

Christ's Ministry and Ours

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, June 17, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 46; Romans 5:6-11; Matthew 9:35-10:8.

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

Matthew, in a few verses, describes the ministry of Jesus which lasted for nearly 3 years, from the time of his baptism at the age of 30 to the time of his death at the age of about 33. "He went through all the towns and villages" of Palestine. I imagine he went through towns like Oxford. Those who were responsive to his ministry provided him with room and board. The ministry of Jesus was characterized by three activities: Preaching, teaching, and healing.

First, Jesus preached the good news of God's rule. Jesus didn't speculate about God. He talked about God as one whom he knew intimately. Jesus spoke of God with authority, calling all people to trust in God. God is like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home. This kind of preaching attracted people who felt forsaken and knew themselves to be prodigals.

The mission of our church and of each one of us is to tell others about this God, to share the good news of who God is. Our job is not to condemn, to put down, to judge but to proclaim good news that God is at hand and that ~~he~~^{God} wants us to share in God's kingdom. We need to learn how to share *verbally* the good news of God's kingdom. We need, not only to practice what we preach, but to preach what we practice.

Second, Jesus was a teacher. He taught in the synagogues. The Presbyterian Church, from the beginning, has placed a great emphasis on education. When John Knox reformed the church in Scotland he wanted a school to be built beside every parish church. Catechisms were written to help people, young and old, learn the basic facts of the Christian faith. Colleges and Universities were founded. Let's never forget that Lincoln

University was founded by a former pastor of this Church in the 1850s because of his concern for Christian education. And yet today denominational leaders lament how little the average Presbyterian knows about the bible and about our rich theological heritage which has so much to offer the church and world at large. The ministry of Jesus was a teaching ministry. That must remain one of our priorities.

Third, Jesus healed people. He healed every disease and sickness. The Gospel which Jesus brought didn't stop at words; it was translated into deeds. The ministry of Jesus was a ministry of healing and that, also, must be a priority that we regain.

Jesus had compassion on the sick and for those in the grip of demons. He couldn't see a sufferer without longing to ease the pain. The sight of tired and hungry crowds filled him with compassion. The sight of a leper, banished from society, filled him with compassion. He looked at the crowds with compassion.

I saw somebody recently with a pin on her lapel which said, "~~Don't feel bad~~, I've already forgotten your name too." So often I'll be introduced to somebody and immediately forget their name. I think Jesus remembered peoples' names. When he looked at the crowds he saw individuals. He saw a widow whose only son had died. He saw the short little tax-collector, Zacchaeus, hiding in a tree and called him by name. He ^{felt} ~~noticed~~ the mere touch of a woman. He saw where a person was hurting and healed the wounds, whether they were physical, emotional or spiritual.

It's so easy to look at crowds of suffering people without compassion because we see so much violence on the television that we become numb. I remember the dark days of the Viet Nam war. Each night the body count would be listed, so many hundreds of soldiers killed. It didn't really mean too much to me until one day a friend said to me, "Did you hear about Jim

Parmelee. He stepped on a land mine. They say he lived for several hours before he died. Jim Parmelee was a star football player at Wheaton and graduated with an ROTC commission as a First Lieutenant in the army. He married his college sweetheart and went off to Viet Nam where, weeks later, he died. That night when the body count was given I didn't hear statistics. I saw the face of Jim Parmelee and his wife. I felt compassion for his family. Jesus, I believe, saw individuals with all their hurts and needs when he looked at the crowds and, like Jesus, the church, and every member, is called to a ministry of compassion.

Jesus especially had compassion for the weak, the poor and the powerless. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless."

^{2 know what it feels like to be harassed}
^ When I was in 8th grade I'd go into Newark with friends to the dance at the Century Club. At intermission I'd often go out to the Chuck Wagon on the Kirkwood Pike with friends. But I had to run a gauntlet. For some reason some members of a Newark club called the Stockers didn't like me. They harassed me. They taunted me. They tried to get me to fight. Now when it comes to fighting I've always basically been a coward. I never gave in to their harassment even when they pushed me around, not because of my Christian character, but because I was chicken. I just didn't want to get the stuffing kicked out of me. I remember once running away from a gang of these yahoos and hiding in a garbage can for about a half-hour until I could no longer hear them. It was humiliating. It was debasing. The people Jesus had compassion on were like me but worse, harassed and helpless.

A couple weeks ago, Ted Turner, who has his own Cable network, was quoted as saying that "Christianity is a religion for losers." What an uproar that caused among some groups of Christians. He was forced to

apologize. I found the whole thing ironic because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so easily distorted. Christianity has, in fact, become the religion of winners. Look around. We are basically the winners. Most of us have jobs, family, status, security, health insurance, a home. But I think that Turner was more right then, perhaps, he knew. The ministry of Jesus was most affective with losers. He drew to him losers like the woman of Samaria who had lost seven husbands, or like Mary Magdalene who had lost her reputation.

It concerns me that our churches have been most successful ministering to people like ourselves who have family and jobs and security. We minister best to middle-class families. I'm glad we do- but I'm concerned to learn how to minister to the harassed and helpless. ^{There are so many.} I'm concerned to have more of the compassion of Jesus.

The risen and ascended Christ continues to have compassion ^{on} harassed and helpless people. Just as Jesus chose twelve disciples to share his ministry, the risen and ascended Christ calls women and men to share his ministry today. The Risen Christ says to us this morning, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." If you're a member of this church, or of any Christian church, God has called you to share the ministry of Christ.

I'm a maker of lists. I have all kinds of lists. I'll share just a few of the ministries I'd like to see happen in the coming years: A singles ministry, initiated and led by a single person. A divorce recovery work-shop initiated and led by a divorced person. An Hispanic ministry. A Habitat for Humanity home built. A group of people, maybe as many as a hundred, who'd be willing to attend a crash course on visiting, and who'd call on every member of our congregation twice a year just to listen. A

prayer ministry where we'd learn to prayer together and for one another. Someone who has skills in marketing and journalism who could design a brochure to send to every new family in the community. A missions conference. A mission project in which young and old might participate in by traveling to Kentucky or Haiti or some other place where our church is involved in mission. An adult educational ministry in which as many adults as are in worship would become involved to study the Bible, our Confessions, our history, and the issues that Christ wants us to address in the world today. A new church building that will expand our ministries to congregation and community.

If you're a Christian God has called you to a ministry. Whether you're quiet or outspoken, conservative or liberal, young or old, male or female God - has called you to share in the ministry of Christ and to minister to others. If you're a Christian, you're a minister. The Christian faith is not made up of spectators listening to professionals and it's not for individuals who're seeking, primarily, to save their own souls. It's made up of persons who're called to serve as representatives of Christ in the world and to serve means to minister.

The ordinary Christian is a minister in the factory, the office, the store, the legislative halls. If you plumbers and school teachers and salespeople are to discover and practice your ministry seven days a week, you need a vast amount of instruction. You need to know how to minister with the compassion of Christ to the person whose mother is dying of cancer, and you need to be able to teach your fellow worker who would like to pray but doesn't know how to begin. You need to be so familiar with the Bible that you can give guidance, on the spot, to the individual who's baffled by the opening chapters of Genesis. You need to be clear enough in your own faith that you can both appreciate the problem of the person who

doubts the miracles of the New Testament and provide answers in the light of a reasonable faith.

I like what our Brief Statement of Faith says about Christ's ministry and ours.

"The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,
engages us through the Word proclaimed,
claims us in the waters of baptism,
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.
In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'

One man at the General Assembly made an unforgettable comment. He said, "We love to sing the old gospel song *Standing on the Promises* but too many of us are sitting on the premises." Standing on the promises while sitting on the premises! Jesus has promised us so many things, forgiveness, eternal life. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us. We're glad to claim those promises. But God has called all of us who claim those promises to share in the ministry of Christ.

Let us pray: Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and fore ever. Amen.