

Life Can Be Complete

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 5th Sunday of Easter, May 1, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-12; John 15:1-8.

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

Last week I came across some of my old records from the late fifties, a Buddy Holly album, 45s by the Shirelles, the Platters, and, above all, Elvis Presley. In the late fifties I was a devotee of Elvis Presley, to my mother's horror. I can remember the first time I saw Elvis on the old Ed Sullivan show. I cut evening church just to see him. He sang, *You ain't nuttin but a hound-dog* and thousands of teenaged girls in the audience shrieked hysterically and threw articles of clothing at him. Guards held them back from coming on stage. Then Elvis began to gyrate seductively. Quickly, the camaraman focused on his face so that the t.v. audience could only imagine what was going on below his neck.

All the time I was thinking, "I'd like to be like Elvis." He was a role model for me. My father was in his sixties, literally dieing, but Elvis pulsed with life. I had all of Presley's hits. I'd listen to them over and over and I'd sing along. I wore my hair like Elvis. I used pink hair wax to slick down the sides and I'd brush it back into a duck tail. And when I left the house I'd unbottom the top three or four buttons on my shirt and turn up my collar. And life was complete for me when someone would say, "Hey, Atkinson, you look a little bit like Elvis Presley."

I think that if I were to describe in Biblical language my behavior I'd say that I was *abiding* in Elvis Presley. Something of the life of Elvis was emerging in me. His message, his values were being incorporated into my life. My head and heart were filled with his music. I wanted to look like him and sound like him. I surrounded myself with friends all of whom tried to look and act like Elvis. Well, the years passed and my interests turned to other music and other people. But in 1977 the King died, and I

was shocked and saddened.

That's the way it is with our heroes. Lindbergh, Joe DiMaggio, Ike, JFK. They inspire us. Something of their life enters us and then they die. But Jesus is different. He also died, but he rose again from the dead. He lives, and millions find purpose and fulfilment in life through his life. "Abide in me," he says. That means that something of his life enters us... his words... his acts... his friends... until we begin to act like him, and have his mind and attitudes... and people look at us and see something of Jesus Christ in us.

But this isn't a private thing, just between Jesus and me. Religion is so easily privatised. So many of our hymns are "me and Jesus" hymns, as if the Christian life were nothing more than a personal relationship to Jesus. A personal relationship to Jesus Christ *is* fundamental. Apart from the Risen Christ we can do nothing. But Christianity is *more* than a personal relationship to Jesus Christ as all important as that is. A personal relationship with Christ unites us with all others who are united with him in faith.

The Risen Christ tells us that our life can be complete only when we're connected, with all the other branches, to him; only when, through Christ, we're related to countless thousands of Christians, in Russia, China, Central America, Africa and Europe, as well as all the men and women in ages past who've been united to Christ. We're part of a grapevine that has spread around the world and the purpose of that grape-vine is to produce fruit... grapes which are turned into wine which the Bible says "makes glad the hearts of men." The purpose of the Christian church is to bring the intoxicating life and joy of the Risen Christ to the men and women of the world.

And yet so often it seems that the church isn't doing that. Ask your

teenage son or daughter what's bringing life and joy to them and I doubt if their first answer would be the church. ^{... going to a rock concert ... being asked to the Prom ... driving license} Why does the life of the church so often seem to contradict what Jesus said? Could it be that the church in the United States has been cut off from the source of our life? So often, young people don't see the church as a place where they can *live on the edge*, at least not in the US. But in so many other parts of the world the church *is* living on the edge. In the Soviet Union where public evangelism isn't allowed, or in China, or in South Africa where Christian young people look up to Winnie Mandela, Bishop Tutu and Alan Boesak. Here are men and women who are quite literally living on the edge because they're united to Christ, and through him, they're united with others around the world to bring life and joy and freedom to their people. Could it be that here in the US where we're so heavily influenced by individualism and the thought of getting ahead and furthering our own careers that so many of us have simply never experienced what it's like to be involved in a purpose that goes beyond individual achievement?

In tenth grade I was a member of the acappella choir at Newark High School. I can distinctly remember one autumn morning when we were singing a composition written 400 years ago named, *A Magnum Mysterium*, by Tomas Luis De Victoria. It was a song about the wonder and mystery of God becoming a human being. There were about 40^{or} us in the choir. And in the middle of the song I stopped singing. I was overwhelmed with the beauty of what we were doing. I stopped to listen. I was thrilled by the sound of our voices blending, weaving, harmonizing in counterpoint. It was like the sound of angels. And I thought, "I'm part of this. I'm helping to make this possible. None of us, by ourselves, could possibly sound so beautiful. But together we're creating something far more beautiful than anything we could do all by ourselves."

It seemed so hard to believe. Here I was a teenager with acne, aware of so many ugly things in my life, so lacking in self-esteem, so scared of rejection, so much in need of acceptance by my peers. When I looked at myself in the mirror I wondered how anybody could possibly love me except my mother who had to whether she wanted to or not. It was hard for me to believe that I could be a part of anything so beautiful as this 400 year old piece of music which expressed the deepest mystery of human existence. And yet I was, and in that realization I felt fulfilment.

I think maybe that's what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson. By ourselves our lives can't accomplish anything of lasting value. But together, as we draw on the resources of the living Christ, God is creating something beautiful in this world through us. ^{God's Vineyard, No Vine & Branches, No Body of Christ.} Our lives are beautiful, fulfilled, all they were meant to be when we're connected to one another through the Risen Christ, ~~doing what he created us to do.~~

Few of us will become famous individuals. We'll grow up, go to work, maybe get married, have children, buy a lot of grown up toys that we think we need to make life ^{complete,} ~~fulfilling~~. Then we retire and grow old and finally die. Is that it? Is that the purpose of life? Can that be all there is? Isn't there something in the human soul that says, "No! There must be something more to life than that."

And the Risen Christ says, "Yes! there is!" God has called us into the Body of Christ to participate in something that transcends our own individual lives, something that, in fact, gives meaning and purpose to our individual lives. We are God's vineyard. God takes great interest and delight in us. He spends so much time trimming us, pruning us, spraying us, and cutting out those things from our lives that are dead, so that we'll bear fruit for him and bring the life of Christ to the world.

Two masons were asked what they were doing. One mason said he was

making a living laying bricks. The other said that he was building a cathedral that would last for centuries. Some people live only to make a living. They live only for themselves. But God intends for us to live for the great and beautiful purpose of bringing life and love and joy to the world through Jesus Christ. The fulfilment of life can't be found in ourselves alone, can't be found in being caught up in our own individual concerns. Only as we're caught up in something beyond ourselves, something bigger than ourselves do our lives find completion. Life is complete when you're a branch on the True Vine that's growing and spreading its branches around the world whose purpose it is to bring the life of Jesus to men and women. Amen.

Father, Life begins again today. Jesus lives again today. He lives for ever with you, beyond the limitations of human life / Lord of time and space. -We praise you, / He lives for ever with us, bringing your life into our life / Lord of here and now. -We praise you, / Father, As we welcome the good news of his life with you - his unlimited power and love - May we know the effects of his life with us: compassion, kindness, patience, the love that binds us together, the courage to forgive and be forgiven. Father, Since life begins again today Help us to make a new beginning with Jesus our Lord. Amen.