

Take, Eat, and Live

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Maundy Thursday, March 23, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 116:12-19; Hebrews 10:16-25; Luke 22:7-20.

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

In the thirty-first chapter of Jeremiah we have the prophecy of a new covenant. "The LORD says, 'The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah... I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs.'"

Jesus had this passage in mind on that night he was betrayed, when he said, "This cup is God's new covenant sealed with my blood, which is poured out for you." Jesus was establishing, at the cost of His life, the New Covenant, the new relation between God and God's people. There are three things that I want to share with you tonight about this New Covenant. First, it's not like the Old Covenant. Secondly, it's written on the hearts of God's people. And, thirdly, it promises the forgiveness of sins.

1. The New Covenant is not like the Old Covenant in this most important respect. The Old Covenant was written on stone tablets and not on the hearts of God's people.

One prayer that I've prayed over the boys since they were born is, "Lord, open their eyes at an early age to see their need of Jesus." My own understanding of the Bible, influenced as it is by our Reformed Faith, leads me to believe that my boys already enjoy a covenant relationship to God. They're not lost spiritually. They're already members of the household of God. They belong to God. They're God's children. And I hope and pray that they'll never know a day that they haven't known Jesus as their Lord and

Savior.

I realise, however, that their realigion is still pretty much external to them. They come to Sunday School and Church because we bring them. They sing in the choir because we make them. Since they were children their mom and dad have been telling them what to do and they don't always like it. They make their beds, but they don't think to do it on their own. They take baths, but it never occurs to them that they need them. They're children of the Covenant but you might say that they're still largely under the Old Covenant. They still rely upon me and their Sunday School teachers to tell them what to believe. But they believe on the basis of external authorities.

Many people never go beyond this stage in faith development. They believe because they've been told. They never come to a place in their spiritual development that they say, "God is my God."

2. Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote, "Religion begins when God outwardly argued is inwardly experienced. God outside of us is a theory: God inside of us become a fact." That brings us to the second this I want to share with you tonight. In the New Covenant God writes his law on our hearts. People say, "God is my God. Christ is my Savior." God is no longer a theory. God is a fact. Carl Jung, the great pyschotherapist was the son of a Reformed minister in Switzerland. It was a very intellectualized faith that was strong on doctrine and short on experience. He once said that when his father got together with other ministers they'd talk about God as men who have never seen elephants talk about elephants. It was in reaction to this that Jung spent the rest of his life searching for a faith that could be experienced.

Sometimes a man or woman will come to me and say, "I was raised in

the Presbyterian church but I never heard the Gospel. I went to church because my parents made me. But it was all just a bunch of rituals that meant anything to them. But now I've come to know Christ as my personal Savior and we're no longer Presbyterians." There's not usually much I can do to reclaim such people except to say, "Perhaps you know the Lord personally today because your parents took you to Sunday School and church. Could it be that you came to confess your sins to God because you first read that confession of sin in a bulletin. Could it be that you believe in Christ as your personal savior because, week after week, you heard your Presbyterian minister pronounce in words from Scripture the Good News that God so loved the world....?"

Years ago I read Jonathan Edward's, Narrative of Surprising
~~Conversions—He told the story of a young teen-age girl. From childhood~~
here parents had taught her the Westminster Shorter Catechism. She memorized it. She knew it by rote. But it meant nothing to her. But one day she was walking in the fields and the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism came to mind, "What is Sin?" "Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the Law of God." And from that time onward there came over her, not suddenly, but slowly, a growing realization that she was a sinner and that she needed Jesus as her Savior.

I think again of a member of my former congregation in Reedsville, a married woman with two young daughters. She was in her early forties. She'd gone to Church all her life, had been baptized as an infant, confirmed, attended church regularly and she was a sincere believer. And yet, somehow it had never really sunk into her heart that God was her God and that God's people were her people. But one morning she was standing next to her husband reciting the Apostles' Creed during the worship service and

(she said) "It was as though I had awakened out of a dream and I said to myself, 'I believe this. This is really my faith! Jesus Christ really is Lord! He really did rise again from the dead. He really does sit at God's right hand. I do believe in the holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the forgiveness of sins...." God had written the new covenant on her heart.

3. The New Covenant promises the forgiveness of sins. "I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs." It isn't easy for God to forgive. God is holy, righteous. He abhors apartheid, racism, the arrogance of the powerful, the oppression of widows and the poor; he hates idolatry and murder and adultery and covetousness and robbery and the dishonoring of parents. He hates the restlessness that doesn't let us rest one day in seven. It's not easy for God to forgive these sins or any sins.

~~The only way God can forgive is by taking all the hurt and pain and~~
suffering that sin has caused onto himself. And that's what he has done in Jesus. In the garden of gethsemane and on the cross Jesus endured hell for us. He endured the hell that millions of people are now experiencing here on earth. The Cross of Christ tells us that when we cheat or lie or oppress our neighbors we are cheating, lying and oppressing God.

God has promised to write his law on the hearts of his people. He's promised to forgive our sins. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is meant to assure us that God will do what he has promised and that he has made what he has promised possible because of the death of Christ. Tonight, Jesus offers us himself as the bread of life which gives us the power to become true children of the father in heaven. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry; whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Here we realize afresh that he wants to live in us, and us in him. Like the disciples we see in him the nourisher of our souls, the bread of heaven. May the

Spirit gives us ears to hear the Risen Lord say to us,

My broken body thus I give
For you, for all; take, eat, and live;
And of the sacred rite renew
That brings My wondrous love to view.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.