

Living Under the Cross

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, February 27, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38.

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

This is an extremely difficult thing that Jesus says. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Mark 8:34-36

I've been familiar with that Bible verse from the time I was a little boy. I remember hearing it taught in Sunday School class. I remember Rev. Adams preaching on it. And, as a little boy, it didn't really sound that hard of a saying. It sounded exciting and adventuresome. I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to follow Christ and even to give up my life for Christ."

I remember coming across a book with a bright red cover in the church library entitled, Foxes', Book of Martyrs. I checked it out, took it home and read it. It told the stories of men and women and even young boys and girls who gave up their lives for the sake of Christ. I thought, how thrilling to be a Christian during the Roman Empire when Christians were persecuted and thrown to lions.

That book inspired me to want to risk all for Christ. I used to dream that one day I'd become a missionary and go to South America, to a tribe in the Amazon who had never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And maybe, if I were lucky, those native South Americans would put me in a big black kettle and eat me for dinner. What could be a better than to lose my life like this for the sake of Christ?

I grew older and the dream of being eaten for Christ began to fade. But in my senior year of high school I read another book entitled, Men Possessed by God. It told the story of the desert monks, Christians who lived after the Roman Emperor, Constantine, became a Christian. Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. The persecution of Christians stopped and pagan persecutions began. Men and women streamed into the church because it was the popular and safe thing to do.

Some Christians believed that Christianity was being watered down and made too easy and safe. No longer was it necessarily to risk your life to be baptized and to follow Christ. They reminded these new Christians that Jesus said that it's necessary to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. So some Christians denied themselves by leaving their homes and families and possessions and going into the desert to pray for the world and battle with the devil. These monks followed a very strict diet and discipline that emphasized self denial. People came out into the desert to hear these monks preach and many were converted.

As I read that book about these desert monks, these men possessed by God I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to become a monk. To deny myself, to leave family, friends, and possessions for the sake of Christ?" I bought a little book entitled, Nine to Five in a little Roman Catholic bookstore in Wilmington. It detailed the life of Franciscan Monks who go to bed at 9 p.m. and get up at 5 a.m. to pray for the world. The life of a Franciscan Monk really appealed to me until I thought a little more about the vows they had to take of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Poverty wasn't too bad. My dad actually took pride in being poorer than others so I didn't think poverty

would be so bad. And obedience didn't bother me. I've always done things by the book and followed the rules. But then there was chastity. I was fairly certain that God had not given me the gift of chastity. I thought that Chastity might present a problem somewhere down the road, so my dream of becoming a monk faded.

Through all of this I began to wonder if just an ordinary person could follow Jesus. Do you have to be killed and eaten by cannibals in order to be a true follower of Jesus? Do you have to become a monk and give up family in order to follow Jesus? Is that the only way to follow? Can we be a follower of Christ and be just an ordinary man or woman? Can we be a follower of Jesus and live in an ordinary house, get married, have kids, hold down a job, change diapers, vacuum the house, help with homework, own a car and go out to dinner every once in a while? Can we be a follower of Christ and be a farmer or a basketball player or own a business?

This is one of the questions the Reformation of the 16th Century addressed in great detail. At that time, there was a widespread feeling that the only way you could be a first class Christian was to become a monk, priest, nun or a missionary. But people like Martin Luther and John Calvin rediscovered the Biblical teaching that ordinary people are called by Jesus to follow him in their homes, in factories, and businesses. In our baptism we are all called to renounce evil and its power in the world; to renounce sin and its power in our own lives; and to turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Lord and Savior, and be faithful followers of Christ to the end of our lives.

Christ calls ordinary men and women, young and old, to follow him.

I think of a group of business men and women from various churches who meet

regularly in a restaurant every month for prayer, the study of the Bible and mutual support. These men and women come together with the specific purpose of shoring the issues and problems they face in being faithful and obedient to Christ in the complexities of business and corporation life. They sometimes share some of their temptations and failures in order to learn better how to follow Jesus in the world of business. They tell about the ways their thinking and reactions are being transformed as they try to deny self and follow Christ. They talk as if they actually expect, anticipate, and rejoice in Christ's control of their thinking and actions. They want the Risen Christ to be very alive and present not only their meetings but on the battlefield in their offices and factories. They are discovering what it means to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Christ

I think of a group of mothers who meet weekly for mutual support. A Christian father or mother who wants to follow Christ in raising their children knows something of self denial. I think of the single mom or dad who could sleep in on Sunday morning but instead, rouses one, two or three young, often unwilling, children to get them ready for Sunday School and Church. But they want the best for their children. They want their children to know and follow Christ. So they deny themselves for the sake of Christ. Christ calls us ordinary people to follow him and that requires self denial and a cross.

But, let's stop here for a moment to change gears. We've talked about how it's possible for ordinary men and women to follow Christ. You don't have to become a missionary although we certainly should be open to God's call to the mission field. God calls us ordinary men and women, young and old, to deny ourselves, take up our

cross and follow him.

But why would any of us want to follow Christ? Christ ended up on a cross. Why would any success oriented American want to follow a Palestinian Jew who ended his life on a cross, accused of sedition? There are at least three things that I find so attractive about Jesus. Three things that make me really want to follow Christ, no matter what it might cost.

For one thing, the Jesus we read about in the Gospels is someone who seemed to know what life is all about. People who knew Jesus knew that in him was life. He lived a joyful and courageous and meaningful life even though he didn't have anywhere near as much as we have. He has the secret of life and I would like to know what that secret is.

For another thing, I want to follow Jesus because he knew God and I have so many uncertainties. Jesus knew God as Father. Jesus was utterly confident in God's gracious will and followed God's will even when it lead him to the cross. I need and want that kind of confidence in God's gracious will. I need and want to know God as Jesus did so that I can face the uncertain future with the assurance of God's gracious will for me and the whole world.

For a third thing, I want to follow Jesus because he cared so deeply about people and I'm deeply aware that I don't care as he did or that the things I care about so much, he didn't seem to care much about. Think of just one story in the Gospels. Remember how Jesus came to the home of Mary and Martha three days after their brother, Lazarus, had died. Jesus knew that within a half hour he would raise Lazarus from the dead. Yet, knowing this, we read that Jesus wept. Jesus wept because he

cared so much for people who had lost loved ones. Even though he knew he would soon raise Lazarus, Jesus cared about the sorrow Mary and Martha and the friends of Lazarus was feeling. Jesus cared deeply about people, no matter who they were. I want to follow Jesus in order that I might learn something from him about caring for people.

I still have the dream of losing my life for the sake of Christ. I no longer dream of being eaten by cannibals for the sake of Christ. I no longer dream of becoming a monk with the life of self denial that entails. I want to follow Christ as a man, as a husband, a father, a brother, a pastor, a neighbor, and a citizen. I discover whenever I follow Christ in my various roles it requires a measure of self denial. And I sometimes choose not to follow Christ because of my distaste for self denial.

But I do believe this. God doesn't want to rob us of our joy. Christ came to give us life; to enable us to know God and care deeply about one another. So whatever it is that God tell us to deny ourselves can't be worth whatever it is that God wants to give us in its place.

God of mercy, you are full of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy, and always ready to forgive. Grant us grace to renounce all evil and to cling to Christ, that in every way we may prove to be your loving children; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.