

For the Life of the World

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 7, 1994. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51.

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

Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." As a young boy I believed in Jesus. I had an assured faith in Christ. But in my teen years my faith in Christ became less certain.

I particularly remember an event that shook my faith when I was around 15. My dad was in his late sixties. He had what today is called *Alzheimer's Disease*. He was like a little child my mother had to care for. She fed him. She took him to the bathroom. She bathed him - like a baby. One summer afternoon there was a knock on the front door. It was a preacher whom I'd never seen before. He said he heard about my dad. He expressed absolute confidence that if we truly believed we'd see my dad healed. He asked if he could place his hands on my father's head and pray for him to be healed. My mother agreed. I remember feeling hope and doubt, and, then, guilt for feeling the doubt. The preacher prayed and left and we never saw him again. My dad wasn't healed.

I wondered, "Is it my fault dad hasn't been healed? Do I, in fact, believe in Christ? Maybe I just have intellectual faith and not saving faith. Maybe I've never come to Christ."

That thought led immediately to fear. "Jesus said, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.'" Jesus said that to religious people

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who ~~couldn't~~ believe in Jesus. Maybe I'm like them- Religious in that I go to church and believe that Jesus existed and is the Son of God and Savior, but maybe I don't really believe with my heart. Maybe I don't believe because I can't believe - because God the Father has not drawn me to Christ. Maybe God has rejected me." Have you ever had that kind of fear? Rejection always hurts; whether the rejection comes from a parent or a lover or a friend. But what can be more terrible than to fear that God has rejected you?

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." How those words of Jesus use to torment me. But I've come to believe that Jesus didn't say these words to create anxiety concerning God's gracious will toward us. Rather, he wants us to know that we're not naturally drawn to Christ. We're not like moths naturally drawn to a candle. The word which John uses for *to draw* is **the word** used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament when Jeremiah hears God say, "With loving kindness have I drawn you." The word always implies some kind of resistance. It's the word for drawing a heavily laden fishing net to the shore. It's the word used of Paul and Silas being dragged before the magistrates in Philippi.¹ ^{John 12:32} Always there's this idea of resistance.

So Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." Jesus said that recognizing that we naturally resist coming to God through Jesus Christ. We may be naturally religious. Human beings are, in fact, incurably religious. We may naturally believe in a Supreme Being. Nearly everybody believes in some kind of God. But we're not naturally drawn to Christ as the only One who

brings to us the life of God.

We must be taught by God, Jesus says. “‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.” We don’t naturally come to God through Christ. We must be taught. We must listen and learn. But how does this happen? I believe it happens, primarily, within the Church and among the people of God. That is why the church, the institutional church, the Presbyterian Church is so important to me in my coming to Christ.

God teaches us through the preaching of the Word and through the Sacraments and as we listen and learn we are drawn to Christ. For example, God taught me as I read and listened to the Bible in home. God also taught me through Rev. Auffarth’s preaching at the Presbyterian Church in Newark. I didn’t always understand. I didn’t always agree. I didn’t always listen carefully. But some of *what God taught me through the preaching of the Word got through to me and it drew me to Christ.*

And God taught me through Mr. Saadeh, my high school youth leader. He listened quietly as I shared with him my fears and doubts about God and my questions about such things as evolution and miracles.

And God taught me through the broader church, through men and women of earlier ages. For example, God taught me as I read and listened to what St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*. He told the story of how God drew him, after years of searching, to Christ. And God taught me as I read and listened to C.S. Lewis, particularly his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, which spoke of his

longing for joy and beauty and how God had drawn him, despite his resistance, to Christ.

And God taught me as I listened to Fyodor Dostoevsky, especially in his novel, *Crime and Punishment*, which tells the story of Raskolnikov, an impoverished university student who brutally murdered an elderly woman, and how the love of Sonia, a prostitute, drew him eventually to repentance and faith in Christ. And as I listened and learned from him I came to see a smile on Christ's face directed at me.

So through the Church - the church of today and the church of yesterday God taught me and as I listen and learned I have come more and more to trust in Christ and to believe in God's gracious will for each one of us. It's a frightening thing for me to try to imagine God's will apart from Jesus Christ. But we don't have to imagine what God's will is. God's will is revealed in Jesus Christ who said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." God, in Christ, wills to give himself for the life of the world.

God's will is not something that's universally known by everybody simply because we're human beings. God is a person who has revealed himself in and through one particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian Jew. To him the Old and New Testaments of the Bible bear witness. Let me illustrate what I mean.

I was outside on a starry night with a friend looking through a telescope. My

friend is a good man who believes in a supreme being, a creator god - but, as far as I can tell, he feels that it's rather narrow-minded to think that God's will can be known only through a particular human being born 2000 years ago - born long before the major scientific discoveries that have transformed our world. He looked through his telescope at the planet Saturn with its rings and then he turned to me and said, "Look! This is so amazing! How can anybody look at the stars and not believe in god?"

I agreed but I found myself asking silently, "Yes, but what god? What can these stars tell us about God? The stars can't tell us if god is friend or foe. We can easily infer from the stars that god is not even aware of our existence and may simply be indifferent to us. But in Jesus of Nazareth, the Creator of the starry universe has become a human being. Through Jesus we know a God who *loved* the world so much that he entered into it, and was willing to live among us as a human being. Through Jesus Christ we know a God who has experience what it's like to be tired and hungry, sorrowful and lonely. Through Christ we know a God who has experienced what it's like to be betrayed, unjustly condemned, insulted, crucified and buried.

Through Christ we believe in a God who is a waiting Father, a God who prepares a feast for his prodigal sons and daughters when we return home. Through Christ we believe in a God who searches for the lost like a woman searching for her lost coin, who does not give up until she finds it. Through Christ we believe in a God who is a shepherd who goes looking for lost sheep and does not

return home until that sheep is found. God's gracious will for lost and unbelieving, doubting men and women is revealed in Christ.

A great many people use the word "god" as though that word means the same thing to everybody. But this simply isn't so. When Christians use the word, they really mean - the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God is one particular kind of God and not any other god. We believe that the way to God is through Jesus Christ, in whom and through whom he has shown himself to us. After the resurrection the disciples of Jesus found that, whenever they thought of God, they were thinking of Jesus Christ, and that, whenever they thought of Jesus Christ, they were thinking of God.

Jesus said, "No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father." Jesus is the One who has come down from heaven, who is **from God**. Only Jesus has seen the father. Only he can reveal who God is to us. Everything that we need to know about God is present and visible in Jesus Christ.

And Jesus says, "He who believes has eternal life." We know that we will all die. We read about people dieing every day. Loved ones die. We, too, will one day die. Death, our own death and the death of our dearest loved ones, is a fact which we must take into account. We must not deny the reality of death. But Jesus speaks of eternal life which the death of the body can't touch and which is the gift of the living God. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which will give for the life of the world."

Eternal life is a gift. It's not something that we all possess simply by the fact that we're human, as though some part of us is naturally immortal. This life, eternal life, depends on God who, in Christ, gave his flesh for the life of the world. This new life is not something that comes to us only after death; it's a gift that we may have now in this life, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth once said, "Eternal life is man's life when God has spoken his 'yes' upon it, once for all, unconditionally and unreservedly.... Eternal life is man's life lived with God, in his bright light, nourished and sustained by his own life. Eternal life is man's life committed to the service of God and thereby to the service of the neighbour.... Eternal life is the *free gift* of God."

All that remains for us is to accept, and to take to heart that this is, in fact, so. God's free gift is eternal life. Free Bread. "If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Amen.

Let us pray: Grant, O Lord, that we may see in you the fulfillment of all our need, and may turn from every false satisfaction to feed on the true and living bread which you have given us in Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.