

Denial Is Not A River In Egypt

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, February 23, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38.

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

A brief news article caught my eye last week. It said the t.v. actress, Rosanne Arnold, attended Elizabeth Taylor's birthday gala dressed up like "Cleopatra, the Queen of Denial." The title of my sermon suddenly came to me, "Denial is not a river in Egypt."

When we hear the word, "denial", today, Christians are more likely to think of a river in Egypt than one of the chief characteristics of the Christian life. Self-denial has been all but dropped from the Christian vocabulary. I can think of two reasons why we don't hear much about self-denial from the pulpit now-a-days. One reason is that most Presbyterian ministers get ~~paid pretty well. We're as much a part of our modern day American~~ consumer society as our parishioners are. How can a minister who owns a house, three cars, three t.v.s, two VCRs, and a dog talk seriously about self-denial? I feel the irony of preaching on self-denial. Who am I to preach about self-denial?

There's another reason why we don't hear about self-denial anymore. Self-denial can be self-destructive. Mary Pipher, writing in her best selling book, Reviving Ophelia, presents case studies of adolescent girls who suffer from the destructive results of self-denial in the form of anorexia. Anorexia is an eating disorder in which, young women especially, become obsessed with thinness. "Anorexic girls" she writes, "are great at self-denial."

Take Samantha for example. Samantha was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed ninety-nine pounds. She used to be a cheerful and

peppy girl before she became anorexic. Now she rarely smiled. She became irritable and lethargic. She was a straight A student, a cheerleader, and she was popular with her classmates but, her mother said, "She doesn't enjoy those things like she used to." What triggered her anorexia? Her boyfriend teased her about her thighs. He broke up with her. He wanted someone thinner. So with great discipline, and in order to regain his approval and the approval of our culture which places so much value on thinness, Samantha began to deny herself food. She became an expert in self-denial. Self-denial can take on destructive forms. But Jesus does not call us to self destruction. Rather he calls us to place limits on our self-destructive consumption.

Our Gospel lesson comes at a watershed in the public ministry of Jesus. This incident is usually referred to as the first 'prediction of the passion'. Jesus "began to teach that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly."

He spoke openly to his disciples. He wanted to make it absolutely clear that God's messiah must suffer. Peter rebuked Jesus for talking about suffering and rejection. Peter had what we call today a "health and wealth Gospel." Peter believed that God's Messiah must be a success in the eyes of the world. Like many people today, Peter couldn't understand how a good person should have to suffer. But Jesus rebuked Peter in strong language. "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And then Jesus "called the crowd with his

disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'"

Self-denial is one the chief characteristics of a follower of Jesus. Jesus wasn't an ascetic. Self-denial in and of itself had no value for him. Jesus enjoyed eating and drinking and was, in fact, condemned for it. But when push came to shove Jesus always did what was right rather than what was expedient. He did what was right rather than what was popular. Followers of Jesus continue his ministry today despite the rejection we might receive.

For example, Peter and Mary, took seriously their decision to join their church. They began to participate in an adult Sunday school class dealing with the call of Jesus to deny ourselves. They learned that with 6 percent of the world's population our country consumes well over 40 percent of the world's available resources. On the way home from worship, Mary asked, "How does what Jesus says about self-denial relate to this?"

Next week in their Sunday School class they listened to how Ed responded to Christ's call to self-denial. Ed was a patriotic American. He was certainly no pacifist but thirty years ago he worked in a factory where napalm was being manufactured. He studied the horrible effects of napalm on its victims, especially on children. He came to the conclusion that he could not follow Christ and participate in the manufacturing of napalm. He quit his lucrative job and took a job that paid much less. He denied himself in order to follow Jesus.

A young mother in the class shared how following Jesus led her to stop buying infant formula. The company that sold the formula

was marketing their product in poor third world countries where unsanitary water used to mix the formula contributed to the death of infants. She said she was willing to deny herself the convenience if it could save one third world baby.

Another man in the class was an avid golfer. He began to take his Christian faith seriously in the midst of the civil rights conflict of the sixties. He had belonged to an exclusive all white country club at the time. He used what influence he had to encourage the club to change their policy but he was met only with angry stares. Finally, he wrote an open letter to the newspaper politely explaining his resignation from the country club. He lost some friends. But he felt that he couldn't really follow Jesus without denying himself that luxury.

As Peter and John participated in the life of the church through their Sunday School class they began to realize that self-denial is so much more than giving up chocolate and ice-cream during lent. Self-denial is a life long requirement for all of us who follow Jesus. In an affluent society such as we live in, self-denial is a life long struggle against the principalities and power of this world that tell us that our value is found in how much we possess or how thin and beautiful we are. Our value is found in belonging to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Great God, whose Son Jesus came as a servant among us: control our wants and restrain our ambitions, so that we may deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.