

I Will Draw All People To Myself

A sermon preached at Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in Lent, March 16, 1997.
Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33.

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

A story in Christianity Today caught my eye in the light of the words of Jesus when he said, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." The story was about Freda, a campus flower child back in the early 1970s. Her long, curly hair, crowned with flowers, fell down to her waist. She preferred muslin, Indian-print dresses to western styled clothing. And she was fascinated by Hinduism. This was back when Eastern religions were being popularized by the Beatles. Then something odd happened. Freda's boyfriend, Gary, had to read one of the Gospels for a philosophy class. He chose the Gospel of Mark because it was the shortest. Gary wasn't at all religious, nevertheless he was intrigued by Mark's portrait of Christ: his concern for the poor and the sick, how he confronted religious and civil authorities, how he welcomed outcasts; and above all for his vision of the kingdom of God. He began to feel strangely drawn to this Jewish man who lived and died in first century Palestine.

In May, 1974, Freda and Gary were married in a Hindu ceremony. They hitch-hiked through Europe on their honeymoon. In Dublin, Ireland, Freda found herself standing before a statue of Jesus in a cathedral. A plaque at the base of the statue said, "Behold the heart that so loved mankind." She found herself strangely drawn to this figure of Christ. She knelt and she found herself weeping unexplainably. She found herself

praying to the Risen Christ. Shortly after that experienced she started to read the Bible, especially the Gospels. She began to rethink her beliefs about God as well as some social and political issues as she read about Jesus. Eventually Freda was drawn, through her interest in Christ, into the life of the church. Her growing faith in Christ wasn't a passing phase. Twenty years later, she's an active, practicing, worshipping Christian. She's involved in the life of her church and community. And her husband, Gary, has become a Greek Orthodox priest.

I think of them when I read the story in our Gospel lesson. Some Greeks wanted to see Jesus. Since they've been in Jerusalem they've heard stories about Jesus. How he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, raised the dead, forgave sins, proclaimed the Kingdom of God. These Greeks represent men and women from every nation and ethnic group who have been, like Freda and Gary, drawn to Jesus over the last two thousand years.

People are drawn to Christ because they see in this crucified Palestinian Jew hope for the salvation and reconciliation of the world. Christians believe that war, poverty, disease, spiritual darkness, racism -- all of which express our sinfulness and alienation from God -- can be resolved through Christ.

We believe that this One lifted up on the cross is not just the God of Americans, but the God, as well, of Russians, Serbians, Bosnians, Chinese, Palestinians, Jews and Muslims - as well as Christians. We've always believed that if we can trust and obey this one who ended up on a cross... if we learn and

follow his way, despite the cost, this world will be saved, reconciled, renewed.

Most Presbyterians do not believe the Bible condemns to hell all those who don't know Jesus or those who have never heard of him. We do, however, believe that the world is condemned already unless we follow, trust, and obey Christ. Several years ago I heard the Reverend Canon Ateek preach in St. George's Cathedral in East Jerusalem. After we returned to the states I read his book entitled, Justice and Only Justice. He spoke of the great mission of the Christian church to proclaim the reality of God who has come to us as a crucified Palestinian Jew. The church, he says, should proclaim God as we have come to know him in Christ to all people, Muslims, Jews as well as Christians. He writes, "The church should insist on what God is really like - not in a spirit of superiority or condescension, but in humility and love." The mission of the church is to proclaim that there is no other God than the Crucified God.

When we look at Christ lifted up on the cross we see a human being, a Palestinian Jew. We see human suffering. The crucified Christ typifies the life experience of so many people in the world today. Jesus identifies in his death with people all around the world who endure pain and suffering, who feel ruthless oppression, who live daily with fear and uncertainty. Sometimes these people see in Christ that God has come and joined himself with them in their misery.

That is certainly true for many Africans. Several years ago I heard Bishop Tutu speak at Lincoln University. He said that

when the missionaries came they gathered the Africans around them and said, "Let us bow our heads, close our eyes, and pray." After the prayer, the Africans discovered that while their eyes were shut, the Europeans had taken all their land, but had given them the Bible. So the Africans began to read the Bible. They began to see parallels to their own misfortunes in the life of the crucified Palestinian Jew. Many came to believe him - that God has no favorites. They came to see themselves created in the image of the One who was crucified for them. His story empowered them in their desire for freedom and dignity. They were drawn to Christ.

But when we look at the Christ lifted up on the cross we see not only human suffering but also the suffering of God. We see the pain of God who loves the world enough to go to hell to save us. God comes to us in Christ crucified. In Christ crucified we see God suffering for and with Muslims, Jews, and Christians. We see God suffering with and for agnostics and atheists. Alistair McGrath writes, "At Calvary, God entered into the darkness of human pain and suffering. God faced the threat of extinction - and having met it, having recognized, exposed and named it as it really is, he conquered it."

The Greeks wanted to see Jesus. As we leave the church this morning I'd like us all to see Jesus lifted ~~up~~ on the cross. See his arms stretched out in invitation to you and the whole world! There is something about God suffering and ~~dying~~ in the person of Christ that draws us out of ourselves to God.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you for all that you did to pay for our sins. We marvel that you were willing to be like a kernel of wheat that is sown in the ground and dies and then bears rich fruit. We think of how cruelly you were crucified at Calvary, and we bless your holy name for giving your all so that we could be saved. Draw people to yourself. Draw all people to yourself so that our world might be saved and experience forgiveness and peace. Amen.