

Sowing and Reaping

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 1989 (at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic church). Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 21:1-3, 17-21; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 6:7-18; Luke 10:1-12, 17-20.

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

You may have read a letter to Ann Landers or Abigail Van Buren, I don't which it was. A woman... married for 25 years... was writing. She wrote, "One month after my husband and I were married I got a phone call late at night. It was a police precinct in Washington D.C. My husband had been arrested for soliciting a prostitute. I couldn't believe it. I rushed down to the jail to post bail. My husband pleaded innocent. I believed him. For the next 25 years my husband had one affair after another. Everybody seemed to know about his philandering but me. The facts were there but I just refused to see them. For 25 years my husband deceived me but what is even worse, I deceived myself."

About 2 months ago... I was flipping the channels one night looking for something just to help me relax. I came across a documentary drama about the man who was the founder of alcoholics anonymous. He started drinking with his army buddies and sometimes he'd drink too much... but a lot of guys were drinking too much. He got out of the army... got married... and got into stocks and bonds and money speculation and was quite successful. *around WWI*
Even though Prohibition was in effect he never had trouble finding something to drink.
He found that drinking helped him relax. There were a couple of martinis at lunch. At dinner there was more. In the evening there was still more. He thought he was more affable after a few drinks. When the bottom fell out of the stock market in 1929 he lost nearly everything. He started drinking more and more. His friends noticed that he was going too far... he was drinking too much... too often. His wife expressed increasing concern. His father-in-law took him aside. But he insisted he didn't have a problem. For nearly twenty years he practically killed himself from drinking too

much... his liver... his spleen was shot. And yet he continued to deceive himself about his alcoholism. Not until his marriage was on the rocks, and he was in the hospital close to death did he finally stop deceiving himself. Finally he was able to say to himself and to a few others, "I'm a drunk." Once he was able to admit that... once he was able to stop deceiving himself... he started back on the long road to recovery and sobriety and to the founding of the organization, Alcoholics Anonymous, ^{in 1935} which has helped so many.

It's so easy to deceive ourselves... deceive ourselves about serious problems our children may have... about the health of our marriage until it's almost too late... about the little lies we sometimes tell to get ourselves off the hook. But most serious of all, it's so easy to deceive ourselves about our relationship to God and to Jesus Christ.

That's what the Apostle Paul was concerned about. "Don't deceive yourselves," Paul warns. Why did he write that? Paul had just spent five chapters telling the Christians in Galatians to let no one rob them of their freedom as Christians. There were some Christians... probably Jewish Christians... Paul sometimes called them "Judaizers"... who insisted that a person wasn't really a Christian unless they kept the Old Testament law of Moses... they must abstain from certain foods... they must follow all the Jewish ceremonies and festivals... and if they don't they aren't really Christians.

What was Paul's response to the Judaizers? Anger! In highly emotional language, Paul spells out that, of all people, Christians are most free and must never submit to the rules and regulations of these Judaizers. If we've been baptized into Christ we've put on Christ... we belong to Christ... and we'll trust in Christ to save us and we'll put no confidence in the law

to save us... not even the law of God.

"A person is not put right with God by doing what the Law of Moses requires, but by faith in Jesus Christ. We are put right with God through faith in Christ... not by trying to do what the law of God commands." That's what Paul wrote.

But you see... that teaching could lead Christians to self deception. It could lead us to think that because Christ has set us free... and because we're put right with God through faith in Christ alone and not by good works... that we can live like hell and still go to heaven. Paul writes, "Don't deceive yourselves. No one makes a fool of God."

One of the things that makes a parent madder than anything else is when a child thinks he or she can make a fool of their parents... pull the wool over dad's eyes. Paul is saying that we can't pull the wool of God's eyes. No one makes a fool of God. Literally, the Greek means... "Nobody turns up their nose at God!" Did you ever turn up your nose to your parents? If you did it was probably when their backs were turned. I remember one occasion... I was about 6 I guess. I was in the kitchen and my mother told me to do something I didn't want to do. There was an argument. I lost the argument and my mother made me do whatever it was she wanted me to do... and when her back was turned I stuck up my nose at her and placed my thumb (like this) to my nose to show her. I hadn't counted on her turning around when she did. She caught me in the act and I reaped a spanking for what I had sown... because my mother loved me... because I belonged to her... because she didn't want me to grow up to be a smart-alec.

God loves us. Christ died for us. Christ didn't spend those hours on the cross with the weight of our sins on his shoulders so that we might go out

and live like hell. He didn't go to hell for us... in our place... so that we might live for ourselves... enslaved by our own selfish desires. That would be a mockery of the cross of Christ. And God will not be mocked. God will not let us, his children... whom God loves... whom Christ died for... make a fool of him anymore than my mother would let me make a fool of her. He died that we might really live... that we might be truly free to obey him out of gratitude and love for what he's done for us.

Don't be deceived. Christ died, not so that we could go on our selfish way... living to please ourselves... but he died to make us like himself. As we read in our Gospel lesson... he sends us out to carry on his ministry... to be the Body of Christ in this world... to heal the sick and to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near. God sends us out to sow the seeds of justice and peace and healing and salvation in this world and he assures us that we will reap what we sow.

Let me change gears for a moment. In the last several weeks I don't know how often I've been asked, "What's happening with the church? Why isn't anything being done? Why haven't we started to rebuild?" Newspapers call me asking me those questions. Every day church members ask me. I run into people in the streets or in stores. "When are you going to rebuild? How come nothing's happening?" And it does seem like nothing's happening when you see the charred remains of our church buildings.

But there's a lot happening beneath the surface. Beneath the surface seeds have been sown. The process of rebuilding has already begun. I don't know much about farming but I know that seeds that are sown sometimes take months before they produce a harvest. We planted some strawberries in our garden this year. Kay tells me that they won't produce any

God created the universe in such a way that he does not really have to punish sin... sin has its own harvest... if we reap some the seeds of selfishness we will reap the harvest of loneliness.

He gives his Spirit &

strawberries this year. We'll have to wait a whole year. You can go out in the garden every day and look around and there doesn't seem to be much happening. You can't see the tomatoes growing. They look like there just sitting there doing nothing. The only things that look like they're growing are the weeds. Weeds grow much faster than good stuff. But the things I enjoy take a long time to grow.

Farmers don't plant, usually, until the soil has been cultivated and prepared. Sometimes they let the ground lie fallow. You just don't go out and throw seeds on the ground one day and come back the next for the harvest. The farmer has to decide what the best seed is for that particular soil. The farmer has to decide what the best crop will be... what will be the most marketable. And as Christians we want to be sure that we plant the right seeds for soil of Oxford... seeds that will produce a harvest to eternal life.

The harvest we're looking for as Christians is not simply a new building. A rebuilt sanctuary is simply a means to that harvest. It's more like a tractor or some other kind of farm machinery. It's something that helps us to do the work of cultivating and planting and harvesting. The harvest we look for in Oxford, and in this nation, and in the world, is God's final victory, God's triumph. We work... we plant seeds... we pray... we plan... we begin rebuilding for the day when God's kingdom will come and God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. "So let us not become tired of doing good; for if we do not give up the time will come when we will reap the harvest." AMEN