

## If I Had Only One Sermon to Preach

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, March 10, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21.

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

Suppose I knew that I had only one opportunity to speak to you (or to anybody) as a Christian minister... one brief moment... only about 15 or 20 minutes to preach. What would I say? Well, I'd carefully prepare my words. I'd be very careful to make every word count and I'd be forced to think about what is central to my faith and to the Christian faith. I certainly wouldn't prepare a lecture. I wouldn't quote a lot of experts. I wouldn't speculate or place before you various points of view for you to consider.

If I had only one sermon to preach I'd want to make sure that I preached the Gospel. I wouldn't want to preach on peripheral things. It certainly wouldn't be the time to preach on some theological fad. I wouldn't preach about how we should all strive to live good lives. I wouldn't give you my opinions on the Palestinian Question. I wouldn't speculate about the various theories concerning either the inspiration of the Bible or the return of Christ. I wouldn't preach about what the Bible says about human sexuality. I wouldn't preach on God's judgment on human sin and wickedness. Nor would I talk about how faith can give you confidence and peace of mind.

There's a need for that kind of preaching, but if I had only one sermon to preach I wouldn't choose any of those topics. I'd want to preach the gospel. I'd want to preach good news. I'd want to proclaim, as persuasively as possible, that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross demonstrates the overwhelming love of God for the world... <sup>For Red & yellow, Black & white</sup> for Americans and Iraqis, for Democrats and Republicans, for communists and capitalists, for homosexuals and heterosexuals, for pro-lifers and pro-choicers, for church-

goers and the unchurched, for those who love God and for those who hate and reject God; for those who find it easy to believe in Christ and for those who struggle with questions and doubts and don't know whether to number themselves among believers or unbelievers. I would want to preach in such a way that everybody leaving this sanctuary, no matter what they've done, would respond in faith to the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. *They'd believe... trust... follow... obey... love... and do the truth.*

Probably the most famous statement of the extent of God's love is found in John's Gospel: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Now, there's so much in the world and in our own experience that seems to contradict God's love for the world. Ben Haden, a Presbyterian minister from Chattanooga, Tennessee once told of a woman- a total stranger- who came into his office. She volunteered very little information and herself- but she did say, 'I want to talk about Jesus Christ.' For more than three hours he tried to answer her questions and to spell out the claims of Christ. Tears flowed down her cheeks- there was so obviously the need. As they walked out of the building together and paused on the steps- she suddenly turned to Haden. 'What kind of a God is he that would permit my husband to rape our only child- our daughter? ... who is confined to a mental institution- probably for the rest of her life. She can only utter a guttural sound.' And then she turned and drove away. *Stories like that can be multiplied over and over... How can God love the world if...*

Have you ever wondered if God loves you? I have a hunch that deep down some of us feel that God, if there is a god, may not even know we exist. And if God does know that we exist, God probably has it in for us. Some of us doubt God's love because we experience so little of human love. We've been bruised, many of us, and battered by life many times. We've been hurt by other people, often by religious people who condemn and judge us. And as a

result, maybe we lunge out at God when God draws near to us. We think God must be coming to judge, perhaps even to torture us forever, to condemn us and our ways.

But some of us doubt God's love for another reason. We doubt God's love because we think God loves only good people, religious people, church going people, people who find it easy to believe. We doubt that God loves worldly people, people who find it hard to pray, people who get angry, who cheat, who lie, who swear, who commit adultery.

But the New Testament shows me a picture of God, in Christ, mixing with everybody- saints and sinners, rich and poor, clever and stupid, religious and irreligious, going to wedding parties and attending funerals, facing up to the reality of disease and disaster- and, in the end, suffering himself the very kind of physical and mental horror that makes us doubt the existence of a God of love (David H.C. Read).

The Bible tells us that God loves those who aren't particularly religious... those who've wandered far and those who're lost. Jesus once told three short stories illustrating this. He said that God is like a waiting father who runs out to meet his prodigal child returning home in rags from a far away country. God is also like a shepherd who leaves the 99 good sheep and goes out looking for one lost sheep who has wandered far away and is in danger of being attacked and killed. Finally, God is like a woman who gives her house a thorough cleaning in search for one small lost coin.

~~Above all I see the self-giving love of God on the cross.~~ <sup>If I had only one sermon to preach I'd testify that</sup> I believe that Jesus was more than just a good man who lived an exemplary life. He was more than the moral teacher of the Sermon on the Mount. I believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God's self. In the seemingly senseless and pointless suffering of Jesus, God himself was present,

sharing in the tragedies of the human race. Jesus didn't come to explain away <sup>suffering</sup> ~~it~~ <sup>He didn't even cure</sup> to take away suffering- he came to take it upon himself, to ~~assume~~ <sup>To give suffering</sup> human suffering ~~and~~ <sup>our</sup> lend it dignity and meaning through his presence and sympathy (Alistair McGrath, Understanding Jesus).

If I had only one sermon to preach, then, I would preach the Gospel. I would point to the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. And I'd want that sermon to be more than simply a declaration of a fact. I'd hope people would respond. I'd hope that people who heard that sermon would ~~trust Christ or at least want to know more.~~ <sup>come to delight in</sup> ~~obey Christ~~.

The God I believe in... the God I trust... the ~~the~~ God I'm betting on is a God whose hands, feet and side have been pierced; a God who has shared the final darkness of our sin and rebellion and the worst that you or I can ever suffer in this world or the next and has done all this in love to win our love and trust.

William MacDonald was once the minister of a Church of Scotland congregation in the Bridge of Allan, Scotland. He had a friend who lived in London and who had built up a successful engineering business but his main interest was a Christian mission outreach in the poverty stricken East End of London where he became a persuasive lay-preacher. One time he visited the Railway Engineering Works in the town of Swindon. A young manager showed him around and after the tour of inspection was over the two men walked slowly to the gate of the factory. They stood for a few minutes talking together. The visiting engineer was thanking the young manager for taking the time to show him around. Then he stretched out his hand to say goodbye. The young manager also stretched out his hand. "But" the engineer

said, "I dropped it at once. It was such a cold, fishy hand." Quickly he saw his mistake. The young manager's face turned red with embarrassment and he said, "When I was an apprentice I had an accident. A nail was driven through my hand and I have never been able to close it since."

The lay preacher then placed his hand on the young manager's shoulder and said, "Nineteen hundred years ago there was a young carpenter in Nazareth. They drove a nail through his had, and he has never been able to close it since."

As you leave the church this morning I would like you to see this vision of God's love demonstrated in the cross of Christ. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. God's hands are outstretched in love to you in whatever condition you find yourself to be this morning. He will not close his hand to you. He will not necessarily come in and miraculously make everything better in your life, but he will come into your life to help you bear with grief and sorrow, your pain and illness.