

## My Servants, Whom I Uphold

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 10, 1999.  
Scripture lesson: Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17.

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

Saturday, January 02, 1999, just a little over a week ago. The headline in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette read, "Man dies when wheelchair topples on snowy night." The article went on to say, "Justin Bradley went to Edinboro University to take advantage of its renowned program for students with disabilities. And, ironically, it was probably in this same spirit of independence that Bradley, who used a wheelchair, declined an offer for a ride home from a New Year's celebration early Friday morning to his residence on the Edinboro University campus and said he would get himself home, despite the blizzard-like conditions. Bradley, 22, died during that half-mile trip home. His body was found Friday afternoon behind the student union, off the campus sidewalks, with his wheelchair tipped over.... Bradley was found wearing only a fleece pullover jacket and face mask but no gloves...." Bradley was probably about 500 yards from his dorm. He was enrolled in the university through its nationally known program for students with disabilities. "One of the reasons why these young people come to college here is to become independent," a university spokesperson said.

There's a lot to be said in favor of independence. We want our children to grow up and become independent. We encourage independent thinking. We encourage people to grow up and become independent of parents, independent of teachers, independent of family, *traditions* independent of church, independent of God. But we sometimes take independence *too* so far.

We also need one another. We need to be connected to one another. We need families. *we need traditions...* We need teachers. We need communities. We need government. We need the church. We need God. *even fatal* It can be dangerous to become independent of these institutions and persons and relationships.

A lot of people live independent from the church. They feel that they don't need the church even though they believe in God. They believe in Jesus. Many claim a born again *a personal relationship* religious experience. They've accepted Jesus as their Savior but they live independently of

Isaiah speaks of the servant of the Lord. An individual. The nation, Christ

Isaiah the prophet painted a word picture of what ever elder, deacon and minister should look like. A servant of God. God's servants are chosen to serve God's people and the world. Chosen to bring forth justice to the nations. Our elders and deacons show us that the church is larger than this congregation. The world is our parish. We bring forth justice to the nations through our mission giving and through participating in work missions and through praying for brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. Isaiah tells us that God's servant deals gently with sinners. With those who are weak and bruised and crushed. God's servant teaches about God and our relationship to God and one another. God's servant is called to bring light into the darkness of people's lives, to open the eyes of people who have been unable to see God. We're all called to be servants of the living God through our baptism. Not just elders and deacons but all of us have our ministry. And until we all discover that everyone of us is a servant of God, everyone of us has a ministry to perform - we won't be the church God wants us to be.

I hope the parents and friends of Justin Bradley have a church family. I hope God enters the darkness of their lives with the light of hope. His friends and family surely feel bruised and broken. They surely are experiencing darkness. May God's servants open their eyes to the presence and power and love of Jesus Christ. May these new elders and deacons help to open our eyes to the presence and power of God this year.

*PP Sometimes because of bad experiences.*

God's people and the sacraments. They feel no need for communal worship, or maybe they've experienced communal worship as tedious and dry and boring and have given up on it. Maybe they've looked for fellowship in the church and were disappointed. Nobody called them when they were sick. A loved one died and the pastor didn't visit. The church offered no help to bring you through a personal crisis. So people live independently of the church.

I don't think that's good. I believe it's destructive of our relationship to God. Last Thursday at our Whole Grief Support Group one of the participants spoke of how her faith and her church brought her through her mother's death. "I don't know what I would have done without my faith; without my church family."

I'll be the first to admit that our church is not what it should be. And we aren't what, by God's grace, we will be one day: A family of Christians dedicated to proclaiming the unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ to the local and world community."

Today we ordain and install newly elected deacons and elders. What we're doing is recognizing that we need one another. We can't survive living independently of one another. None of us is perfect. All of us are broken, bruised, and fallen men and women. Don't look at me or these elders and deacons and expect to find sinless perfection. We are not what we shall be. But we are what we are by the grace of God. We have answered the call to be God's servants, servants of the people of God.

When we ordain and install new elders and deacons we're reminded that we're dependent on one another. We can't maintain spiritual life independent of one another. We're connected. Connected to one another through solemn vows. Connected to Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly through our Confessions and Book of Order. Connected to past generations through the laying on of hands. We need one another. Independent living is good. But we also need community. We need one another.

We need to pray for another. We need to listen to one another. We need to encourage one another. We need to bear one another's burdens. We need to discipline one another. We need to challenge one another to be what God wants us to be.