

Confessing Christ

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 5, 1995, the first Sunday in Lent. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13.

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

G.K. Chesterton wrote a story about a man who woke up one morning not knowing who he was. He looks at the picture of his wife on the bedstand. "Who is she?" "Why am I here?" He gets up, dresses - but doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know where to go. "What should I be doing?" "Do I have a job?" "Where is it?" "What is it?" "Do I have children?" "How old are they?" "Where are they?"

His predicament is resolved only as he hears and believes and confesses the story of who he is. His family lead him to a large dinner table - a family whom he doesn't know - he has no memory of them. They sit for hours and eat and talk. They tell him stories. "I remember when you were a little boy..." "I remember your grandparents, they came to this country from Italy. They were poor. They couldn't speak English." They show him photographs. They sing songs. His friends and loved ones tell him stories - and eventually he comes to know who he is. He rediscovers his purpose in life.

~~We don't know who we are unless we're told. We need to be constantly reminded of who we are. We forget so easily. But not every story that we hear tells us the true story of who we are. There are many false stories. We need to reject false stories of who we are. We believe that the Bible - the Gospel - contains the true story of who we are.~~ If we want to know who we are - if we want to know what our purpose in life is - we need to be told - we need to hear the story of the Bible. We need to hear the story of Jesus Christ in the Gospel.

The Old Testament people of God recited this story when they came to worship.

5 "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7 we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our

affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me."

Notice, for one thing, that we can't say who we are without reference to God. We know who we are in relation to the living God - the God who heard our cries - who saw our affliction - who brought us out of slavery - the place we are today. But this story tells us more. It tells us that we were wanderers. As we listen to these stories we know how it feels to be afflicted and oppressed. We know what it means to be immigrants in a strange land. This story shapes our attitudes and reactions to others who are oppressed.

Notice, for another thing, that this confession of faith is not a personal testimony. A personal testimony tells the story of a solitary individual. ~~Evangelical Christians are known for personal testimonies.~~ A personal testimony tells the story of how Christ became real in our lives? It's important for us to be able to tell our personal story of our relationship to Christ. Try to put into clear and concise words what God, in Christ, has done for you? Find a friend with whom you can share your spiritual journey. Tell your stories to each other. As you tell your own personal story you begin to get a better understanding of who you are and why you're here.

Personal testimonies are important. But there's one danger about personal testimonies. Personal testimonies are extremely individualistic. Personal testimonies can give the impression that Christianity is simply a personal relationship with Christ. Personal testimonies can give the impression that we don't need the church, we don't need the sacraments. All we need is a personal relationship with Christ.

But notice that the confession of faith God's people recited is more than a

personal testimony. ~~It's a family testimony. It's a corporate testimony.~~ It's the recitation of a history of a people. The confession of faith relates the individual worshiper to people and events that happened long ago.

We've come to this worship service to learn who we are. ~~Our ancestors were wanderers. Our ancestors came from Europe. They came from Africa. They came from Asia and South America. All of us have ancestors who were, at one time, oppressed. God's hand was in the wandering of our ancestors.~~ We're here this morning because thousands of years ago the Lord God acted in the lives of our wandering ancestors. He heard their cries. ~~He sent apostles and missionaries to them. They heard the story. They cried out to the Lord and were saved. They confessed Christ as Lord with their lips. They believed in their hearts that God raised him from the dead.~~ Were it not for that great cloud of witnesses we wouldn't be here this morning.

When I'm in danger of forgetting who I am I come to a worship service. I offer my gift and come to the communion table. I tear off a piece of bread and take a sip of wine in holy communion to reopen my memory lifeline to an immense family. I feel at times that the ancient Jews become my family. The apostles and martyrs become my family. The orthodox in Russia become my family. The Catholics in Poland become my family. The Pentecostals in Brazil become my family. The wretched of the earth become my family. Remembering that we belong to this spiritual family helps us to know who we are and where we're going.

O Lord God, you let your people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. So guide us, that, following our Savior, we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.