

Little Children, Let us Love

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday of Easter, April 21, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:18-24; John 10:11-18.

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

Too many people I care about are hurting this morning. People close to me are angry, and in deep pain and anguish. Words alone can't take away the pain. There are few areas of life which stir up more pain, fear and anger than the area of human sexuality. Human sexuality has an extraordinary potential for divisiveness, alienation and distress. And we all contribute too much to the pain of others for mere words to have much meaning.

Years ago I used to have breakfast every Thursday morning with two married men with children. We'd read a brief passage of Scripture, eat our breakfast, and talk. ~~And then we'd close with a brief prayer. When two or three people sit and talk together for about four years they begin to trust one another. You begin to feel you can say things to one another that you've never said before. One morning one of the men got up the courage to share something with the two of us that he'd never shared with anyone before.~~

He was active in his church and loved the Lord. He was loved and respected in the community for his public service but he had what he called "his dirty little secret." Sometimes he'd drive to a neighboring large city, travel as much as two hours, where he'd be anonymous, just to buy a pornographic book or magazine. He told us of the fear and dread he had of discovery. His heart condemned him. He felt miserable inside. He was ashamed of himself. He despised himself. The two of us listened to him and felt his pain and anguish. ~~And both of us would have been ashamed to say, in the face of such painful honesty, "What you're doing is wrong."~~

He was a member of a small evangelical church who had a clear, strong, uncompromising witness against sexual sins *which he fully agreed with*. He even signed a petition, once, protesting the sale of Playboy and Penthouse magazines in the local 7-Eleven store. But, he said, "what if the people in my church really knew what I'm like? Not only would I be condemning myself, but all these people who now respect me, would be condemning and despising me. I feel so lonely." Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, "He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone."

The man continued in a quiet monotone, his head bowed so that he didn't have to look into our eyes. He said something like this. "When I think that God knows everything about me, my heart condemns me. It has never been easy for me to believe that God loves me. It has always been easier for me to believe that God is angry with me. But, I keep coming back, again and again, to Jesus."

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. I believe that Jesus was and is both God and human. Jesus is God in the flesh. In Jesus, the Lord from heaven came down to earth to bind up the wounds of his hurting sheep and to go searching for those who were lost. But Jesus is not only God in the flesh. Jesus was and is the one truly human-being who ever lived. Jesus is the kind of human being God intends us all to be.

Jesus is the good Shepherd. He laid down his life for his sheep. When he saw the wolves coming he didn't leave his sheep and run away. The hired hand runs away ^{because he doesn't really care for the sheep} but the good shepherd stays and gives his life for his sheep. Jesus spoke honestly to the hypocritical culture of his day. And he brought into a heartless religious system of law, love that was not just in word, but in truth and action. He risked everything that ordinary people want out of

life... acceptance, security, success, wealth... so he could minister to lost and hurt human beings.

Disreputable sinners loved Jesus. Reputable sinners hated him. Why *did* disreputable sinners love Jesus? I believe it was because Jesus loved them, not only in word, but in truth and action. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, chose to be associated with disreputable sinners. That has always fascinated me. It's also disturbed and frightened me. I'm a reputable sinner who doesn't like to be too closely associated with disreputable sinners. And I have a need to spell out clearly that I'm against disreputable sin. You see, I'm afraid that if I become too sympathetic with disreputable sinners, that is, with people whose sins ~~everybody knows about~~ ^{most people} and condemns, if I become too sympathetic with them, reputable sinners might see me as condoning disreputable sin.

Jesus said, "I lay down my life." No one took his life. Of course Judas betrayed him into the hands of the religious leaders. They handed him over to Pilate. He turned him over to the soldiers who drove the nails in his hands and feet. But Jesus freely gave his life. He freely chose to take the place of disreputable sinners and share their pain, shame, guilt and rejection. Jesus loved, not only in word and speech, but in truth and action.

A religion that loves in word and speech but which doesn't love in action will wallop you with God's commandments. It will condemn you for not living up to them in your own life. Religion can clobber you for your failures. It can send you groveling in the sawdust of defeat.

I attended a conference a number of years ago where I met a middle age man who had come to the conference hurting and shamed because of who he

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was. He felt condemned by a religion who loved in word and speech, but not in action.

Religion sometimes does this to us; it tells us that we're forever wrong unless we measure up to God's ideal. I tried to speak to this man of God's love for sinners but my words seemed hollow because they weren't accompanied by the kind of action that Jesus took when he so closely identified with disreputable sinners that he was condemned for being one himself. I drew back from my sad-eyed friend who'd experienced from the church so much hatred, pain and rejection. I drew back from him. I didn't want to get too close to him. I wanted Christ to come to him, but I didn't want to get too close to him. But Christ comes to people primarily through us who claim him as our Lord and Savior.

Our epistle lesson talks about commandments. "All who obey his commandments abide in him." It's not at all surprising that God gives us commandments and wants us to obey them. It's not surprising that God wants us to be good and pure and chaste. The surprising thing is that Christ doesn't make us good and pure and chaste by bullying us into moral improvement. It's only when God, freely, *freely*, persuades us, not just through words but through the Cross of Jesus, that he accepts us the way we are that we begin to feel the power to obey his commandments. When we feel sure that, because of Christ's death and through Christ's death, we can never be condemned for what we are, or *who* we are... that no judgment, no guilt can hurt us, then, and only then, the power of God's love in Jesus Christ begins to work in us.

Don Quixote was a ridiculous knight who came riding on his silly donkey to conquer the world. He ended up charging windmills, but he had one

powerful ability. He was able to make life better for someone by persuading her that she was all right when she was all wrong. He met this dirty woman in a dirty tavern in a dirty little town. She wasn't a good woman; in fact, everyone in town knew she was a bad woman. Since they all knew she was bad, they all treated her like a hopelessly dirty sinner. And, since everyone treated her like a hopelessly dirty sinner, she felt *she must be* a hopelessly dirty sinner. So she acted the part to the hilt.

Then Don Quixote rode into town. He looked at her through the spectacles of his love. And what he saw was a beautiful woman. He broke through the icy judgment of the moral majority and declared her to be a beautiful and wonderful person. And when she was sure that Don Quixote really meant it, when she finally embraced the love with which he embraced her, she began to feel the power of love that's not just in word or speech but in truth and action. She *became* what Don Quixote *saw*.

When Jesus comes to us, riding into Jerusalem on his silly donkey,^{riding to his death} we're not dealing with a fictional knight. When we're dealing with Jesus Christ we're dealing with a holy and just God who expects us to be holy and knows that we're not because ^{God} he knows everything. But in Jesus, God comes to us ^{because of Christ's death} as the Good Shepherd and works with us, and in us, on the premise that we're forgiven and righteous and pure and chaste, when, in fact, we know all along that we're not. And the moment we *believe* what he *declares* us to be we ^{begin} ~~to~~ *begin* to be liberated from our private burden of failures and given power to become, not in a moment or overnight but eventually, the sort of person God wants us to be. *And I shall dwell in my house & my heart because*

Let us pray: O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sources: Lewis Smedes, How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?

Prayers of the People

We thank you, God, that you have always loved the world you have made. We thank you that in Jesus this love of yours was fully expressed, not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. We thank you that he was known as the friend of those whom most people despised, and that he shared his plans and his work with ordinary men and women like ourselves. We thank you for the honor of being called his friends, and we pray that we may not let him down.

We know that this friendship has not always seemed real to us. We are sorry that we're so worried about how others think of us, and so little worried about the way we think of others. So often we live and think and act as if your love weren't there. We're sorry, too, that we do so little to make your friendship real to other people. We pray that we may be forgiven, and that you will show us how we may be better friends and followers of Jesus.

And now, as Jesus has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...

Neighborhood Service

Ed Neeligh

Howard & Dale Perkins

Jean Appleton

Viola Swunden

Marion Milburn

Stephane McQueen

Bill Townsend

{ Mike Wilson

{ Amr Terry