

Proclamation Is Our Central Task

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 25, 1998. Scripture lessons: Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14.

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

Have you ever tried to speak and been unable? I've visited stroke victims robbed of their ability to speak. Tears of frustration stream down their cheeks as they try to speak. But more tragic are Christians who *are* able to speak but go through life saying nothing about Christ, not even to invite a friend to a bible study or a worship. Dr. Martin Marty in an interview in *USA Today* wrote that inviting people to church is one of the key reasons Southern Baptist churches recover their church drop-outs as well as they do. Baptists, says Marty, are taught to invite. He goes on to say that other traditions do not do so well. "the average (Presbyterian) invites someone to church once every twenty-eight years. Americans don't come unless invited." Gary Demarest writes, "... many of us seem to carry our faith in a file marked 'personal and confidential.'"

Now turn to our Epistle Lesson. It contains some of the very last words written by the apostle Paul. Paul is in prison. He's writing within weeks, perhaps days, of his martyrdom outside of Rome. For about 30 years, without intermission, he has traveled throughout the Eastern half of the Roman Empire proclaiming Jesus as Lord. He has fought a good fight, finished his course, and kept the faith. And now Paul is on trial for his life. He has already had a preliminary hearing. In one of the highest courts of the empire, before his judges and perhaps before the emperor himself, with a large crowd of the general public present, Paul courageously proclaimed the Gospel. He writes, "the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it."

For Paul, proclamation was the central task of the church. He lived and died proclaiming the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The church today lives and dies proclaiming the good news. We will surely die as a church if proclamation does not become, once again, our central task. Proclamation is our declared central task. Look at the mission statement. We are "a family of Christians dedicated to proclaiming the unconditional love and leadership of Jesus Christ to the local and world community."

Ask your friends, "When you think of the Oxford Presbyterian Church what comes to mind?" The steeple? The size of the building? The beautiful stained glass windows shining in all their glory at night? Our pre-school? The place where so many scouts meet? The location of Head Start and Early Intervention? Some people think of wealth and power. I would like our church to be known as a place where countless men and women and children have come to know and serve Jesus Christ. One says, "I met Christ in a worship service there and my life has been changed forever." Another says, "I learned there that Christ is Lord of all of life, of politics and economics as well as religion." And a third testifies, "I came to love God with my mind while attending Sunday School there." A fourth says, "I participated in a work mission project and discovered that faith in Jesus Christ entails sacrificial commitment."

What do we want Oxford Presbyterian Church to be known for? I want us to be known for the proclamation of the Gospel. I think of the epitaph on Thomas Jefferson's tomb in Monticello, just outside Charlottesville, Virginia. Jefferson has always been one of my heroes, so several years ago I took our family to visit Monticello. We stood before Jefferson's tomb. The inscription on it reads, "here is buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of The University of Virginia." The surprising thing - there's no mention that he was Governor of Virginia, member of Congress, Ambassador to France, Secretary of State, Vice President of the United States, or even President of the United States. The reason? Probably Jefferson wrote his own epitaph. He wanted, above all, to be remembered for his love of freedom. Nothing else mattered, not even being President of the United States (Harrington). Our church has accomplished many things but none of it matters if we don't come to know and follow Jesus Christ in sacrificial ways through the proclamation of the Gospel.

How can we begin to make the proclamation of the Gospel more central to the life of our church? How can we get ourselves to talk about our faith to those outside? We can begin by talking about Christ among ourselves even if it means only that we talk about our doubts at first. Get together in small groups after church or in a Sunday School class. Share the meaning of your faith

or your lack of faith with one another over a cup of coffee. List some of the most significant people in your faith development? List some of the most significant events in your spiritual journey? Learn the basics of the Christian faith through personal and group Bible Study. If there isn't a Sunday school class that meets your need then talk to one another about what you want and need. What if each of us decided to develop a significant relationship over the next year with at least one unchurched person with the purpose of earning the right to share our faith in an appropriate way (Demarest)?

The apostle Paul believed passionately that Christ made a difference in his life. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire proclaiming the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the world's only true hope. Despite imprisonment, hunger, storms, beatings, false accusations, in season and out of season he proclaimed the Gospel. He was able to do so because he believed that Christ was with him. "When I was on trial, no one came to my support," Paul writes. "All deserted me. They were afraid. But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength." Think of times when the Lord has stood by you and given you strength. I'm thrilled when Kathy Lilley stands up and shares with us with so much obvious excitement about the Bible club at Octarora and the parents and students who are leading it. When has the Lord stood by you: perhaps through a divorce, through the loss of a loved one, when a child was born, when you graduated, when you were traveling in a far away place.

Proclamation of the Gospel must become the central task of our church, and of every member - not something peripheral. There's a mission field just outside the door of our church. Up and down Market Street, third street, in the new developments. There are people who need Jesus Christ.

St. Paul wrote from a prison. More recently Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail* where he was imprisoned for the sake of the liberating message of the gospel. He wrote, "We (Christians) are to be more than theological thermometers just *measuring* the temperature of our time. We are, instead, to be thermostats, *setting* the temperature of our time. Our impact is lessened and our proclamation is timid and tepid precisely because we are more 'blenders' than 'proclaimers.'"

Some of you will remember the story of the person walking at night by the seashore when she heard someone crying out for help. She plunged into the surf and at risk to her own life, dragged ashore an almost lifeless body. She administered CPR and artificial respiration until the body began to breathe. The rescuer was elated and the person who was saved was so grateful that, together, they made a covenant to spend time everyday walking up and down the shore listening for the cries of drowning men and women. Over the years men and women were saved. Their numbers increased. Their enthusiasm soared. Then they decided to build a club house. Some rested in the club house while the others searched for drowning people. The club house was enlarged. Comfortable furnishing were added. Eventually more and more time was spent building and repairing the club house and less and less time spent rescuing the lost. The cries of drowning people went unheard within the comfortable, well insulated walls of their club house.

Churches are meant to be places from which members go out to rescue drowning men and women. In the church revived men and women are nursed back to life by the proclamation of the gospel and the medicine of the sacraments. God has called us to proclaim the story of salvation and eternal life. But it becomes easy to sit in a pew and depend upon someone else to do the work. It's easy for us to become complacent and not do the work God has for us. Don't let this happen to Oxford Presbyterian Church! Work, pray, study, serve to make our church a successful lifesaving station for the lost. Help me restore to its central place the proclamation of the Gospel.

Read the pamphlet in your bulletins! Pray! Set aside time today to ask yourself: "What does Christ mean to me? What has been my experience with Christ? I don't care if you're young or old, find somebody with whom to share your faith. Start with someone safe - a fellow believer or a fellow doubter. None of us has all the answers. Dr. D.T. Niles used to say that evangelism is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. These are low level, low risks things you can do and you can do them today and you can help turn the tide.

By your word, O God, your creation sprang forth, and we were given the breath of life. By your word, eternal God, death is overcome, Christ is raised from the tomb, and we are given a new life in the power of your Spirit. May we boldly proclaim this good news, by the words of our mouths and the deeds of our lives, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.