

An Opportunity to Testify

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 15, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Just before his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion, Jesus warned his disciples about what would happen in the future. He spoke of the destruction of the temple that took place some forty years later. He warned his disciples against being led astray by false prophets. Above all he warned of persecution. Jesus said, "They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to prisons and you will be brought before governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify."

The words of Jesus remind me of the church under persecution in many parts of the world. A few years ago, Bishop Emilio de Carvalho, Methodist Bishop of Angola, visited the United States. Angola is under Marxist rule. "What's it like to be the church in a Marxist country? Is the Marxist government supportive of the church?" "No, but we don't expect it or need it to be supportive." "Have there been tensions between the government and the church?" "Oh, yes. Not long ago the government decreed that we should disband all women's organizations in the church." "Well, how did the church manage without the women being able to meet?" "Oh, the women kept meeting. The government isn't strong enough to do much about it." "But what will you do when the government becomes stronger?" "Well, we'll keep meeting. The government does what it needs to do. The church does what it needs to do. If we go to jail for testifying to the Lordship of Christ, we'll just go to jail. *Jail gives us a wonderful opportunity to testify to Jesus Christ.* Our church has made some of its most dramatic gains during the revolution when so many of us were in jail. In jail, you have everyone there, in one place. You have time to testify and teach. Sure, twenty of our pastors were killed during the revolution, but we came out of jail a much larger and stronger church. People said, look at those Christians, they're willing to die for Christ. There must be something to their faith."

Then the Bishop told his American audience. "Don't worry about the church in Angola. We're taking every opportunity to testify to God's grace in the face of persecution. But, frankly,

I worry about you American Christians. I'd find it much more difficult to be a pastor here in the United States. Here, you have so many material things you could lose. It must be very tempting for you not to testify."

Christ wants us American Christians to take every opportunity to testify. Presbyterians haven't been doing a good job of testifying. Martin Marty claims, tongue in cheek, that Presbyterians invite somebody to church on the average of once every 28 years. We don't do a good job of testifying. **What does it mean to testify?** *Testify* is a legal term. Last week the newspapers said that in the upcoming impeachment hearings in Congress only one or two witnesses would be called to testify. Two people will tell what they've heard and seen and discovered. They're called *to testify, to bear witness to the truth*. Jesus calls us to testify in the courtroom of public opinion. He wants us to testify to the truth about him before our friends and neighbors. Tell what we know about Jesus. Who is Jesus? Why did he die? Bear witness to his resurrection. **Testify to how Christ is making a difference in your life**; not how Christ has made you perfect but how Christ is helping you to deal with pain and suffering and disappointments and loss as well as with joy and happiness. Jesus sends us into the neighborhood to testify to him. He wants us to seize every opportunity to testify to his grace, love and mercy.

Opportunities to testify present themselves every day. I think of how Jim Sumner took the opportunity to testify last Thursday evening at Alan Andrew's surprise 50th birthday party. Jim was entirely unaware that he was testifying. That's what made it so beautiful and powerful to me. Jim was master of ceremonies. He shared some of his memories of Alan over the years, some of the ornery, naughty things they'd done. He also mentioned, parenthetically, how Alan was instrumental in getting him back into the church years ago. Near the end of the party Jim invited Alan to join him and Ralph Spotts to sing two Gospel songs which testified to God's grace in Jesus Christ. Jim then closed the party reading from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment." There had been lots of eating and drinking and laughter and tears of joys as

memories were shared and those verses of Scripture were most appropriate. My guess is that some of the non-church, non-religious people, would have left that party with a seed of transcendence planted in their hearts. I imagine some of them left thinking, "I know those guys. I've known them all my life. I know also that they've found something in Christ and the church and they still enjoy eating and drinking with their old non-churched friends. Maybe there's something more to life than the secular world has to offer."

Jesus wants us to seize every opportunity to testify even when we feel lost and unable to find our way. Sometimes a frank admission that we feel lost and want to be found by Christ is a powerful witness. Some of you remember Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. His television services changed the minds of a lot of us about Roman Catholics. We heard and saw a man who obviously loved Christ, his church, and all people. He once told this story. He was scheduled to speak in Philadelphia. He was unfamiliar with the church and got hopelessly lost trying to find City Hall. He saw some tough looking teenagers hanging out on a street corner and asked them for directions. One of the kids asked what he was going to do at City Hall? He said, "I'm going to preach a sermon." "About what?" He told them he was going to preach on, "How to get to heaven" and he invited them to come along and hear him preach. They responded, "Are you kidding? You don't even know how to get to City Hall how do you expect to tell us how to get to heaven." There's something healthy and honest about the exchange between the Bishop and the teenagers. All of us, Bishops included, need direction. Nobody likes somebody who knows all the answers and who needs no instructions. Sometimes a frank admission that we don't have all the answers, that we too are seeking direction, is a good way to invite a friend to begin the journey toward God with you.

What an opportunity we have to testify to Christ here in Oxford. Over half of the people on our membership rolls never come to church. Some I've never seen. You know some of these people. What an opportunity to testify to Christ. Call them on the telephone. Drop them a note. Invite them for coffee. Ask if they'd be a part of a Bible study and if it could be held at their house. Over half the town is unchurched. We don't have to rob Methodists or Roman Catholics

from their churches. Half the people in town don't worship with God's people regularly. And yet there is hunger. There is so much spiritual hunger. People are looking everywhere for spiritual fulfillment. What an opportunity we have to testify. We are not perfect, we have not yet arrived, but we are looking to Christ for spiritual nourishment and direction and purpose.

Worship services will get better & better; Church school ... because we will have to change & adapt in ways that reach out & will create greater opportunities to testify

I believe that testifying to Christ is one of the most important tasks of our church and of every member. Why? Because I believe that there's no salvation in this world or the next apart from Jesus Christ. [Remember the vision of a new world that Isaiah saw in our Old Testament

lesson. A city of joy and delight. No more weeping. No cries of distress in this city. No more infants that live only a few days. No more adults who die prematurely because of poor health-care or foolish lifestyle choices. A city of houses and vineyards and plentiful food for everybody and meaningful work. And God will live in that city. He answers our prayers before we open our lips. How do we get there from here. Only through Christ. Only through his way. That world is possible only because of what Jesus Christ has done, is doing, and will do through us.] The hope of this world is found in following Jesus Christ, listening to him, obeying him, trusting him.

Our Presbyterian heritage talks of six great ends of the church - six vital tasks that mark the life of our church. The first of these is "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind." This is another way of saying that we are called to take every opportunity to testify to the salvation God has given us in Jesus Christ. How are you going to act in response to this sermon this week? Look for opportunities to testify. Seize every opportunity to testify.

Let us pray: God of the covenant, in our baptism you called us to proclaim the coming of your kingdom. Give us courage like you gave the apostles, that we may faithfully witness to your love and peace in every circumstance of life, in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.