

Gaining Through Losing

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, to the congregation of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on June 11, 1989, the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church. Scripture Lessons: Job 1:6-12; Psalm 91; Philippians 3:4-15; John 15:1-5.

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

St. Paul, in our Epistle lesson, talks about forgetting those things which are behind us, but so often we hear the biblical command, "Do not forget! Remember!" Before we can forget, we need to remember. That's part of the grieving process. I feel that's what I've needed to do this past week. I've looked through our pictorial directory... at the pictures of the organ pipes and the sanctuary and the Sunday School rooms. I've been remembering the Christmas Eve services. The candle lit sanctuary... the smell of pine needles and melted wax... the choir processing, singing, "Once in Royal David's City..." or "O Come all ye faithful". I've been remembering the wonderful children's choir presentations when the pulpit was pulled out and the young people proclaimed the gospel in song... the story of Noah and the Ark... the story of Adam and Eve... the story of Jonah and how God delivered him from the belly of the big fish.

I remember how, when I was feeling overwhelmed, I'd sometimes retreat into the sanctuary and just sit there. I'd sit and read the names and dates on the stained glass windows and feel the peace and the presence of the saints. Sometimes I'd stand in the pulpit and think, "This is probably the pulpit that Caspar Wistar Hodge preached from one hundred years ago. From this pulpit the Word of God has been proclaimed for over a hundred years." I'd sit in the pews and think of how for a hundred years the living God has encountered men and women and generations have received the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

Sometimes I'd stand alone behind the Communion Table. Was it behind

this Communion Table that the Dickeys, the Hodges and Dr. Watson stood and broke bread and poured wine? I remember the marble baptismal font and how it was dedicated to the glory of God and to the memory of a child who died at an early age. I remembered how anxious I'd be before a baptism, afraid that I might get there only to discover there was no water. And there at the font I'd dip my hand in the water and pour it on the heads of infants from where it would drip down their baptismal gowns onto the carpet.

I've been doing a lot of remembering these past two weeks. But Paul says, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." I feel like saying to the Apostle Paul, "Come on, Paul, you never really entirely forgot your past anymore than we can. If you'd really forgotten you wouldn't have reminded us with such evident pride how you were circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews and a pharisee." Paul hadn't really blotted those memories from his mind. But he knew that there was a future as well as a present and a past. He knew that God is a living God. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but God is also the God of our children and our as yet unborn grandchildren.

Paul tells us, "Let us hold true to what we have attained." We can't hold true to what we've attained if we don't remember what it is that our ancestors did attain. We have a great heritage in Oxford as Presbyterians. We're the oldest church in the community, dating back to the 1700's, older than this nation. In the center of town... known for our involvement in the life of Oxford, as well as the nation. What fruit this church has produced for nearly 250 years. From this church have come forth moderators of the

General Assembly, missionaries, seminary professors, pastors, community leaders, senators and congressional representatives, Lincoln University, the Neighborhood Services Center, a senior center, a pre-school... not to speak of Christian business men and women, teachers in the public schools, and homemakers.

This church has produced much fruit for the Kingdom of God but our Gospel lesson tells us that God prunes his people so that we'll bear more fruit. What is it that God wants us to accomplish in the next 100 years? What great things God must have for us to do? What's the goal he wants us to press on towards? God restored to Job all his possessions and increased his family two fold. God gave St. Paul a goal that eclipsed his heritage. God has pruned us and I'm convinced that God has fruit for us to bear more plentifully than the fruit this church has produced in its 250 year history. This is as an exciting time as ever to be a minister of this church and I'm so grateful to God for this opportunity.

I think now of another church that was destroyed by fire and how, out of the ashes, a new and more fruitful church arose. In the winter of 1940 the city of Coventry, England was blitzed, and the medieval Cathedral destroyed by fire. Years later a new Coventry Cathedral was consecrated. But three years before the consecration of the new Cathedral ten parish priests met for prayer, Bible study and fellowship. One of them said, "We're faced with the Consecration of our Cathedral in just over three years. I believe this is going to be a great spiritual opportunity?" There was a pause. "An opportunity for what?" someone asked. "How can it be more than a great festival and a blowing of trumpets?" The discussion continued and they very soon came to see that what God wanted wasn't just a consecrated Cathedral, but a consecrated people. And if there was

to be a consecrated people, it would have to begin with themselves.

They decided to meet weekly for breakfast, prayer, Holy Communion and to listen to God's word in the Bible. They asked God, "What does it mean to be a consecrated people? And what, in particular, O Lord, do you want us to do now?" Through this time they began to know and trust one another more deeply. Personality conflicts diminished. Petty jealousies disappeared. They began to be concerned for one another. After a year of this the priests said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if the people in our parishes could come to know one another as we have this past year, and begin to pray with and for one another as we have. So each priest went home and invited people in their congregation into their manses for fellowship, prayer and to listen to the Word of God in Scripture.

Their congregations began to ask, "What is the Church in my parish really for?" "What sort of a Church would my church be if everyone in the Church was just like me?" "What has an organization like our Church got to do with a man dying on a cross?" Of course not everybody in the parishes participated but those who did sensed a deepening Christian fellowship. They began to feel that they, and not the ministers, were the front line soldiers of the Church. They, not the clergy, were the representatives of Christ in the factories, shops, offices, schools and homes of the city. If Christ's compassion was to get into those situations, then they, the lay-people, must be the channels through which it would come. If Christ's truth was to be spoken, then they must speak it.

And they began to learn to pray. One evening the parish priest said to the parishioners gathered in a home, "I'm going to ask you to do something you've probably never done before in your life. To pray out loud, in your own words. We shall wait upon God in silence, and each of us is free to

offer up prayer as we wish." Silence fell, embarrassed, tense- because Anglicans aren't used to this sort of thing anymore than Presbyterians. Then one would pray and the floodgates would open and from all over the room would come prayer from the heart, sometimes expressed in a few halting words, sometimes in the familiar words of the Prayer Book.

These cottage meetings continued nearly two years while the cathedral was being rebuilt. Finally, on the eve of the consecration everybody gathered in the cathedral where the Bishop called upon them to reaffirm their baptismal vows; to renounce Satan, to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as their Lord and Savior, and to be his faithful servants to the end of their lives. Hundreds of people, staid Anglicans, who do things even more decently and orderly than Presbyterians, committed their lives to Christ that night and God had, not only a consecrated cathedral but a consecrated people who began to bear fruit in the city of coventry. People came to offer up to God every part of their daily lives. Industry, agriculture, education, government, the armed forces, youth, old age pensioners and the medical services to mention only a few were revitalized as Christians began to see that every area of their lives belong to Jesus Christ the Lord.

That's what I pray will happen to us. What a great opportunity God has given us, an opportunity unsurpassed for the past 130 years. What a wonderful opportunity to bear witness to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the coming months we'll be making multi-million dollar decisions. What a wonderful opportunity to bear witness to how Christians express differences of opinion and make decisions... how Christians can press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Because make no mistake we will be bearing a

witness. May we be so consecrated and dedicated that the witness we bear may bring honor to the Risen Christ.

In a year, perhaps two, our new church building will have been rebuilt. We'll have a service of dedication. What if our elders were to begin now to meet weekly for breakfast and to ask God, "What is our Presbyterian Church in Oxford really for?" "What sort of a Church would my church be if everyone in the Church was just like me?" "What has an organization like our Church got to do with a man dying on a cross?" What if, throughout our congregation, groups of people were begin to meet, not out of necessity but out of a Godly desire, in various homes to raise those same questions and wait for God to answer?

What if we took the months, perhaps years, leading up to the dedication of our new church as an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? God wants not just a dedicated building but a dedicated people. In the coming months may we gain more of Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of our own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. In the coming months and years may we come to know him and the power of his resurrection and may we, as well, share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible we may attain the resurrection from the dead. Amen.