

Let My People Go

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 12, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 8:20-32; 10:1-11; 21-29.

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

Life is full of compromises. Imagine how miserable we'd be if we were never willing to compromise. But we shouldn't compromise about some things. The corporate worship of the living God whom we know in Jesus Christ is just one thing that shouldn't be compromised. Pharaoh offered Moses four compromises in response to the LORD's command, "Let my people go that they may worship me." First, Pharaoh said, "Go, worship your God, but you've got to worship right here in Egypt." Second, he said, "Go, worship the LORD, but don't go very far." The fourth was, "Go, worship but leave your cattle in Egypt." But the third one is what interests me the most. "Leave your children in Egypt."

Today, millions of parents are leaving their children in Egypt when it comes to the worship of God. We hear our modern Pharaohs saying to us, "Go, be a Christian, but don't take your children to Sunday School and Church. Let them stay at home and let them make their own decision when they grow up.

This morning, Sunday School resumed after the summer vacation. The youth choirs began to practice again. The youth groups have geared up even though they continued to meet throughout the summer. And we have, Mark Reudenbush, our new youth minister (I mean, Director of Youth Ministries). And if every child of the covenant who was baptized in our church were to participate in Sunday School and choirs and youth groups we would have about 150 young people involved in Sunday School and worship.

“Go worship the LORD, but leave your children in Egypt.” That’s a compromise that too many Presbyterians have agreed to over the years. American parents are extremely devoted to our children. We’re anxious for our children to succeed and be happy. We’re anxious about their health, their education, their physical, social, and emotional welfare. But too often, we’re not as anxious about their relationship to Jesus Christ within the church.

A minister once shared this story with his congregation. He and his wife picked up their young son after an afternoon of play at a friend’s house. As they rode home, the boy was unusually quiet and seemed troubled. The parents gently asked him if there was something wrong, but he didn’t seem to want to talk about it. The parents became more and more anxious and encouraged him to share with them what was bothering him. “It’s about Martin,” the boy said, referring to the boy he’d been playing with that day. “But I can’t tell you about it”, he continued. The parents looked at each other, raising their eyebrows in concern, and kept prodding the boy to tell them what happened. Finally he said, “Martin says he doesn’t believe in Jesus,” and with that, the parents breathed a collective sigh of relief that the problem was only theological and not some else. Afterwards that ministry admitted that too often we’re concerned about the physical and emotional health of our children, but seem unconcerned about the most important thing of life; faith in Jesus Christ! Love for God! Obedience to God’s will.

Where are our children? Where are the children of Oxford? The wealthy children? The poor children? Hispanic children? Black and white children? Where are our own covenant children who’ve been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ?

Are we leaving them behind in Egypt? What can we do to encourage them and their parents to join with us in our pilgrim's journey out of Egypt, out of slavery into the freedom of faith in Christ? Maybe it takes only a telephone call. A few words in passing on the way to the Post-office. Talking over a cup of tea. "You have really great kids," we can say. "I know you want to do everything you can to help them learn good values. How about giving our Sunday School a try? We have great youth choirs. We have really active youth groups. We have a great new youth minister."

We parents are anxious about our children in so many ways. We're anxious about their grades. That's good. We're anxious about their popularity and become extremely grieved when we feel our children are being taunted by their peers. And this too is good. We're concerned about their looks and spend our hard earned money at the orthodontist to assure that their teeth will be straight. And this is good. We want them to succeed in athletics so we spend a lot of money on athletic camps and shoes and we spend hours running them to and from practice and games. And this is as it should be. We're concerned that they be successful in life. That's great. But these aren't the most important things in life! The most important thing is that they know God; that they trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior; that they discover that their chief purpose in life is to glorify and enjoy - yes - enjoy God!

Some parents discover that their little ones don't like to go to Sunday School and church. And when we bring them to church they cry and squirm and make faces and noises; even when they're teenagers. Let me assure you that this is true of many normal children. But it isn't the only thing our children object to. Some children don't like to go to public school. Some don't like to wash and brush their teeth. Some

don't like to trim the grass or make their beds. Many don't like to go to the doctors for inoculations. But when we parents allow our children simply to follow their own inclinations and desires and let them do whatever they want we're giving them a false view of life which they'll have to unlearn through painful experience.

If it's raining on Sunday morning we might tell our complaining children, "Oh, it's such a bad day, you don't have to go to Sunday School today if you don't want to." If it's a beautiful Fall morning, the sun is shining, and the air is crisp and clear we say, "Oh, it's such a great day! If you really don't want to go to Sunday School and church you don't have to." If our children are still asleep at 9:15 on Sunday morning we might say, "Well, no sense in waking them up and rushing. I'll let them sleep in."

But if it's raining on Monday morning, or if it's a beautiful Fall Monday morning, or if our children are sleeping late we still make them go to school. "Get up! You have school today. You're going to be late!" So our children quickly learn what we parents feel is most important. Parents feel public school is very important. Sunday school isn't so import. It's terribly important that they reading and writing and arithmetic. Its not so important that they learn that God created us, that Christ has redeemed us through his death and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit sets us free to love and serve God

How man children and young people in Oxford receive no religious instruction whatsoever? How many of our baptized children are responding to the invitation of Jesus, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for I am meek and lowly of heart and you shall find rest for your souls." Too many children are being left in Egypt by their parents and neighbors. They aren't learning who God is. They're not learning what

God says is right and wrong. They're not learning the most important things in all of life. What does all their success amount to if they don't know Christ? If they don't love God?

What I've found to be so exciting though, is that there are young people in this church and in this town who are discovering what really is important in life. They're discovering who God is and what he requires of us. They're discovering that Christ is alive and that the Holy Spirit is able to give them an exciting purpose in life.

The church isn't a museum to display the relics of a dead faith. The purpose of the church isn't to amass wealth and save money, but to save lives for Jesus Christ. And without the Sunday school, without the youth choirs, and youth fellowships, and service projects, the church can become an elaborate museum testifying to the faith of dead people rather than testifying to the living faith of living people. Don't leave the children in Egypt!

Let us pray: Merciful God, you call us by name and promise to each of us your constant love. Watch over our children and the children of this town. Deepen their understanding of the gospel; strengthen their commitment to follow the way of Christ; and keep them in the faith and communion of your church. Increase their compassion for others; send them into the world in witness to your love; and bring them to the fullness of your peace and glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sept 12

A LITANY FOR WORKERS IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION
By Joyce Flight

To be read alternately by Leader and Teachers.

Leader: Because I have felt God's presence in my life,

Teachers: I teach so that other persons will be aware and grow in their understanding of God.

Leader: Because I have given my life to God,

Teachers: I teach so that others will know God's redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Leader: Because I know that I am a child of God and that I have been placed here to love God and my neighbors,

Teachers: I teach so that others will respond in faith and love.

Leader: Because I have experienced the joy of trusting in God's providence and the support of church fellowship,

Teachers: I teach so that others may increasingly identify themselves as sons of God and members of the Christian community.

Leader: Because I believe that life is fullest and best when I seek to follow the teachings of Christ,

Teachers: I teach so that others may live in the spirit of God in every relationship.

Leader: Because I am a part of a great worldwide body of Christians seeking to bring about God's kingdom on earth,

Teachers: I teach so that others may fulfill their common discipleship in the world.

Leader: Because I trust in God's promise of everlasting life with him,

Teachers: I teach so that others may abide in the Christian hope.

ALL: All praise to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. AMEN