

Jesus and His Followers

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 24, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 28:10-17; Psalm 91:1-10; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 10:24-33.

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

When I was at the Reedsville Presbyterian Church in Reedsville, Pennsylvania I was a single minister for four years. I lived in a big, old, four bedroom manse with a cavernous attic. I'd often get scared at night in that ~~big old~~ place. I'd hear noises outside but those weren't the noises that scared me. I knew what they were - the sound of the wind in the trees, Amish buggies, the cars. The sounds that frightened me were the ones that came from the attic. Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night and think I'd hear a footstep up there. Just one! Or maybe a board would creak as it expanded or contracted and I'd lie there in terror.

Now I never locked the front door of the manse at night. Never! It was a peaceful, rural, community with very little crime. I *did* keep the attic door locked however. I wasn't afraid of who might come in the front door at night but I was afraid of what might be coming down from the attic and I wanted to be able to get out of there fast.

Jesus had a lot to say about fear. He said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell." ^{men, a little later,} Jesus warned that no punishment that humans can ever mete out can compare with the ultimate fate of one who ^{continually} denies what one knows of the truth in Christ. There are things which are far worse than death, Jesus teaches.

Jesus was speaking to people whom he had chosen to send into all the towns of villages of Palestine to preach the gospel, heal, and cast out demons. ^{what he has told them privately, they are to speak out publicly} He makes it clear that his followers shouldn't expect better

treatment than he got. Jesus was accused of being in cahoots with Beelzebub (another name for the devil). His followers will be accused of worse things. His followers aren't to fear ridicule, rejection, persecution or martyrdom. They're to fear God.

These words must've been particularly relevant to the Palestinian churches that first read Matthew's Gospel. They knew that Jesus had been falsely accused of sedition and blasphemy and put to death on a cross. They knew they could expect no better treatment. Unlike today in the United States when the church is a respected institution, the church was then considered to be a subversive sect. As a result of ~~the~~^{their} commitment to Christ the followers of Jesus ~~took~~ they were dragged before crowds of people and beaten. They were brought before the magistrates and were thrown in jail. In many cases they gave up their lives. Think, for a moment, of some of the accusations that were brought against the followers of Jesus.

- (1) They were accused of being *cannibals*. The service of Holy Communion hadn't yet become a socially respectable religious rite. Word leaked out that these fanatics were eating human flesh and drinking human blood in this mysterious service celebrated in darkness for fear of the authorities.
- (2) They were accused of being *immoral* because they celebrated what they called love feasts. It was hard for the secular mind of that day to realize that people could really, genuinely love one another across social, racial, political, and language barriers.
- (3) They were accused of being *revolutionaries* because they sang of how God puts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts those of low degree.
- (4) They were accused of being *disloyal and unpatriotic* because they wouldn't take an oath of allegiance to the Emperor as superior to God.

(5) They were accused of *destroying family life* because Jesus taught that loyalty to him should surpass loyalty even to mother and father.

(6) The early Christians were accused of *tampering with society* and not confining themselves to religious issues. There were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire. Although the church didn't set out to abolish slavery as an institution, it did treat slaves as equal to their masters.

The followers of Jesus said that in Christ the social distinctions that divided slave and free had no bearing in the church.

(7) The followers of Jesus were accused of being *destructive to the business and economic interests* of the community because the habits of this new band of women and men differed so greatly from the habits of the status quo. In the city of Ephesus business owners started a riot because they feared Christians wouldn't buy their statues of the pagan gods. Christians in those days didn't organize boycotts. They simply stopped wanting ^{buying} what they really didn't need and what was positively harmful to their spiritual life.

In the face of all these accusations and threats Jesus called his followers to put their ultimate fear in the God whom they'd come to know and trust through Him. Unlike the hostile civil and religious authorities, God cared for them. "Don't you know that every hair on your head is numbered?" God says, "If I care even about a bird who falls to the ground, how much more do you think I care for you who've risked your life for me - you whom I've created in my image and whose every thought I intimately know and understand?"

Too often we've allowed the Christian faith to become a sentimental, emotional trip. We forget the rigorous, realistic message of Jesus. Too often we're willing to be called Christians as long as it's the popular thing.

William Barclay spoke of a famous scholar and man of the world. When asked if he was a Christian, his answer was, "Yes, but not offensively so." He meant that he didn't allow his Christianity to interfere with the society he kept and the pleasures he loved. Sometimes we say to other people, in so many words, that we're Church members, but not to worry about it too much; that we have no intention of being different.

The Presbyterian Church has never been afraid to influence our culture. Some denominations, like the Amish, feel that God has called them to withdraw from society and form a counter-culture. We need to listen to their witness. But Presbyterians have always felt that God calls us to be involved in society, to influence culture and to leaven it with the Gospel. That's why the only clergyperson to sign the Declaration of Independence was a Presbyterian Minister, John Witherspoon. That's why Presbyterians have served in the Senate and Congress in far greater numbers than our size as a denomination would lead ~~you~~ to believe. That's why so many of our own members are involved in every area of the life of this community. *That's good.*

But anyone who immerses themselves in society is bound, not only to influence it, but *to be influenced by it*. As a result many of our leaders in the Presbyterian Church, such as Dr. Gillespie, President of Princeton Seminary, have been warning us that there's little if any difference anymore between being a good Presbyterian and being a good American citizen. We don't like to get too out of step with the rest of society.

It's not under persecution that the church fails. The time when the church takes its setback is when culturally it's respectable to be a Christian. It's easy for us to slide along, never being counted as women and men who worship and serve God, through our Lord Jesus Christ - never

expressing forthrightly that our ultimate fear is not fear of losing our status or wealth or popularity, but the fear of grieving God's love.

Alan Boesak, the Black South African minister, has faced false accusations and threats against his life for many years. After the death of Steven Biko in a prison cell, Rev. Boesak urged his congregation to have a greater fear of God than of the government. "This greater fear" he said, "finds expression in faith in *Christ*, in trust in him, and in obedience to him. *Belief* in him rather than in idols that cannot see, hear, and liberate. *Trust* in him instead of in human plans and systems that are inwardly rotten and infected by sin unto death itself and on account of their injustice bound to disappear. *Obedience* to him and his word instead of a blind servility that distorts reality and leads to the precipice.

Those who wish to imitate Jesus the Messiah in the world are required so to believe in him that the anxiety in their lives is overcome."

When Jesus spoke to his followers he didn't try to soothe or rationalize away ~~the anxiety of his disciples~~ ^{their fears}. He didn't attempt cheap words of comfort in the spirit of "just believe in me and nothing will happen to you". Jesus never sentimentalized God's love. God is love, but God is also holy and there needs to be a place in us for awe and fear which answer God's holiness.

There was a shipwreck off the rocky coast of Maine during a terrible storm. The coast-guard received an SOS indicating that there were survivors. A boat and crew were readied to go out into the dark, stormy waters. One of the frightened crew said to the captain, "Sir, if we go out there in this weather, we'll never come back." The captain, who knew his duty to rescue the perishing, responded, "We have to go out. We don't have to come back." When Jesus sent out his followers ^{into a stormy & hostile world} to preach and teach and

heal he told them, "You have to go out. You don't have to come back."

I don't know what dangerous or frightening situation you or I may find ourselves in where we're called upon to confess Christ when we're tempted to deny him; when we're tempted to remain silent when we should speak out; when we're tempted to inaction when we should be getting involved. But I hope for myself and for you that we'll have the courage to ^{fear the one whom Christ went to hell for us...} fear the God who loves us in Christ, more than we fear anyone else.¹ If we do, maybe there'll be people who will say of us, what was said of John Knox. "Here lies one who feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man or woman." BbxXzz(9

Let us pray: O God, have mercy upon us. We are not quick to proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior. We confess that we fear ~~more~~ our friends and neighbors more than we fear you. At times we feel that it's awkward to confess him as the source of new life. Help us to love, fear, and trust you, to acknowledge you before others, and to live for Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. Amen.