

Sermon for Sunday, January 19, 1975 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WILL THE REAL CHRISTIAN PLEASE STAND UP?"

Acts 5:12-21

Text: "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life."
Acts 5:20

Several weeks ago I caught the flu and spent the better part of a week in bed. From time to time, out of sheer boredom, I turned on the TV. To my surprise I discovered that a program that I watched years ago was still around, a program called, "To Tell the Truth." The format of the program is simple. Three people are introduced, all claiming to be the same person. A panel of experts questions them and then tries to decide which person is the real Mr. So-and So. At the conclusion of this bit of nonsense, the host of the program cries out dramatically, "Will the real Mr. So-and-So please stand up!"

In one sense of the word, "To Tell the Truth" is a sort of parable on life. In the first place, most of us are busy trying to be someone we are not. We respond falsely to others in life in an effort to make them think we are something different from what we really are. Most of us have all sorts of false fronts and facades behind which we hide from one another. For example here is the passive, cooperative fellow that goes along with whatever is being done. But underneath he is filled with seething resentments and bitterness. Or here is the life of the party-guy, witty, charming - and underneath is in agony of insecurity and anxiety that leaves him twisting in inward misery. Or here is the Big Chief character. He is always taking the lead, showing everyone how a thing should be done, bossing the whole show. And underneath his facade is a desperate loneliness and a yearning desperation to be liked and accepted.

And do you know why we do that? It is because we are afraid that if others know what we are really like they will not like us or accept us. We are afraid to be ourselves. Sometimes we get so caught up in our little game of hiding and deception that we ourselves don't know truly who we are. Pretension gets more and more detached from reality. We are afraid to let the real us stand up.

There is a second sense in which the program is a parable on life. We are always trying to guess who the other person really is. Partially because we sense some note of falseness in others, and partially because we ourselves are not being true to life, we begin to lose our confidence in the integrity of who and what others are. I remember one Charlie Brown comic strip that showed Lucy writing a letter to Santa Claus. She wrote, "Dear Santa, I am writing for all the boys and girls in this world who love you. I am not thinking of myself. I am only thinking of others." The last section shows Snoopy, the dog, looking disgusted and the caption says, "It's becoming increasingly difficult to tell the 'phonies' from the 'realies'." And isn't that our problem with one another? The next time you catch yourself saying something like, "she only does that to show off." or "He is just putting on a big front" or something similar, you are probably suffering from the Snoopy syndrome, you are trying to guess the phonies from the realies.

In our Scripture this morning we read about some men who were no phonies. They had been locked up in jail. They had been told not to teach in the name of Jesus. Yet, in spite of this, when they were released by an angel of the Lord from prison, the Bible tells us, "they entered the temple at daybreak and taught." Here is a picture of men who know who and what they are. They are not afraid to be themselves. They are men who love Jesus, who have an inner serenity and peace about

them, who are not afraid to stand up and say, "This is who I am. This is what I stand for."

Notice first of all that these men were not always this way. There had been a time when, in a sense, they were phonies. One of their number became so unsure of who and what he was that he tried to turn the clock back. He tried to return to an old way of life and pretend nothing had ever happened. He was so afraid of what had been happening to him that he tried to destroy it - his name was Judas. On another occasion one of these men had become so uncertain, so unsure of himself - of who and what he was - that he was afraid to be himself. So the Bible tells us that he cursed and swore and claimed he never knew Jesus. His name was Peter. Eventually there came a time when all of them became uncertain. They were afraid and frightened to be what they wanted to be. And when that happened, with Jesus hanging on the cross on the hill of Calvary, the Bible says, "They all forsook him and fled." They were running away from life, from who and what they were.

But now we discover these same men and they are phonies no longer. They tell the Jewish leaders who threaten their lives, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) What changed them? Wasn't it the discovery that in spite of their failure and cowardice, Jesus still loved them? Wasn't it the discovery that Jesus understood their fear and terror and then they had deserted him in his hour of deepest need, he still loved them.

Do you know why we are so often phonies with one another? It is because basically we are ashamed of who and what we are. We know ourselves too well! We know the motives that drive and push us, the thoughts that compell and control us, the passions that grip and hold us captive. And we are ashamed. We dare not let another see us for just what we are for in our secret hearts we hide dark deeds done, thoughts thought, passions felt - and we are ashamed. So, we are afraid we will not be liked or loved. We are afraid we will not be accepted. Yes, we are ashamed.

Were the apostles ashamed because they deserted Jesus? Oh, you know they were! But they discovered he loved them just the same. Do you think Jesus knows about those inner deeds, those thoughts, those passions that belong to you? Do you remember how the Psalmist put it? O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me! Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up; thou discernest my thoughts from afar. Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether." (Psalm 139) Yes, he knows!

But I've got some good news for you this morning! Jesus loves you just the same. He knows all about you and still he loves you - just as you are. Your sin has been paid for. Your debt is covered. Years ago King Charles V was loaned a large sum of money by a merchant in Antwerp. The note came due, but the King was bankrupt and unable to pay. The merchant gave a great banquet for the King. When all of the guests were seated and before the food was brought in, the merchant had a large platter placed on the table before him and a fire lighted on it. Then taking the note out of his pocket, he held it in the flames until it was burned to ashes. The King stood there and wept. In a far greater sense, Jesus who knows all about us, takes our sins and burns them to ashes in the flames of Calvary. Our debt is paid. Our sin is forgiven. We are accepted by God.

So, the first thing that happened that changed the disciples was that they discovered that Jesus loved them and accepted them and their sin was paid, their debt was covered. Then a second thing happened. Because he accepted them, they began to accept themselves. Do you hate yourself this morning? Many of us do. Do you despise yourself for some of the things you do? Lots of us are in the same boat? But have you ever tried to change? I know I have and I'm sure you've tried, too. Yet, most of us have already broken all of our New Year's resolutions! So we begin to feel guilty and we hate ourselves for our weakness. But let me tell you a secret. When we discover that Jesus loves us and accepts us, a miracle begins to happen. We begin to accept ourselves. An inner peace begins to come when we know we are loved and accepted and that our sins are covered. We don't have to pretend to be something we are not, we are loved and accepted just as we are. We don't have to hide any longer. You see, I accept myself when I know who I am - and I know who I am when I know I am his. Yes, when I know I am the accepted one - loved and forgiven - then I can begin to accept myself.

Now, the third thing that happened to the disciples was this: having discovered that they were men for whom Jesus died and that he loved them - and having discovered that they could be at peace about themselves because they were at peace with God - a strange thing happened. The angel of the Lord told them to go stand in the temple and tell people about the new Life and all it meant. And do you know what? Those men who had once fled and deserted Jesus, stood up in the temple and did just what the angel said! They told people about Jesus.

Do you know what the world needs today? It needs for real Christians to stand up and tell them about Jesus. Let me ask you a question. Do you think everybody you know is at peace with himself because he knows he is accepted by Jesus? Or again, do you think everybody in St. Louis is at peace with himself, that he has the courage to be himself? Well, we both know the answers to those two questions. But who will go and stand to speak to the people all the words of this Life?

Centuries ago when the wings of the fierce Roman eagle cast an ominous shadow over the world, the brave warriors of Caesar set forth to conquer Britain. As their vessels appeared on the horizon, the Englishmen bravely gathered on the heights to defend their homeland. To their utter bewilderment, the first thing the Romans did on disembarking was to set fire to their ships. When the flames had consumed their ships, the only avenue of retreat had been cut off. No wonder a tiny little village on the banks of the Tiber river became the mistress of the world. You see, when a man knows who and what he is, he can burn his escape routes. He won't be using them. And when a man belongs to Jesus and knows it, he can accept himself and he can go stand up for Jesus to tell people about this new life. The disciples in the temple had burned their ships behind them. As Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men." He knew who he was.

I read a story once about a man who stretched a tightrope across Niagara River. He took a wheelbarrow and rolled it across in front of him. Thousands of people cheered him on. Then he put a 200 pound sack of dirt in the wheelbarrow and rolled it over, and then he rolled it back. Then he turned to the crowd and asked, "How many of you believe that I can roll a man across in this wheelbarrow? Everybody shouted and one man on the front row especially seemed enthusiastic. "Good," said the tightrope artist, pointing to the man, "Get in the wheelbarrow!" Well, you couldn't see the man for the dust he left so fast. He thought he believed, but not enough to get in the wheelbarrow. And what the world needs today are men who truly believe; men who, in the act of believing, learn to accept themselves and who then go to share with the world the good news about this new life. You see what we really need are for the real Christians to please stand up - and get in the wheelbarrow.