

Food for the Hungry

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on February 4, 1990, the 5th Sunday after Epiphany. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 58:3-9a; Psalm 112:4-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-11; Matthew 5:13-16.

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

zZbBzzbB

Weary travelers see the lights shining in a city set on a hill and say to themselves, "There's food. There's shelter. There's protection from rain and cold and highway robbers." A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden.

In seventeenth century New England, the Pilgrim fathers and mothers saw the church of Jesus Christ as a city set upon a hill, visibly displaying to all the world the truth of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. They were participants in a holy experiment. They hoped that the church in the New World would display, as never before, the new society Jesus came to inaugurate. They believed that membership in the body of Christ could provide a model of community that would knit individuals together in mutual support in the new world. This new Christian community was based on an obligation binding on everybody in that community of love and concern for others.

Today many Christians don't share that vision, which goes all the way back to Jesus, of the church as a city set upon a hill. Many people feel that their religious faith is a private thing, just between them and Jesus. Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus. The New England founders would certainly would agree with that but they would've been quick to add that a relationship with Jesus automatically creates relationships and obligations with others inside and outside the church. One ordinarily can't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ without having a personal relationship with the Church which is the Body of Christ.

Robert Bellah's book, Habits of the Heart, tells about the growth of individualism and the decline of commitment in American Life. In that

book he interviewed a woman name Sheila. Sheila Larson is a young nurse who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." In defining Sheilaism she said, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself."

"Sheilism", writes Bellah, has become representative of much of Christianity in the U.S. The trend, he says, is for every individual in the U.S. to have their own religion a religion without any obligations other than to the self.

We've come a long way in America from the Pilgrim vision of the Body of Christ as a city set upon a hill. This rugged individualism makes it very difficult for American Christians to understand the Bible. So much of what Jesus says in the New Testament is directed, not to isolated individuals, but to individuals in groups, to individuals in the Church. And so much of the entire Bible presupposes that God's people have a public responsibility. Christ calls individuals into a personal relationship with him that incorporates them into a community of faith which carries out the work of God in the world. Part of the work of the church, and its individual members, is, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke... to share our bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our houses; to clothe the naked and not to hide ourselves from our own flesh".

Someone has said, "The Christian church is the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of its nonmembers." Christ calls us into his Church not simply that we might be ministered unto and spiritually fed, but that we might carry on his ministry in the world.

"I have come not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it" Jesus said. We know that we're not put right with God by obeying God's laws. Rather, Jesus saves us, apart from works, apart from obedience to the law. A Christian seeks to obey the law of God out of gratitude for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ.

What prompts Christians to respond to the needs of the oppressed, hungry, and homeless is God's love? God's love sets us free to care deeply about others, so when their need confronts us, we act. But if our faith and love are genuine, we'll want that action to do more than make *us* feel good or bestow temporary relief. We'll want our action to deal with their need as effectively as possible. Grounding our ethic in the Gospel, we affirm for others a right that we enjoy: the right to food, the right to a home, the right to be free from oppression. We want the hungry, the homeless, and the oppressed to overcome a situation that flagrantly violates their humanity.

But where do we begin? There are all sorts of ways that we can begin to follow Jesus in his ministry to the hungry and homeless. For example, the confirmation class is going up to Philadelphia this afternoon to participate in Trevor's run by helping to feed the homeless. Nearly six years ago, an 11-year old boy named Trevor Ferrell... someone who knew what "home" really meant... dared to ask a question so many of us avoid: "Why?" Why *do* people have to live out on the street, homeless and hungry? Trevor's Campaign for the homeless was the answer- a young boy's clear vision and direct action.

Through the efforts of hundreds of volunteers, Trevor's Campain brings food every night of the year to people still living on the streets. Since 1984, *Trevor's Place*, which used to be an old rooming house, has offered temporary shelter for up to 40 homeless people.

There are other ways in which we can begin to express our gratitude to Christ for our salvation. I know a man in our congregation who invites hungry people to dinner from time to time. Some of you may open your homes to a refugee or to someone who is homeless. As a boy I can remember several occasions when my parents opened our home to homeless people.

If we have children we can place before them role models and heroes and Christian values. Who are the heroes we place before our children to emulate? What are the kinds of jobs we try to influence our children towards? Do we dream only that our children will be successful financially? Or do we tell them stories of men and women who live full happy fulfilled lives in the service of others. Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer, St. Francis of Assisi... people who know who they are... who know that they're loved by God... who know that Jesus has died for them... who know that Jesus looks upon them as the salt of the earth to preserve the world from decay and to add flavor to all of life.

How do we communicate to our children that we sincerely believe that the purpose of life is not to earn more money... but to serve and to use whatever resources God has given... money, talents, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to set free the oppressed, to share our bread with the hungry and open our homes to the homeless?

There are other ways for us to become personally involved in ministry to the hungry, homeless, and oppressed. Many people are retiring early, at the age of 55. Have you ever considered retiring early and then volunteering to serve the Lord, within the church, in Appalachia or an Indian Reservation or in a some third world country?

I have a dream for our church. I believe that every one of us has a Christian calling, a distinctive ministry. Like Mother Teresa in Calcutta,

each one of us has a place with his or her name on it where God's people are hurting. If we hear the call of Christ and respond, He will send us, with joy and abandon, to lift burdens and to liberate people.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Notice, he didn't say, "Give me this day my daily bread." He said *us*. He said *our* bread. This means that every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray for the more than 500 million people who don't have enough food. Well fed people who know the Lord and who pray the Lord's Prayer are obligated to reach out to the hungry millions, both those who are close to us as well as those far away.

Let us pray: For all who are starving, O God, we ask your saving grace. Move us personally to ask what it is we can do to become involved in the work of Christ. Move the governments of the world to plan wisely and generously for the long term relief of all such chronic injustice, and strengthen and inspire all whose lives are spent in bringing food to people maimed by hunger; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of the People

bB Lord God, your eyes are open day and night watching over us; your ears are always ready to listen to our prayers. We have come to worship you. We come as sinners, in need of your forgiveness. We come tired from our work, in need of refreshment and recreation. We come with worries, in need of your guidance. But first, please lift us out of our preoccupation with our own needs. Allow us to see you with the yes of faith, and to hear with understanding what you say to us. Make us thankful for all the good we have received from you. Awaken in us a longing to do what is right. And make us aware of the great company, past, present and to come, with whom we join to worship you.

Father, you do not create us to live alone and you have not made us all alike. We thank you for our families and we pray for them. By all we do and say help us to build up the faith and confidence of those we love. When we quarrel, help us to forgive quickly. Help us to welcome new members into our families without reserve, and not to neglect those who in our yes have become less interesting or more demanding.

We pray for the places where we work, that there we may be workmen who have no need to be ashamed. We ask to be reliable rather than successful, worthy of trust rather than popular. Whether those we work with be many or few, may we help to give them the sense that they are personally wanted and cared for.

We pray for this community to which we belong, that we may be good citizens. Make us willing to accept responsibility for it. Grant that our influence as a church and as individuals in this town be good and not evil.

And we pray for those who are oppressed in any way, for the homeless, for the hungry and especially for those whom we know who are sick, hospitalised, or suffering in mind or body. We pray for the doubting and for the unbelieving. May we, as individuals and as a church, point them to Christ their Savior.

And now as Christ our Savior has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...