

Good Friday

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, at Second Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Good Friday, April 10, 1998. Scripture lessons: *Ephesians 3:18*

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

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." I like the way the Living Bible paraphrases it. "May you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves." **When I hear those words I see the cross of Jesus. The two arms of the cross represent how long and how wide the love of God is. And the vertical post reminds us of how deep and high God's love really is.**

I want you to **picture the cross**. When I picture the cross I see arms, the outstretched arms of Jesus, arms that 2,000 years later still yearn to embrace all of us. When you think of the cross you may think first of **pain**, the pain Jesus suffered. Or you may think of **shame**, the shame Jesus suffered. Or you may think of **loneliness**, the loneliness Jesus felt. But when I think of the Cross, I see the arms of Jesus stretched out. I see Jesus, dying a slow and terrible death, with his arms pulled wide. **He could have been stoned**, like Stephen. But then, to protect himself, his arms would have been pulled in to his chest. **Or he might have been beheaded**, like his cousin John. But then his arms would have been bound behind his back. Instead, the arms of Jesus were stretched taut, leaving bare his heart. Even when he could no longer physically hold out his arms, they were held in place by the nails.

When I think of the cross, I think of the arms of Jesus. **They remind me of the arms of my father when I was a little boy.** I'd stand on the staircase in our house, on the fourth stair, and my dad would stand at the bottom of the stairs. He'd stretch out his arms wide and he'd say, "Jump, Teddy." And I'd jump. I wasn't afraid of falling. I wasn't afraid of getting hurt. I was absolutely confident that my daddy would catch me. When I think of the cross, I see arms. I see the arms of Jesus stretched out. And God asks us to take a leap of faith. "Trust me! Leap into

my arms! Leap into the arms of Jesus!” Find out for yourself that the “eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

When I think of the cross I think of the arms of Jesus. **I see them stretched out over Jerusalem.** “Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” And I think of **the arms of Jesus stretched out like a mother hen over Oxford**, stretched out over Second Presbyterian Church, stretched out over Oxford Presbyterian Church. **I see the arms of Jesus stretched out over our nation**; stretched out to Bill Clinton. I see the arms of Jesus stretched out to Newt Gingrich. I see the arms of Jesus stretched out, not in lust but in love, to Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp. Last week I remembered the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated. I remembered exactly where I was 30 years ago when I heard about his murder. I remember how a group of seminary students gathered around a tape player and listened to his great “I have a dream” sermon, and we wept. I saw the arms of Jesus stretched out over Dr. Martin Luther King. *... stretched over world. ... Ireland* And, today, I see his arms stretched out over **Nelson Mandela**. I see the arms of Jesus stretched out to our enemies, to **Saddam Hussein**, and to **Mohammar Khadafi** and to **Fidel Castro**. I see his arms stretched out over you and me. When I see the cross, I think of the arms of Jesus stretched out,

for the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an' worse;
An' for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe.

Why don't we run to those arms? Why don't we leap into those arms more often?

Because, too often, we're too proud. We're determined to run our own lives. We're full of doubt and unbelief. And too many of us allow ourselves to be embraced by too many other arms who can never love us like God loves us. But the arms of Jesus remain stretched out.

There's a wideness in God's mercy
Like the wideness in the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal

Is most wonderfully kind.

To the end of time those arms will be stretched out, the arms of Jesus, eternally outstretched, reaching out to all of us in our turmoil, rebellion and confusion.

When I think of the Cross, I think of the collective need of the church to open our arms-- to stretch out our arms in forgiveness, to stretch them out in acceptance, fully aware of our faults and deep imperfections; stretch out our arms in welcome to all God's prodigal sons and daughters.

The second thing I see when I look at the cross is the vertical dimension. The cross reaches up into heaven and descends into the depths of hell. The vertical dimension of the cross reminds me of how deep and how high the love of God is. A few months ago our family visited the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. We were reminded that human beings have walked on the moon. I learned that one of the astronauts took with him to the moon the bread of Holy Communion, given to him by his minister. While the astronaut circled the moon he ate the bread. That reminds me of how high the love of God is. The Psalmist said, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there."

The Psalmist also wrote that if "I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." Hell is the last place you'd expect to find the love of God. But the love of God even reaches down into the depths of hell. In the second chapter of Jonah we read the prayer of Jonah. "Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice." The love of God extends down into the depths of hell and up into the heights of heaven.

There is a hell because men and women are free to reject the outstretched arms of Jesus. People choose to be in hell. We're free to refuse to love or to forgive or to be forgiven. We're free to hate, and to hold grudges. We're free to lie and to destroy and kill. And that's hell. A young man once came to his pastor. He broke down weeping and stammered out, "I've taken my life away from the hands of God, and I don't know what to do with it." That's hell. To take our lives away from the hands of God. But God refuses to stop loving even those who would be

in hell. The Bible says that Jesus descended into hell and led captivity captive. He went to hell to rescue those long held captive there. There's a hymn that says it well...

The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell.
It goes beyond the highest star,
And reaches to the lowest hell.

The love of God extends from the depths of hell up to the heights of heaven, from the guttermost to the uttermost; from the crack house, to the White House. St. Paul writes, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, not things present, nor things to come, nor power, *nor height, nor depth*, nor any else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Tonight the Lord Jesus Christ stretches out his arms to lift us up from the depths and to lift us ^{out of the depths} up to the heights. He stretches out his arms to us. He gives us this bread and this wine and his body and blood. Take the leap of faith. Leap into the arms of Jesus. And when you eat the bread and drink the cup "may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves."

Let us pray: