

God the Joy Bringer

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on October 11, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Ezra 6:16-22.

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

How many of you stood in line for ^{last week} an hour at the new Chinese Restaurant on Market Street? We ambled over there last Sunday evening after Mark's football game. The place was wall to wall people. Everybody in Oxford came out just to see what the new restaurant was like. Some people were there who probably don't eat out very often. Others who usually go to other restaurants came out just to try it out a new restaurant and style of food. Something new attracts people.

When our new church opens its doors for the first time we can also expect new people to come. People will be willing to come to our church if for nothing else to see what it looks like inside. Your neighbor who likes to sleep in on Sunday mornings will wake up on the morning we go back into our church and think, "I'm going to drag myself out of bed just to see what this new place is like."

Men, women and children, rich and poor, black and white, who haven't been to church for years and who have, maybe, never been to church will be ripe for joining our church when we go back in. And maybe, by the grace of God, they'll come to put their trust in God through Christ, accept him as their Saviour, and serve him as their King in the fellowship of his church.

I believe something like this happened when the second temple in Jerusalem was dedicated. Ezra tells us that soon after the new temple was dedicated, the Passover "was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, *and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the*

nations of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel."

A. Who were these people who separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations to worship the LORD?

1. I believe some were pagans. They had worshipped the gods of nature. They worshipped the gods of war. They worshipped the gods of pleasure. They worshipped their national gods. But they also watched the new temple being built. They were curious. They wanted to come closer to it to see what it was like. And as they came closer they heard more and more about the God whose temple it was and they came to trust this God. And after the new temple was dedicated they separated themselves from their pagan practices and joined up with the people of God.

They're a lot like some of the unchurched in our community who've never been in church or Sunday School. Most likely you have a friend or neighbor who was never baptized; who can't remember ever going to church or Sunday School. You know a young boy or girl who's never been to Sunday School or worship. Many of these unchurched people are very religious. They believe in ESP and reincarnation and flying saucers and horoscopes and ouija boards. Many are very opened to discussion about spiritual things.

And these unchurched people are watching our building go up. They're curious. They asked you, "When are you getting back in? Why are you building such a large building?" And when they ask, what a perfect opportunity for you to say, "We want our church to serve the whole community. We want everybody in town to feel that this is their church. We believe our town has a lot of needs that this new building can help to meet." And then you could say, "I bet you'd like to see what it's like

inside. Why don't you come with me when we get back in? I'll give you a call. I'll pick you up." And you could say, "I think your daughter and son would like Sunday School and youth group. They have fun but we also teach our young people values I know you want them to have: to be honest, to be fair, to be tolerant. And they'll also learn about Jesus and his life and ministry and why he died."

The number one reason why secular, non-churched men and women get involved in a church is because they want their children to have a religious education, and Sunday School is just about the only place they'll get it. So just as so many people came out to the new Chinese restaurant to try out something new, we can expect unchurched people to try out our new church. And maybe some of them will join us and separate themselves from the gods they presently worship, to worship the LORD.

2. But not all who joined the returned exiles to celebrate the Passover were pagans. Some were Israelites who had fallen away from the worship of the LORD. They'd lost their distinctive culture and customs. They no longer told their children how God had saved them from slavery in Egypt. They no longer told their children about how God had promised to bless the whole world through their ancestor Abraham. They became more and more influenced by their pagan friends and neighbors. Eventually they dropped out of the covenant community. Their children intermarried with pagan men and women. They forgot who they were.

Until the new temple was built and dedicated. Crowds from all over watched the service. They got caught up in the excitement of the dedication and they began to have a longing to rediscover their heritage and return to the Lord.

Some of the unchurched in our community are like those Israelites who had

fallen away and forgotten who they were. These are men and women and children who were baptized in this church. They went to Sunday School with you. They got married in the old sanctuary. They made a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. But something happened and they've fallen away.

You know who many of these people are. They used to sit in the pew in front of you. They once served on a committee with you. You remember how they used to come to Sunday School and maybe even teach. They're your friends, your relatives, your neighbors. You see them every day in your homes and on our streets and in our schools. They believe in Jesus. They pray. They just don't feel they need the church. They believe they can be a good Christian without attending church. These men and women and young people often have a longing to come home because, deep down, they know they can't be close to Christ without being close to his family.

The re-entry into our new church building gives them a perfect opportunity to come home. Don't let the opportunity pass! The number one priority of our elders and congregation must be to blitz those members who've become inactive or who are becoming inactive, so that they'll join us and separate themselves from those activities and priorities which prevent them from worshipping the LORD.

We have a wonderful opportunity to reap a harvest for the kingdom of God. We must not let the opportunity slip. This must be the number one priority, evangelism of those outside and shepherding of those who have wandered off.

B. But I need to say one final thing. If the people who came to the new Chinese restaurant were satisfied with their meal, they'll very likely come back again. But if they don't get good service and good food, they'll probably stay home or go someplace

else when the excitement of newness wears off.

The people who will come to see our new church will not keep coming unless they see something more than a new church building. ~~They must see more than the building.~~ They must see that we have a relationship to Jesus Christ that really makes a difference in our lives, at work, in our marriages, and within our communities. If we want the unchurched men and women in our town to join us and separate themselves from the pollutions of our culture, we must purify ourselves. Can our kind of faith and our kind of Christianity and our kind of lifestyle attract the unchurched to Christ?

Ezra tells us that "The priests... purified themselves." The New Testament teaches the priesthood of all believers. You're a priest. I'm a priest... if we trust in Christ. You teenage girls and guys are priests. And we're not just ordinary priest, "(We) are a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9).

Now the job of a priest is two-fold. For one thing, a priest, represents God to the world. When we, as priests, purify ourselves people will begin to see something of Christ in our lives that will point them to God. As priests, we bring Christ to the people in this community by touching the untouchable, eating and drinking with sinners, healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving sins, casting out demons, preaching good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming God's gracious will for the world is its salvation.

What if we separated ourselves from all those things which prevent Christ from ministering to the community through us; pride, envy, pettiness, self-

centeredness. Then, when the unchurched men and women and inactive members come to see our new church they'll see more than a building, they'll see our changed lives and they'll meet and trust in Christ.

But a priest has a second function. Not only do we bring Christ to the world, we bring our loved ones, friends and neighbors into the presence of God in prayer. The priest goes into the presence of God with the joys and concerns of the community on his heart. As priests we pray for our unchurched neighbors and for our inactive members. We pray for the businesses, the schools, the leaders of our community. We plead for their health and salvation. What if we, as priests, brought the unchurched and the inactive members of our congregation into the presence of God every day. What if each one of us were to take the membership directory and bring one or two names of members before the Lord in prayer? What if each day we brought our unchurched friend and colleague into the presence of God in prayer. Maybe then they'd see more than a new church. Maybe they'd begin to see that God loves them and wants them to join us, to worship God and to serve this whole community.

Purify ourselves and worship the Lord with joy! That must be a priority. Then our unchurched friends and neighbors will be attracted, not simply to a new building, but to a new God... the God who is known only through Jesus Christ, our Passover Lamb, whose blood was shed for the salvation of the whole world.

Let us pray: Gracious God who sent Jesus Christ to seek and save lost men and women: grant that we may so present Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the unchurched men and women in our town, that they may come to put their trust in you through Christ, to accept him as their Saviour, and serve him as their King in the fellowship of his church. Through Christ our Lord and High Priest we pray. Amen.