is to be immersed in and nourished by that heritage of faith. One cannot be a full, participating member of the Christian Church without being acquainted with that heritage. You can be religious without the heritage, but your religion won't be Christianity. To be Christian is to be immersed in that heritage and the steward of that heritage in the Church. No other institution keeps that memory of faith alive.

I like the word "benchmark". Benchmarks, as you probably know, are those marks that surveyors make to indicate a starting point in mapping a territory. They cut a benchmark into a rock or some other durable material so that others later on will be able to find the starting point for making their own maps. That's what a heritage is. A heritage provides you with benchmarks, reference points. That's why we read the Old Testament and the New Testament in our services and say the creeds - old creeds like the Apostles' Creed and modern creeds. They're all benchmarks. That's why we celebrate the holy days of our faith - Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Easter, Pentecost, Good Friday. They're all benchmarks, left there by those who have already completed their journey of faith.

It may be a long time before you travel where they have traveled. But when you do, you will have their witness - the benchmarks - to help you find your way. Some day you'll discover that Luther was right when he said there's nothing we do that can save ourselves, but we've already been saved by what God has done for us and that knowledge will help you find your way when you are lost some day.

And you'll discover that old doctrines, such as grace and repentance, are not just words out of the past, but experiences in the present which can change your whole life and give new meaning and freshness to your life. And that someone, like the Holy Spirit - Whom we celebrate next month on Pentecost - is the only way that you'll be able to explain how you were able to get through a difficult time of your life, even as the disciples got through a difficult time of despair and sorrow, when you were sure it was the end, but it turned out to be the gift of new life. The presence of a Holy Spirit guiding you, sustaining you. Perhaps you can whisper a soft "Amen" in your heart to that.

You may not understand those doctrines or benchmarks now because you have not yet entered the territory they chart. But don't make the mistake that so many people make in our time, that because you don't understand something it isn't true, or it isn't important. If it's a doctrine that's been around for 2,000 years, and you've been around for 20 or 25 or 50 years, the problem may not be with the Doctrine. It may simply mean that you haven't experienced enough of life yet to know what the map is charting.

But the Church in its wisdom knows that some day you may travel there, and because you have kept close to the Church you've kept close to the heritage or to those benchmarks. And if you know where the benchmarks are, then the territory you find yourself in will not confuse you or alarm you. You will have the witness of two to four thousand years of tradition and of biblical faith and insight to help you find your way. That's the first thing it means to be a Christian. It means to be a part of a heritage, a community of faith stretching back to the time of Abraham.

FELLOWSHIP OF CARING

Secondly, to be Christian is also to be in a fellowship of caring.

The Church believed that it was establishing a new community in this world and this new community was to be the model for all other human communities. Christians were to be together in such a way that the quality of life, their life, would be like leaven in the loaf of the world. In the Church all those barriers that have separated people in this old world were to come down. That's why Paul says to the Galatians that in the Church now there's "neither Jew nor Greek...nor slave nor free, nor male nor female". Those were the barriers that separated people in this world. And Paul says, "look, they don't exist...in the Church we are all one in Christ Jesus".

There was something different about the Church. There was a quality about their life that didn't exist anywhere else and it was called "koinonia" in those days. And to be Christian is to be a part of that fellowship. I call it a caring for one another based on the example of the love that our Lord has given to us. It's a love that is expressed in words and in deeds and in prayer for each other. That's why we try to have fellowship groups in the Church, that's

why we really need to develop more of them. That's why every time we gather as a congregation to worship we pray for one another, because we are a fellowship of caring.

A woman was in the woods painting at her easel. Shots rang out from a bluff above her and she realized she had been hit. Laying on the ground she could see two young men on the bluff shooting at her with a rifle. She was struck three times. She passed out. And when she came to she was in a hospital room. For a week she hovered between life and death in semi-consciousness. People came from the Church that she belonged to, but seldom attended...they came and cared for her. They came regularly. They sat with her; they prayed for her; they did not know that she was aware of their presence. They thought she was unconscious. She said that the only thing she remembered from that week was their being there, their coming and going. She said:

"I was blissfully aware of their being there. I felt as if I had been gathered up in a cocoon of love...I was part of a beloved community."

That's exactly what the Church talks about when it speaks of "koinonia" - the fellowship of caring. And you cannot be Christian unless you are a part of it - not to receive, but also to give to the fellowship of caring.

MISSION OF SERVING The Church is a heritage of meaning. It is also a fellowship of caring. And finally the Church is a mission of serving - and you cannot be a Christian and not be a part of that mission, too.

We don't stop to think about it, but the Church is responsible for most of the institutions of caring in this world, and for the creation of a climate of humaneness in this world that did not exist until the Church came preaching the Good News about the sanctity and the importance of each individual and their rights as human beings.

It's as if the fellowship of caring in the Church went out beyond the walls of the Church and became a mission of serving in the world. And so hospitals and homes were begun by monasteries and nunneries to care for those who had been rejected by the rest of the world because they were untouchable - lepers and victims of the plague. The monasteries and nunneries received them "in the name of Christ" and touched them. It was the Church that began the schools and the universities in this world to lift people out of darkness of superstition and ignorance. It was the Church that began social service agencies in this country, particularly the Methodist Church in the 19th century, to lift the burden from the backs of the poor and needy. There's no other institution in the whole world that has done more for the betterment of the quality of life of all humans than the Church.

Some cynics ask that if the Church has been around for 2,000 years, how come the world is not a better place? I say the world is a better place because the Church has been around for 2,000 years. Imagine what it would be like without it. And its mission to the world is not yet finished. It continues.

This Church, incidentally, spends thousands of dollars on causes and persons beyond its walls. I know of no other Church in America that is privileged to give away to others as much as this Church does. Be a good Samaritan it says. Share with those who are in need in this city, this country, the world. I suppose you

can do that, that you can follow that command without joining the Church. But I remind you that it is the Church that gives you that command, and it is the Church that has followed it more faithfully and more generously than any other institution. And the Church got the command from the Bible - from God's Word!

CLOSING SECTION

Next Sunday we have four young men joining the Church as "confirmands" which reminds me that I first joined the Church as a confirmand, many years ago. I must have been 12 or 13 at the time. I guess I just sort of "oozed" into the Church. I grew up in the Church - one in Albany, one in Gloversville, New York. Both my father and my grandfather were preachers - one ordained, the other a local or "lay" preacher in the Wesleyan movement in England. I guess some would say it sort of ran in the family.

And because it ran in the family I probably ran away from it and resisted it for a while, but it did no good. I couldn't imagine having to write and to preach a sermon every week for 40 years! But I could find no better meaning of life than that which I found in the heritage of the Church. And even if I were to go outside of the Church I would still be dependent upon that heritage, for all the great moral principles and values which are the foundation stones of our society are grounded in that heritage that comes from the Church. So, too, are the great dreams of mankind - the dream of a better world, a peaceful world, a world of unity of all people - all are dependent on the Church. Nor could I find any institution that continually challenged me to be a better person,, every week challenging me to be the kind of person God created me to be.

The Church gave me not only the challenge of Jesus to give my life to something greater than myself, but the Church also gave me in its fellowship the example of people whose lives showed me that if I were to run away from the challenge given to me by my Lord, I would be running away from the meaning of life itself.

And so I finally came to see that instead of staying away from the Church because I didn't need it, I had to be in the Church because of all that I owed to it.

AN OLD PRAYER

There's an old prayer for the Church that has a phrase in it that I've kept with me over the years. Speaking of the Church it says:

"When we compare Her with all human institutions, we rejoice, for there is none like her. But when we compare her with the mind of Her Master, we bow in contrition."

I discovered many years ago that the Church when compared with Her Master falls short. It always has. But what I couldn't get around was the fact that the Church - in spite of her frailties, in spite of her sinfulness, in spite of her selfishness - nevertheless presents the image of that Master. No matter how corrupt the Church was, it gave birth to its own reformers. Why was that? And when I compared her with all other human institutions there was none like her, and there never shall be. The Church is that one institution that can give you a heritage of meaning stretching back to Abraham, a fellowship of caring and a Kingdom to strive for. And all it asks of you is that you give to her your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service. And if not here, where? And if not now, when?

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There was something...something different about the Church! There was a quality about their life that didn't exist anywhere else and it was called "koinon" in those days. And to be Christian is to be a part of that fellowship. I call it a caring for one another based on the example of the love that our Lord has given to us. It's a love that is expressed in words and in deeds and in prayer for each other. That's why we try to have fellowship groups in this Church, that's why we really need to develop more of them. That's why every time we gather as a congregation to worship we pray for one another, because we are a fellowship of caring.

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Now I discovered at an early age that the Church when compared with Her Master falls pitifully short...it always has. But what I couldn't get around was the fact that the Church - in spite of her frailties, in spite of her sinfulness, in spite of her selfishness - nevertheless presents the image of that Master. No matter how corrupt the Church was, it gave birth to its own reformers. Why was that? And when I compared that with all other human institutions there was none like Her, and there never shall be. The Church is that one institution that can give you a heritage of meaning stretching back to Abraham, a fellowship of caring, and a Kingdom to strive for. And all it asks of you is that you give to Her your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service. And if not here, where? And if not now, when?

LET US PRAY

We thank You, O God, for the Church that has met in various places down through the ages, sometimes in great cathedrals and sometimes in catacombs and sometimes in the fields. Help us to recover in our own lives the thing that makes the Church its real self, and then send us out to carry that spirit of the Living Christ into our homes, our offices, our schools - wherever we may be. We ask this in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord.

which all noble and moral people strive for.