

Thank God for the Church

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, July 16, 1989 in Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church sanctuary. Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 2:1, 6-14; Psalm 139:1-12; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37.

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

Do any of you remember Janis Joplin? Janis Joplin was like a meteorite that flashed across a dark sky. She was one of my favorites along with Bob Dylan, Jimmi Hendrix and Joan Baez. She had a powerful, throaty sound... a white blues singer... she sang with passion... abandon... she sang with despair. It was predicted that she would completely ruin her vocal chords if she kept singing as she did.

It was 1970... she was just about 27 years old... Janis Joplin was found dead from an overdose of heroin... close by was an empty bottle of "Southern Comfort". In the aftermath magazines wrote about her and one of them printed this: "Janis asked an acquaintance after a concert in Michigan, 'Have you ever been loved? I haven't. I only feel it on stage. I'm going to write a song about making love to 25,000 people in a concert and then going back to my room alone.'" That kind of grinding loneliness had been at work on Janis a long time. She'd spoken of school days in her home town in Texas: "They put me down, man, those square people in Port Arthur. And I wanted them so much to love me." Janis Joplin died, alone with her needle, between a night table and a strange bed. She knew all her life-long she was missing something.

I wish that Janis had found a church where people really believed in Jesus. Where they really loved. A Church that communicated hope to those in despair. The Church, Paul tells us, is made up of those whom God has rescued from the power of darkness and brought safe into the kingdom of his dear Son... people who've been set free... whose sins have been forgiven.

Thank God for the Church. That's what Paul did. So many people today

say they believe in Jesus... but the church is actually despised by many people. So often I hear testimonies, "I went to church all my life... went to Sunday School... sang in the choir... was involved in youth group... was baptized, confirmed and married in the church... and then I met Jesus Christ... outside the church. I was born again." And I wait for them to thank God for the church which nurtured them all those years... for the Sunday School teachers... for youth group leaders. But I don't hear it. Rather I sense they feel that faith in Christ has nothing to do with the Church.

Paul was well aware of the faults and failings of the church but he writes, "We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you (he was talking about the church in Colossae)."

For one thing, Paul thanked God for the Church because of their faith in Christ. I want you to ask yourself why you believe in Christ? Why do you trust in a God you can't see? What keeps you coming back to your faith in spite of your doubts and sometimes in spite of your pain? I think there's a stubborn unbeliever in all of us. Sometimes we believe in spite of evidence that everything is so wrong that God must be dead. What is it that keeps bringing us back to faith in Christ?

I believe because the church put its arms of caring ministry around me. My faith was conceived in the womb of mother Church. St. Augustine once said, "I would never have believed had it not been for the church." It was the church that brought the message of Jesus across the ages; for over a thousand years Monks devoted their whole lives to translating and copying the Bible in their monasteries. The Church sent out missionaries well over a thousand years ago to Africa, Asia and Europe. I know that the church is an earthen vessel. I know that there's a lot of bungling in the church... a

lot of times it stands in the way of faith in Christ but, for all it's humanity, the church is still Christ's way of walking the streets and alleys of our towns. The church gets credit for an assist whenever anyone believes in Christ.

For a second thing, St Paul thanked God for the Church's love for all God's people. In 1977 a massive earthquake leveled Guatemala... mud-slides wiped out whole villages... thousands of people died... and hundreds of churches were destroyed. The Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas was just about to begin a million dollar building project when the news of the earthquake reached them. As they prayed for the Church in Guatemala they sensed God was leading them to contribute the money for their rebuilding to help rebuild the churches in Guatemala. The session agreed... the congregation agreed... they sent nearly a million *dollars of their own building fund* to help rebuild the churches in Guatemala. Thank God for the Church's love for all God's people.

And thank God for the churches of our community... for the love they've showed to us. What would John Knox and John Calvin think about a Roman Catholic Church inviting a Presbyterian congregation to worship in their sanctuary? What would the Grand Inquisitor think? Thank God that the church's love cuts across denominational lines. Thank God for the Methodist church for hosting the Senior Center and our Bible School. Thank God for St. Christopher's Episcopal church for hosting our services and meetings. This week we received a contribution from the Colerain Baptist church. Thank God for these expressions of the Church's love... not just for their own... but for others who are also God's people.

For a third thing, St. Paul thanked God because, he writes, "Your faith and love are based on what you hope for, which is kept safe for you in

heaven."

The Church is the community of hope. Last Friday Kay and I saw the movie, "Dead Poets Society". It was a moving film. If you see it take "Kleenex" with you. Robin Williams put in a splendid performance as an English teacher in an elite prep school. He reminds his students that they are the "food of worms"... they're all going to die... so "Seize the Day"... take advantage of every opportunity you have today. One young man takes his teacher's advice seriously. He wants to be an actor but his father wants him to be a doctor. Never had his father considered his boy's hopes and dreams. The boy feels trapped by his father's obsessive demands. He feels hopeless. Like Janis Joplin he feels that there's no way out.

The Church has been entrusted with the message of hope for people like this young man. Since the resurrection of Jesus no one need be trapped... *there's hope even in the midst of despair.* I think of a woman... 21 years old... a college graduate... a brilliant young black woman... with terminal cancer. The nurses kept reassuring her: "Honey, it's all right. You just have to live one day at a time." To which she always replied: "You don't understand, I'm a Christian... there is tomorrow."

Is there someone here this morning who feels trapped... hopeless... no way out... you've really messed up? Don't believe it! It's a lie! The Good News offers hope. Most likely there are people in this congregation who've been where you are and they've been given hope... and it began to happen when they began to trust a brother or sister in Christ to share their burdens.

St Paul thanked God for the Church's faith, love and hope but he didn't stop there. He went on to pray that God would fill the Church with the knowledge of his will. As we begin thinking about rebuilding our church

we need, above all, for God to fill us with the knowledge of his will.

God will fill us with a knowledge of his will as we sincerely seek God's will rather than our own will to be done. That's what the sisters program that you've read about in the Lamplighter and seen in the bulletin is all about. Kathy Lilley is coordinating this program. I thank God for Kathy's initiative in this. It's not too late to get involved. We need to support one another in prayer. We need to be filled with all the wisdom and understanding that God's Spirit gives.

People have been asking, "Why haven't we started to rebuild?" Well, for one thing, the Session feels that it's important to seek God's will in the physical building of the church. After all, it's God's church, not ours. God needs to be consulted. That's why one of the first things the Session did after the fire was to call a special prayer meeting on the Green. The first, *and most important step in rebuilding is seeking God's will.*

But how do we discover God's will? The Bible gives some general directions but it doesn't contain blueprints for the Oxford Presbyterian Church. God doesn't usually speak audibly. He speaks through people who're seeking God's guidance.

Last Sunday the Session approved guidelines for a Building Planning Committee. The members of that committee represent new members, young members, long time members, members who have a special concern to have our church historically restored and members who've said, "Let's explore every option including relocating." The main, overriding purpose of this committee is to seek the knowledge of God's will. This Committee will be meeting Wednesday evening for the first time. Pray that God will fill them with the knowledge of his will. Later in the process they'll be coming to you, the congregation, to ask you what you believe God's will is

for our new church. When that time comes the Building Planning Committee will let you know how to go about being heard. We believe that the power to discern God's will doesn't rest in one individual but in groups of people called by God to carry out his will in the world.

When you pray before your meal today... before you go to bed tonight... take time to pray... and to thank God for the Church. Ask God to fill the Church with the knowledge of God's will. Then we'll be able to live as the Lord wants and will always do what pleases God. Your lives will produce all kinds of good deeds, and you will grow in your knowledge of God.

And now, may you be made strong with all the strength which comes from God's glorious power, so that you may be able to endure everything with patience. And with joy give thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to have your share of what God has reserved for his people in the kingdom of light." Amen.