

## Rebuilding the Community of Faith

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on November 22, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 9-10 (selected verses).

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

Ira was a boy I knew (or, should I say, I pretended I didn't know) when I was in ninth grade. Ira was different. He was very smart but he was different. We had a school dance one Friday. I got dressed up in my black slacks, a pink shirt, and my ~~black and the same pink and black tie, which I wore last week.~~ Nearly every boy there wore black slacks and a pink shirt. But not Ira. Ira came to the dance in his Boy Scout uniform. He stuck out like a sore thumb. He didn't even seem to notice that he was the only one there wearing a Boy Scout uniform. He even wore the Sash with all his merit badges. Everyone avoided him. None of the girls would dance with him. He stood there all by himself, separate from everybody. Ira was different. Ira was down right weird.

I thought of Ira when I was preparing my sermon. God has always called his people to be an odd, peculiar people but we've never really like that idea. Our ancestors in the faith, the Jews, had returned to Jerusalem. They had rebuilt their temple. They had reconstructed the walls of the city. Now they had assembled to hear the Law of God read. Upon hearing the Law of God, perhaps for the first time in many years, they were overcome with a dread sense of guilt because the Law of God reminded them of how God had wanted them to be different from the other nations. Then those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors and they

made a firm agreement in writing indicating their intent to renew their covenant with the Lord. They made a public declaration of their intention to be a peculiar, separated, people.

God wants us to be a separated people. The Law of God says, "You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine (Lev. 20:26)." And the Apostle Paul wrote, "come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:17)."

But you say, "I don't like to be odd or separate. I don't want to be like your friend, Ira. So when I'm with the guys and they take the Lord's name in vain I will too so they won't think I'm different. And when they tell racist and sexist and gay bashing jokes, I'll laugh even though I know it's wrong because I want to be accepted. I don't want to be separated from my friends. I want to be like them. Besides, how could I ever get them interested in coming to church if I'm too different?"

And when you think about it, the idea that God wants us to separate ourselves from others ~~and to his law~~ sounds a little snobbish. When I was in high school a few guys wore ties and sport coats to school every day. They were the guys who lived up on the hill in big houses across from the Newark Country Club. They drove to school in their own cars and ~~got good grades and~~ went off to Harvard and Yale. They hung around with one another at dances. They invited people just

like them to their parties. They didn't hang around with guys like me. They were separate. I felt that they kept to themselves because they thought they were better than the rest of us.

God wants us to be separated from others and to his law but he doesn't want us to look down on others as if to say, "We're God's people and you aren't." There's a fine line between being a separated people and being self-righteous pharisees.

Now I know I'm irritating some of you, at least I hope I am. You know that the Presbyterian Church, historically, has been committed to transforming the culture rather than separating ourselves from the culture. The Amish separate themselves. We're not like the Amish. We immerse ourselves in the culture. We are like salt in society. We work within the system to change the system. We get involved in society, in politics, in service organizations, in labor unions, in cultural exchanges. We pride ourselves that there've been more Presbyterians in the senate and congress and as Presidents than any other denomination.

But those who become immersed in the culture in order to change it are often changed by the culture. <sup>we think we're changing the culture when, in fact, our culture is changing us.</sup> We have a tendency to equate the values and goals of our culture and our nation with the values and goals of the Kingdom of God. Sometimes we give the impression that there's not much difference between a Presbyterian and a good, upstanding, citizen.

But God wants us to be a separate people. Baptism separates us from the nations of the world and initiates us into God's kingdom where the law says if someone strikes you on the right cheek you don't hit back and where the poor and

those who are persecuted ~~from~~<sup>for</sup> righteousness sake are blessed.

Let me tell you about a few odd, peculiar people I've known who are in many ways separate from the people around them.

I think of a college class mate named Roy. It was back in the mid sixties. The war in Vietnam was heating up. We all had 2-S student deferments. After graduation most of my friends would lose their student deferments. Some of my friends were in ROTC and were eager to graduate and go to Viet Nam if necessary. One friend, Jim Parmelee, was killed when he stepped on a land mine. Some of my friends were opposed to the war. One of my friends burned his draft card which was a fairly safe thing to do since he already had a deferment. Some talked about going to Canada. I didn't have to worry about any of this because I was on my way to seminary with a guaranteed three year 4-D deferment for divinity students.

But Roy was in a separate class. I remember talking one night with Roy about the war. He said, "You know, Ted, most of those Vietnamese don't know Christ as their savior. I figure if I go over there I might have to kill some of them and they'd very likely go to hell."

Roy applied for and received CD status. He was safe. He didn't have to worry about the war. But what does he do? He turns around and goes to Vietnam as a missionary. When the Americans left, Roy stayed. He's still over there sharing the gospel and ministering to the people of Vietnam. He's an odd guy. I believe that that's something like what God wants us to be like.

Or I think of another friend, a woman- she calls herself a pro-choice

Christian feminist. She volunteers at an abortion counseling center. She said, "You know, most women I counsel don't want an abortion. Many of these girls tell me, 'I don't like the idea of an abortion but I feel like I have no choice.'"

And then my friend says, "Isn't that ironic. We Presbyterians are pro-choice. I believe in pro-choice but so many of these girls feel that they have no choice. I want to give them a choice. I want to be able to tell these girls, 'I know a family that you can stay with while you're in college and they'll help you raise your child, if you really don't want to have an abortion. And, if your worried about money, I know a church who will foot the medical bill, if you really don't want to have the abortion. But if you really want the abortion I'll support you in your decision and stand by you.'"

My friend is different. She doesn't fit the stereotype of a pro-choice feminist or a pro-lifer. There's something that separates her from the rest of the crowd. I believe God wants his people to be a separated people in that sense, a peculiar people who are able to offer choices to people that the world can't or doesn't want to offer.

Many of you saw the movie, "Chariot's of Fire." Eric Liddell, from Scotland, the worlds' fastest human at the time, goes to the Olympics, but refuses to run on the Lord's Day. His friends urge him to run because if he wins he'll be able to testify of the place of Christ in his life. The Prince of Wales calls him a traitor to his country because he refuses to run on the Lord's Day. Eric was in a separate class as an athlete. He was different.

Most people don't realize that Eric went on to become a missionary to China. He separated himself from his own nation. He taught science at the Anglo-Chinese College in Tientsin and then decided to tackle the more arduous task of rural evangelism, traveling many miles in rugged conditions by foot and bicycle. When the Japanese invaded, Eric stayed. Eventually he was arrested and taken to a concentration camp in Shantung province where he died in 1945 just before the war was over. When Eric died, one of the women in the camp, a Russian prostitute, said that Eric Liddell was the only man who had ever done anything for her, and not wanted to be repaid in kind.

Most of us, including myself, come to church in the reluctant hope of being made different... and of gaining the courage to be separated to the Law of God. We belong to the church. We belong to God. We're made up of people God has separated. <sup>The Greek word for church is ecclesia. The called-out</sup> from the nations to be a peculiar people. <sup>The separated one</sup> We've separated ourselves this morning from those outside the church not because we're better than they are. We're not better. We're here because God has called us, because we know we need God's forgiveness, because we hope God will give us the courage and strength to be different for Christ and his kingdom.

Only if the church is different can we make a difference. Only if God's people, you and me, are different and separate ourselves from the false values of our friends and culture can we change the world.