

Paul & Valerie
Walden

For the Life of the World - Part 2

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 7, 1994. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Psalm 111; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58.

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

Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." Let's think about what Jesus said long ago to those ancient Jews. Let's listen to what he, the Risen Christ, says to us this morning and apply it to our lives.

In a few weeks I'll be a half century old. According to actuarial statistics I passed life's midway point about 15 years ago. Although life can end at any moment, statistically I'm now about two-thirds through. I've been on the down hill slope for years. When I get my alumni magazine from Princeton or Wheaton I turn first to the obituaries and count how many younger people than I have died. So far the number of people who are older greatly outnumber those who are younger. But each year there's a slight shift. Every once in a while the name of someone from my class appears, someone I know, giving me pause, reminding me of my mortality. I know I'm going to die. I'm trying to deal with that reality. I don't want to stick my head in the sand. I don't want to pretend that it's not going to happen. I'm trying to plan for that certainty.

How do I prepare for death? I've written down instructions about my funeral. I've chosen hymns, Scripture lessons, and made other arrangements so that this doesn't fall, all of a sudden, on Kay's lap - presupposing that she outlives me. I've decided whether to be buried or cremated. I've told Kay and others that if I am terminally ill that I don't want heroic efforts taken to prolong dying. I've given

thought to what to do with all my stuff. I believe that faith in Christ requires this kind of planning for the certainty of death. Faith in the Risen Christ and faith in his promise of eternal life enable us to face death, our death, and not deny it.

Now, I don't want to die. I love life even though life includes suffering as well as joy. I love the hymn, "For the Beauty of the Earth". One stanza goes:

For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth, and friends above,
For all gentle thoughts and mild,
Lord of all, to Thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

I love this world. I can affirm what Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in one of poems.

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists, that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with colour!

I not only love life, I don't expect to die for many years. I hope to live a long healthy life. I'd like to see my children graduate, perhaps get married. I'd like to celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary when I'm 81. After I retire I'd like to be a volunteer in mission on some impoverished Caribbean Island where the temperature doesn't go below 50 or above 80. So I have not only planned for death, I've planned for a long life. But I realize that death doesn't usually come on schedule. Death doesn't always come at the end of life. I want to be ready if death should come today or tomorrow.

I don't understand why so many people don't make plans for death. I don't understand why so many people seem to deny the inevitability of death and the

reality of death. I especially don't understand why so many Christians who trust in Christ don't plan for death and don't like to talk about death.

When people do talk about death most say, "I'm not afraid of death. It's dying that frightens me." But dying should not frighten us. I've stood by the death beds of many people, young and old. Nearly always, dying is much more difficult and frightening for those of us who remain than for those who are dying. Modern medicine makes most pain unnecessary. Usually a dying person drifts off into a deep sleep or into a coma. There's little indication of pain or discomfort. Dying is not something to fear.

But death itself - that's another story. In fact, I frankly don't understand why so many people say that they don't fear death. The Bible says that death is an enemy, the king of terrors. Should we *not* fear such a fearsome and powerful enemy? I myself fear death at times. I'm not afraid of dying, but sometimes I fear death.

Fear is not bad. Many of us think that fear *is* bad, but it's not. Without fear there's no courage. A soldier that goes into battle without fear is a fool. But when a soldier, fearing death, says "no" to those fears, and goes into battle he's being courageous. Fear is what makes courage possible. And people who face death without fear, without any fear or anxiety, must be fools! My guess is that people who don't fear death are really denying death and what the Bible says about death. But the Risen Christ enables us to admit our fear of death. The Risen Christ enables us to prepare for our inevitable death. The Risen Christ enables us to face our fear

of death with courage.

Apart from faith in Christ, I fear death. I fear there's nothing after death. Nothing! John Donne, a great and honest Christian poet wrote,

I have a fear of death, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore.

I can identify with that fear. When I let go of Christ, the Risen Christ, I have a fear that when I die I'll simply return to the dust. Apart from the promise of the risen Christ I fear that there's *nothing* after death. I'll simply die and my body will return to the earth: "earth to earth, dust to dust, ashes to ashes". The Old Testament, Job, expressed this fear when he wrote,

At least there is hope for a tree: if it is cut down, it will sprout again... But man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more... If a man dies, will he live again?

So I'm not sure what people mean when they say, "I'm not afraid of death." When a person say, "I don't fear death" do they mean, "I believe that life goes on automatically"? That's certainly not a Christian belief. There's nothing in the Bible that gives us any indication that life goes on automatically. Jesus tells us, quite frankly, that eternal life is not automatic. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood," he says, "you have no life in you."

We are *not*, by nature, immortal. Eternal life doesn't come to us automatically. Eternal life comes as a gift of God's grace. Eternal life is made possible only by the death of Christ who gave his flesh for the life of the world. Eternal life is not something that comes automatically. Christ promises that we shall live forever, not because we're naturally immortal, but because we have fed

on him, the Living Bread. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.... I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.... the one who feeds on me will live because of me."

Our hope of eternal life, then, is not based on human optimism. It's not based on analogies from nature - like the flowers blooming in the Spring after having hibernated all winter. Our hope of eternal life isn't based on butterflies emerging from a shroud like cocoons. Our hope of eternal life is baseless unless it's based on the promise of the Risen Christ.

Notice that Jesus talks about the necessity of eating the Bread of Life. "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever... unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. The one who feeds on me will live because of me."

Bread is something that we eat. We don't just talk about it when we're hungry, we don't just admire it on the shelves in the grocery store. We eat it. We have to feed on it, chew it, swallow it, digest it, assimilate it until it becomes part of our own flesh and blood. It's not enough to talk about Christ or admire him or even simply attend worship services or even believe that he's the Savior. We have to feed on Christ. We have to chew on his teaching, swallow what he says, ruminate

on his words and life, absorb his teaching, his character, his ways and his spirit. We have to assimilate his life and teaching until he lives in us and through us - until his mind thinks in our mind and we look at the world through his eyes and he controls our hands and feet and lips.

My great desire is that we hunger and thirst for Jesus Christ. There've been times when the smell of food has triggered my sense of hunger. I have not been thinking of food but then I walk into the house on a cold winter's day and smell bread baking - and, all of a sudden - I'm hungry. Friends, I so much want the worship service to be like that. I want so much for the worship service to give ~~you~~^{us} a sense of ~~your~~ hunger and thirst for Christ, to awaken ~~you~~^{us} to ~~your~~ hunger for Christ. The worship service, in and of itself, can't satisfy our hunger. Only God can satisfy our hungry through Christ.

In a few weeks we'll celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. When we receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion what ~~you~~^{we} receive is only a tiny piece of bread dipped in juice. It will not satisfy you if you're hungry or thirsty, but that's not what it's designed to do. Still, these elements may awaken us to recognize that longing... to feel the hunger with us not for what he gives but for him... *for himself*. In Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection, God gives us, not just bread and wine, he gives us himself. We take the bread and the cup, knowing that we will never be filled, never be satisfied, until he's living in us and we're living in him.

Let us pray: Ever-loving God, your Son, Jesus Christ, gave himself as living bread for the life of the world. Give us such a knowledge of his presence that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life to serve you continually; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in unity with the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.