

## Maundy Thursday

A sermon preached at Union Presbyterian Church on Maundy Thursday, April 16, 1992 by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA. Scripture Lessons: Psalm 23, Isaiah 53, Luke 15:1-7.

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

We all know this story so well. Most of us first heard it in Sunday School or maybe even in our homes. The shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness and searches for one lost sheep. In the days of Jesus the leopard, panther, and lion were still in Palestine (Barclay). It was dangerous to go off alone into the wilderness. We don't know how long he searched but it may have taken days of climbing over rugged boulders and avoiding deep crevasses to find the lost sheep (Bailey). When the shepherd finds the sheep the hardest job is still before him. He has to get this heavy animal, weighing as much as a large dog, back to the flock. ~~He lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. He accepts this back breaking job with~~ joy (Bailey). When he gets back to his village he gathers his relatives, friends and neighbors and invites them to rejoice with him over this lost sheep.

Christians see, in the Shepherd, God who, in Jesus, comes down from heaven to earth to find the lost human race. The Bible does not tell the story of men and women who diligently look for a God who is lost. The Bible tells the story of men and women who are lost and perishing apart from Christ. Everyone who is a Christian must identify to some degree with the lost sheep in this parable. We come to the Lord's Table as repentant sinners over whom the angels in heaven rejoice.

Some people find it easier than others to see themselves as lost sinners. There's a large tombstone in the village of Olney, England that marks the grave of

John Newton, the man who wrote the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. On that gravestone is written these words:

JOHN NEWTON  
CLERK  
ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE  
A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA  
WAS  
BY THE RICH MERCY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR  
JESUS CHRIST  
PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED,  
AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH  
HE HAD LONG LABORED TO DESTROY

Newton was the son of a sea captain who was engaged in the Mediterranean trade. His mother died when he was six, and after only two years of formal schooling he joined his father's ship at the age of eleven. His early life was one of immorality, debauchery, blasphemy and failure. He was rejected by his father, in trouble with all his employers, and finally jailed and degraded. In later years he served on slave ships, where he so incurred the hatred of his employer's African slave wife that he became virtually a "slave of slaves."

But the Good Shepherd came searching for Newton. "Through many dangers, toils, and snares" he passed until, finally, during a violent storm in which he almost lost his life he repented and was converted. The Good Shepherd found him and brought him home rejoicing. The angels in heaven rejoiced over his repentance and conversion. At the age of thirty-nine, John Newton became a minister and gave the rest of his life to serving God in the church. He became the leading opponent of the slave trade in late 18th century England. During his fifteen years as pastor at Olney he wrote many hymns including the most famous of all his hymns, *Amazing*

*Grace.*

That hymn, which the choir will sing, is his testimony. He wrote, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found." He saw himself as the lost sheep in the parable and he saw Jesus as his Saviour. Near the end of his life he said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour."

We can't really understand why Jesus died or why he instituted the Lord's Supper until we see ourselves, like John Newton, as lost sinners who need to repent and trust in Jesus to carry us home to God. This is very difficult for many of us because we, perhaps, have never experienced the kind of gross sins that John Newton did. We're more like the Scribes and Pharisees who've been raised in the church, who have, perhaps always gone to church, and who have an interest in religious things.

I remember as a boy listening to the testimonies of people who had been converted to Christ out of a background of crime, drugs, and sex. It was so foreign to me. I wondered if I could ever be saved. I wanted a dramatic conversion experience like theirs. But I came to know in my heart that I didn't have to do those things in order to be a sinner. I realized that I could sin as much by failing to do what is good as much as by doing what is evil.

The Bible tells us that even scribes and pharisees can be saved. John Wesley is a good example of how a good person came to see himself as a lost sinner in need of repentance. Wesley was born into a Christian home. His father was a

Church of England minister. His mother, Susanna, left a permanent imprint on his life. She educated her 19 children in reading, writing, arithmetic, Latin, Greek, history, literature and religion. She set aside one evening a week for each of her children to talk with them about their educational and spiritual development. When John left for Oxford University he continued to do all that his mother taught him. Referring to his college days, he wrote in his diary, "I still read the Scriptures, and said my prayers morning and evening. And what I now hoped to be saved by, was, (1) not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; and (3) reading the Bible, going to church and saying my prayers."

But one evening, years after he had become a minister, he went to a Bible study in Aldersgate Street. Someone was reading Luther's preface to the *Epistle to the Romans*. "About a quarter before nine," Wesley wrote, "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."

Wesley's testimony shows that not only sinners and tax-collectors, but also scribes and pharisees can come to see themselves as lost sheep.

Jesus is here tonight to eat and drink with us. But in order to receive the bread and the cup worthily we must see ourselves as one whom Jesus has found and brought home to God. We must see ourselves as repentant sinners over whom the angels in heaven rejoice.

“Who ought to the Lord’s Table?”, the Heidelberg Catechism asks. “Those who are displeased with themselves for their sins, and who nevertheless trust that these sins have been forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the passion and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and improve their life. The impenitent and hypocrites, however, eat and drink judgment to themselves.”

Let us come to the Lord’s Table as those who can sing with John Newton, “I once was lost, but now am found.”