

Incomplete Christians

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Baptism of the Lord, January 12, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11.

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

I read an interesting article in the newspaper last week. A large Armenian family, refugees from persecution, settled in Minnesota, in a tightly knit Armenian community. They became U.S. citizens. Eventually the refugee family arranged with another Armenian family for the marriage of two of their sons in their early twenties with two teenage daughters, thirteen and fourteen. The marriage took place. The newly-weds left for their honeymoon. When they returned the two brothers were immediately arrested for statutory rape and the father of the teenage brides was arrested as an accessory to the crime. "Don't you know that it's against the law for girls that young to marry?" "We didn't know," they pleaded. The Armenians were US citizens. But they'd never heard of the laws that govern marriage in the US. They were incomplete Americans.

In Ephesus Paul met some men who were Christians, but incomplete Christians. They received the baptism of John but their understanding of the Christian faith was severely lacking. They never heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul gave them some basic instruction in the Christian faith. They received Christian baptism into Christ's church. Then Paul laid his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied - about 12 of them. In the years to come, Ephesus became a center of Christian mission to the Gentiles - and these 12 disciples became the nucleus of the Ephesian church.

Many years ago, Tom Long was teaching a confirmation class to a very small group. In fact, there were only three eighth grade girls in the class. "I was telling them about the seasons of the Christian year" he said. "I asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. None of them knew." So Dr. Long proceeded to explain that Pentecost was the day the church was all gathered together in one place and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Flames of fire rested on their heads. Then they began to speak the gospel in all the languages of the world.

Two of the girls received this information with a kind of bored, "ho-hum" attitude. But the third girl looked astonished - her blue eyes wide open and her mouth agape. Finally she said, "Gosh, Reverend Long, I must have been absent that Sunday."

~~"The beauty of that moment was not that she misunderstood~~ about Pentecost, but that she understood about the Church," She realized that what happened on that first Pentecost Sunday could happen again on any Sunday in her very own church. She was sorry she missed that Sunday. And having missed that Sunday, she felt that her Christian experience was incomplete.

Our church will never be complete apart from the renewal of the Holy Spirit. The completion of our building program depends upon every Christian realizing that at any given moment the Holy Spirit may begin to transform a merely institutional church into a powerful, vibrant community of faith where, healing and salvation is experienced by us and the community around us on a regular basis. In the words of a great hymn, we're incomplete Christians until the time comes when - -

We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

Last Monday night we attended the Solanco basketball game with Warwick High School. About fifty Warwick students sat together in one section of the Solanco gym. They cheered their team with remarkable discipline and creativity. Every time one of their men went to the foul line they'd lift up their arms like Pentecostals, and they'd all say, "Whoosh" when their man made a basket. They were spirited, but they did everything decently and in order. What made them so effective was they were all together in one place to cheer on their team. They really gave their school the home court advantage.

Solanco's fans greatly outnumbered Warwick's fans. But we weren't organized in our cheers. We each did our own thing. Most were just sitting on our hands. Solanco should have beaten Warwick. But the Warwick fans had spirit. Our fans didn't. Solanco has a great basketball team, but the Solanco basketball team was incomplete because the Solanco fans didn't get into the game.

When a church is filled with the Holy Spirit we cheer on and encourage one another like those Warwick fans did. A church of 500 talented members is incomplete unless the Holy Spirit binds us together to support and comfort and challenge one another in our life with Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us the home court advantage even when surrounded by a secular world.

All of us are incomplete Christians by ourselves. We need one another. And only the Holy Spirit can bind us together into a single body that will enable us to win and minister for Christ in this community effectively.

We're incomplete by ourselves. Every Christian needs to be a part of some smaller group or activity in the church: Sunday school, choir, prayer groups, Bible studies, work projects, greeters, NOMAD dinners, working in the kitchen, ushers, providing snacks for young choir members and the youth group, providing transportation (for Suzie to or from Philadelphia), bringing in covered dish meals for the bereaved and for parents of new borns - the list goes on and on. Individual Christians are incomplete in ourselves. We need one another. The Holy Spirit binds us together.

A friend preached as a guest at a church in a small town in Western Pennsylvania. After the service my friend left the church with the pastor. My friend noticed an old couple walking slowly down the sidewalk with great difficulty. Each had one arm around the other and they cuddled close together as they walked. My friend commented, "Look at that old couple. They look like a couple of teenagers."

The pastor knew the couple. He said to my friend, "That couple takes a walk everyday. They just celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. He's completely deaf. She's completely blind. In their twilight years he has become her eyes. She has become his ears. They need one another. They can't live without each other. They're incomplete without one another."

We're incomplete Christians without one another. The Holy Spirit takes us sinners, incomplete in ourselves, and binds us together, enables us and our church to live for Christ, enables us to do what we can't do by ourselves.

Come, Holy Spirit. Baptize our congregation. Bind us together. Empower us to do your will. Make visible the Risen Christ in our community. Be present to heal, to forgive, and to begin a new creation in us and in Oxford. Amen.