

The Look of Jesus

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 9, 1994, the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31.

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

The rich young ruler asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And "Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'"

Now, if I'd been Jesus that day, that's not what I'd've said. I'd've asked him for a large donation to complete the rebuilding of the church. I'd've asked him for a large endowment to help pay for the maintenance of the building. I'd've reminded him that the every member canvas is coming up soon and he'd have the opportunity to increase his pledge.

And being a good protestant in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition I'd try to straighten out this rich young man's theology. Theology matters to us Presbyterians. The rich young man thinks that eternal life can be inherited like wealth. He thinks that we can do something to inherit eternal life. I'd want to correct him with good Reformed theology. I'd say to him, "God unconditionally loves and accepts you just as you are! Eternal life is not based on what you do, but on what God has done for us through Jesus Christ."

Or if I'd been Jesus I'd have taken a therapeutic approach. I'd use what I learned in my seminary pastoral care and counseling classes. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" I'd've said, "What do you think you need to do?"

But I can tell you one thing. I wouldn't have the nerve to ask him for everything. In fact, if the rich young ruler had suggested selling everything and giving to the poor, I'd probably try to talk him out of it. "Now let's be reasonable," I'd say. "What good would it do to give everything away? What good would it do for you to be totally dependent on others for your food and clothing and shelter? That doesn't make any sense. Do you think those poor people are going to use your money better than you? Don't be foolish! Be practical! Tithe to the church, but don't sell everything and give it all to the poor." So, if any of you has concerns about your relationship to God (and I certainly hope that many of you do) - don't expect me to tell you something impractical like, "Go, sell all you have and give to the poor."

Jesus made an impossible demand. Always doing it. Paralyzed man; withered hand; blind; dead girl, Lazarus... Be born again... Go sell...

~~And yet Jesus spoke this unpleasant word to the rich young ruler.~~ What **Jesus said** said made the man go away sad. From the stand point of 20th century American Christianity - that's not good! The last thing a preacher wants is for anyone in his congregation to go away sad. We like upbeat sermons that send us away happy. We like the congregation to go away feeling good. Sometimes we preachers will stoop to telling anything if it just makes you feel good. But Jesus told the man, "Go, sell everything... and give to the poor..."

Jesus said this because he loved this rich young ruler. Throughout the scriptures we're called upon to love one another. But do we clearly understand what loving somebody entails? What does it really mean to love another? Does it mean going easy on someone? Does it mean trusting the words of someone even

when the words are at odds with the evidence? Does loving our child mean letting her always get her own way? Does loving another mean excusing one's destructive behavior?

Let me put this into the context of something that a lot of us are following in the news - the O.J. Simpson trial. I don't know if O.J. is innocent or guilty. Like a good American, I presume that he's innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Not only that, I like O.J. We were in Buffalo, New York near the close of his career with the Bills. I followed O.J.'s career from the time he was at USC.

I think, though, that, according to Newsweek and Time and other so called reputable news sources, O.J. abused and threatened his wife more than once. On January 1, 1989, his wife, Nicole, dialed 911. The police arrived and reported that she had been badly beaten. Simpson pleaded no contest to spousal battery charges, was fined, and placed on two years probation. He received a little counseling by telephone. Most people didn't want to acknowledge what had occurred, so they looked the other way. Three months after the beating, O.J. was signed by NBC Sports to a lucrative contract as an announcer. No one questioned it. He had been someone else, someone not as handsome - someone not as popular - someone not as well liked NBC would have been blasted for its poor judgment.

Maybe that wasn't the loving thing to do. The loving thing would have been to require him to undergo in depth counseling for at least a year, and to do volunteer work at a shelter for battered women. The loving thing was not to let

him off the hook. The loving thing would have been to force him to face the demons within himself, to compel him to make amends for his behavior, and to help him undergo much needed change.

The loving thing is not always the feel good thing to do. Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything *you have* and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." It was the love, the genuine concern which Jesus had for the man, which compelled Jesus to prescribe such an extreme requirement for the man to fulfill. The loving thing was not to go easy on him. The loving thing was to call on ~~him to face reality.~~ *This man's attachment to money, possessions ... disregard for the poor* At this the man's face fell. He went away sad.

I can see another young man walking away sad. I'm thinking of an intelligent young man, an extremely well educated young man, an exceedingly charming young man who got hooked on cocaine. He came to a friend asking for money. He owed a large sum of money to a drug dealer. If the money wasn't paid his leg would be broken and he might even be killed.

"You've got to give me the money. They'll kill me! They're going to kill me!" The friend looked at him and loved him and said, "No! I can't give you the money! To be honest with you, I can give you the money but I won't! You need to get help, but money won't help you." And the man's face fell. He went away sad. He went away accusing his friend of being cold and unloving.

Karl Marx said that religion is the opiate of the people. Opium is a narcotic made from Poppy flowers. Heroin is made from opium. The use of opium causes

addiction. Opium, when first used, gives users a feeling of extreme calm and well-being. Their troubles seem unimportant, and they temporarily live in an unreal world of isolated contentment. Opium addicts tend to neglect their health and their families. Religion is like opium, Karl Marx said.

A lot of religion makes people feel so good that they forget their poverty, they forget their slavery, they forget their oppression. Religion makes people feel so good about themselves that they neglect their families and their neighbors. Religion can make people blind to the poor. Religion, Marx said, is the opiate of the people. Unfortunately, a lot of religion is like an opiate.

But Jesus didn't offer the rich young man an opiate. He didn't offer the rich, young ruler something to make him feel good on the pretext of loving him. Because he loved him he told him the one thing that he lacked. He told him how he could have treasure in heaven. Because he loved him he wanted him to face reality. Because he loved him, he said, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Jesus really wanted this man to follow him. If the young man went away sad, he wasn't as sad as Jesus felt.

When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he's not telling us to have a warm, cozy, emotional feeling towards them. He's telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being; even if it means sacrificing their well-being. Jesus looked at the rich young ruler and loved him and because he loved him let the

man walk away from him sad. The love of Jesus allows us to walk sadly away from him.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the rich young ruler asked Jesus. Jesus didn’t say, “Increase your pledge and make a major contribution to the building fund?” He didn’t say, “There’s nothing we can do. God unconditionally loves and accepts you where you are.” He didn’t say, “What do you think you should do?” He said, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” He said this out of love.

What Jesus has to say to us won’t always make us feel good. He knows what we lack. He knows what we need to do. Because he loves us, he sometimes says things to us that make us sad, that make us angry. He sometimes commands us to do things that may seem to be impossible for us to obey. He sometimes speaks to us in ways that may even cause us to walk away from him sadly. And yet, whatever Jesus requires of us and commands of us he requires in love; he commands in love. And whoever has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Jesus and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come, eternal life.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we have answered your call and have said that we will follow you, and now we’re afraid that we have involved ourselves in a life that is too much for us. Help us to a firmer resolution, to follow Jesus so closely that life shall not crowd him from sight: and as we keep him in view put strength in our feet and joy in our heart.

Part of this sermon is based on a sermon by William Willimon as quoted in Tom Long’s, The Witness of Preaching and a sermon by Gregory Knox Jones, Minister of Chester Presbyterian Church, Chester, Virginia in Biblical Preaching Journal, Fall 1994.