

The Poor Have Good News Brought To Them

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 13, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11.

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

Imagine waiting for Christmas when you were a child. The days go so slowly. You discover packages hidden in closets. You pick them up, shake them. "What's inside? Who's it for?" You help dad and mom choose the Christmas tree. The house decorated. Bright colors. Red, Green, Silver, Gold. Beautiful! And the *smells* announcing Christmas. Evergreens. Holly. Cinnamon. Christmas cookies baking. And the *sounds* that prepare us for Christmas. Beautiful music coming from other ages. And the *freedom* of Christmas. Vacation from school. Sleeping in. And renewed *relationships*. Visits from friends and relatives you haven't seen for a year.

But imagine Christmas postponed. Christmas Eve you pick up the Daily Local. Headlines scream: "Christmas postponed indefinitely!" Imagine the disappointment. December 25th comes and goes. The Christmas music dies. The cookies disappear. School vacation comes ends. The evergreens dry up and still no Christmas. No gifts.

I imagine that's how John the Baptist felt waiting for the Messiah. See John in prison. Staring out from between prison bars. Hands gripping the bars. Eyes searching the horizon. He's looking for God's ideal ruler to come like a child waiting for Christmas. No one ever waited with such anticipation as John the Baptist. Waiting for Christmas. Waiting for the Messiah. He sends disciples to Jesus. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered. "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Hear people sing who were speechless. Look at lame people leap. And "The poor have good news brought to them." One sure sign of the coming Messiah - the poor have good news brought to them.

For months our deacons have been preparing to bring good news to the poor. Several Sundays ago the Deacons offering plate was passed down the aisle. You reached into your wallets and put in money so that good news might be brought to the poor. Letters were sent to area businesses, service organizations, schools, asking help to collect canned goods. Deacons

as a sign of his coming.

have been working like Santa's Elves buying and collecting food and toys. This Friday - 7 p.m. - boxes will be sorted and packed in the Fellowship Hall. Canned goods, bags of rice, flour, sugar, cereal will fill the boxes. Sunday morning, boxes will be delivered. Some of you will have the opportunity to bring good news to the poor. You will become a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God.

Some people return from delivering boxes disappointed. Sometimes they return angry, cynical. "I'm never going to do that again." You carry a heavy box of food up a flight of stairs to an apartment. Four or five occupants sit around watching a color t.v. You notice a VCR. You see a carton of cigarettes and calculate in your head how much money they spend. You also may notice that the people in the apartment don't greet you, don't thank you, don't smile. Sometimes they avoid looking at you. They point to a table and say curtly, "Put the box there." You put it there and you leave. You return to your car and say, "Maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

~~But we need to~~ deliver those baskets. We need to bring good news to the poor. What they do with it is between them and God. We need to give, sometimes, more than they need to receive. We bring good news, as Jesus brought. He once healed ten lepers. Only one returned to thank him. Jesus didn't say, "I don't think I'll heal people any more." Nor did Jesus choose only to heal people who expressed gratitude. No, Jesus brought good news to people who rejected him. He healed because it was his nature to heal. He brought good news because it's his nature to bring good news. We give these baskets because God has given us some of the Spirit of Christ - to give without asking for anything in return. The food baskets won't solve the problem of poverty in Oxford. They're an expression of the presence of Christ in us because Christ loves the poor ~~even when they don't respond in faith~~. Our giving is a sign of God's giving. God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Some took offense at God's gift. Blessed are those who take no offense.

But Jesus brought more than Christmas food boxes. He did more than feed the hungry. Jesus brought good news that changed lives. I know it's easier to bring a box of food to the poor

than it is to develop a relationship that will enable them to hear good news from us. What amazes me about Jesus is that poor people liked him. We, on the other hand, have very few poor people in our churches. Poor people don't seem to like Presbyterians very much. Of all the denominations Presbyterians have the highest family income: higher than Methodists, higher than Lutherans. Higher than Episcopalians. We are the wealthiest and best educated denomination in the world.

Christianity in the United States is largely a middle class affair. When we think of evangelistic efforts we think, first, of young people, teenagers. How can we get more young people into the church. American teenagers have enormous amounts of money. Teenage money drives the music industry, the fashion industry, cosmetics, clothing, movies. Teenagers have enormous amounts of money to spend. When we think of growing churches we think of churches growing with middle class young people and their parents. Churches target young people for growth. They've got money to run church programs. When was the last time you heard of a church targeting poor people for growth? Jesus brought good news to the poor. One sure sign that the Messiah has come - the poor have good news brought to them.

What if next year we bring with the food baskets a brief hand written note in English and Spanish.

"Dear Friend,

The members of the Oxford Presbyterian Church wish for you and your family a merry Christmas. We would love to have you become part of the family of Christ at the Oxford Presbyterian Church. We need you to help us bring the good news of Jesus to all of Oxford. We welcome your children to learn more about Jesus in our Sunday School, youth programs and children's choirs. We welcome you to learn with us about Jesus and the good news of salvation. Do you need a ride to Sunday School or church? We'll provide one. In a week or so we'll visit you or give you a call to see how, together, we can better serve Christ.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

I once delivered a Christmas basket years ago when our boys were small. I climbed a flight of outside wooden stairs to an apartment. An elderly woman lived there with her daughter who was in her twenties but looked my age. Three small children ran around the apartment.

The smallest, a little boy, with only a tee shirt - no diapers, no underwear. I thought, "I'll just drop this box off and get out." The two women watched the t.v. "Put the box on the table," the older women said barely glancing at me. I put the box down. The three children got quiet and stared at me. I stood there awkwardly for a few moments thinking maybe they'd say thank you. They just kept watching the television. I started to go but something led me to say, "Hi, my name is Ted. I have three children too." I smiled. The two women turned and looked at me without smiling. Let me show you their pictures. As I got out my wallet, I thought, "This is stupid. This is really stupid. The pictures show my boys well dressed, neat, clean. This was a stupid idea. How are they going to feel?" Too late to change my mind, I walked over to the couch where they sat, "See, this is Andrew, my oldest son. That's Philip. He's my middle son. And here's my youngest son, Mark. And here's my wife. Her name is Kay." "Why am I doing this?" I thought. Then I pointed to their children. "What are the names of your children?" The mother turned down the t.v. She didn't smile. She looked a little frightened, maybe even angry. She pointed to the oldest child, a boy. "Jose." That's all she said. She pointed to the little girl, "Maria." - She reached down and placed the naked little boy on her lap. "Jesus." I saw the unmistakable look of pride in the mother's eyes. She loves her children every bit as much as I love mine. Nothing else was said. I turned awkwardly and left. I'm not even sure if I heard, "Thank you." It didn't matter because I saw Jesus in their home. Jesus was naked. Jesus must have been chilly. But Jesus would eat well over the holidays. Jesus would have a new toy to play with. We need to give, more than they need to receive. Maybe some of you will see Jesus when you deliver baskets next Sunday.