

The Bible's Purpose

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 2, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 2; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31.

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

The Risen Lord came and stood in the midst of the church and said to them, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." ~~The Risen Lord~~ ^{He} breathed on ~~that little band of men and women which, at that time, composed the entire Christian church~~ ^{them} and said ~~to them~~, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Jesus was giving the Church the power of the Holy Spirit to continue his ministry of leading people from guilt to forgiveness, from doubt to faith, from death to life.

First, Jesus empowered the church to continue his ministry of leading people from guilt to forgiveness. He said to the church, "If you forgive ~~people's sins, they are forgiven, if you do not forgive them, they are not~~ forgiven." ~~These words have been very controversial in the history of the church and have been interpreted in a variety of ways. Protestants, however,~~ firmly believe that no human being, other than Jesus, can forgive sins. But we also firmly believe that Jesus has given the Church the responsibility of continuing his ministry of preaching the Gospel throughout the world, declaring with authority the terms on which God forgives sins, promising pardon to penitent believers and warning of judgment to impenitent unbelievers.

When a person sees that he or she is guilty of all kinds of sin, then soul-shattering remorse ^{often} takes over. And if you know something about what I'm talking about, you ~~ought to be in church.~~ You should be right here in the middle of the church's life. ~~Every Sunday, you should be right here in the worship services, and~~ you should be benefiting from the special friendships that people can build up in church through the Church School

and Prayer meetings. This is what you need. You need it because right here in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, your sin can be taken care of.

The church is the place where broken-hearted sinners come together to get rid of their terrible burdens. That's why I need the church so much, and that's why I love it. It's the place where confessed transgressors of God's law receive God's pardon. Sinners who confess their sins are relieved of the terrible remorse and sorrow many sinners often feel. They're assured that their sins, no matter how gross and ugly, have been paid for by God Himself; and their sins need not keep them from enjoying the blessing of God eternally. Forgiveness is a reality in the Church because, just as God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus has sent the Church to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to those who repent and believe and to warn of God's judgment to those who persist in unbelief and sin.

Secondly, Jesus has empowered the Church by the Holy Spirit to continue his ministry of bringing men and women out of unbelief and into faith. That's why John tells us the story of how Thomas moved from unbelief to faith in the Risen Lord. Thomas came to believe largely because of the miracle of the fellowship of the Church. Thomas, like many of church members, had become inactive. He wasn't with the others on that first Easter evening when the Risen Lord appeared. But the disciples missed him. They didn't forget him. They went and told him, "We have seen the Lord!" And when Thomas ^{said he would not believe unless certain conditions were met} ~~responded the way he did~~ the disciples might have shunned him after that as an unbeliever. But they didn't. They remained faithful to Thomas. And eventually Thomas returned.

The amazing thing about that early Church was that it wasn't a closed group. It wasn't an exclusive group who didn't want unbelievers and doubters to join them. They endured a man who doubted the resurrection,

the basic teaching of Christianity. Thomas must have noticed that it pained the disciples not to have him with them. It hurt them that he had excluded himself from the blessing they shared. Because the Church wasn't afraid of heretics, ~~and~~ doubters and unbelievers Thomas was ~~led~~ led from unbelief to faith.

When I was ~~the~~ Minister of the Reedsville Presbyterian Church in Mifflin County I started a Sunday evening study of a book by Bruce Larson and Keith Miller entitled, "The Edge of Adventure: an exeriment in faith." We had about ten people the first night. At the beginning of the session I asked everybody why they were there. One man, ^{Dan} ~~Frank~~, said, "I'm here because my wife didn't want to come alone. I'm not even sure that I believe in God but I'm willing to give God a try." He said this with a kind of cocky swagger. ~~At the end of the session I suggested that all of us say~~ a short sentence prayer. If anyone didn't want to pray they could simply say, "Pass." ^{Dan} ~~Frank~~ passed that night and for the next several weeks.

It was about the fifth week however that ^{Dan} ~~Frank~~ prayed for the first time. And what a prayer it was. He said something like, "O God, I feel like a fool. I wonder if I'm just talking to myself out loud. Do you hear me? Do you even exist? I don't know, but something's happening to me and I want to know if you're really there." There was no sudden conversion experience. ^{Dan} ~~Frank~~ continued to come. He began to enter into the discussion more and more. He continued to pray. He began to come to church with his wife. Over two years later he felt that he was finally ready to make a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and join the church. He's now an elder and is helping with the youth group. The Risen Christ continues to bring men and women out of doubt and unbelief into a living faith through the Church empowered by the Holy Spirit.

I'd encourage any of you who are unbelievers or who have crippling doubts. Christ is alive and he's promised, "Seek and you shall find." Don't exclude yourself from the fellowship of believers. One of these days the Risen Lord will come and stand in your midst and open the eyes of your faith to see that Christ is alive and your unbelief will be shattered and your doubt will dissolve.

3. Finally, Jesus empowered His Church with His Holy Spirit to lead men and women out of death and into life. This, in fact, is why St. John wrote his Gospel. "But these are written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life." The miracle of the resurrection is not only that Jesus Christ rose from the dead but also that Peter, James and John, Mary and Martha rose from the dead and became eloquent in the cause of the resurrection and traveled all over the world and gave their lives for the truth that death was not the end but only the gateway to a fuller life.

When St John writes of having "life" he's thinking of quality of life, the quality of a relationship with God which, having begun and been nurtured in this life, continues and flourishes in the next. At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that it's possible for men and women to enter into a relationship of love and trust with God through faith in Jesus Christ, and, as a member of his church, to grow in grace and knowledge. To live in that relationship with God, to nourish and develop it by prayer and sacrament and service is to enter into life. That living relationship can't be terminated just because the body of the believer dies.

I believed that Jesus Christ has sent us, His Church, into the world to carry on his ministry. I believe that the Risen Lord has empowered the Church with His Holy Spirit so that what Jesus did 2000 years ago in

Palestine may continue today and to the end of time; leading men and women out of guilt into forgiveness; leading them out of unbelief into faith; leading them from death into life. Everybody who's a member of Christ's Church plays a part. We're all inclined to say, "How can I have real influence where I live, where I work, and on the course of events in this threatening world? I have little spiritual power or qualities of mind and heart to make a difference. I'm not Jesus Christ. After all, he's the Savior, not me." That's right. But the Risen Lord has breathed on us. This breath of Jesus is the Holy Spirit. It's not into a religious club that you and I have been baptized, but into a community that's nourished and empowered by the Spirit of Christ. It's not in our own strength that we're going to fight on the side of forgiveness and faith and life but in the strength of the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

Let us pray: Come, Spirit of Christ, and visit each one of us, strengthening us inwardly that we as individuals and as a community may continue your ministry by leading men and women out of guilt into forgiveness, out of unbelief into faith, out of death into life. Amen.

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