

The Raising of Lazarus

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in Lent, March 24, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45.

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

Jesus stands before Martha, the sister of Lazarus who is now four days dead and buried. He says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

How do we come to believe this? -- especially when we bury a loved one, or when we, ourselves, await our own certain death, or when we feel our own situation is hopeless? How do we come to faith in Jesus Christ? That's what I want to talk about this morning.

But first, listen to a letter from a man who already believes. Vernon Smith, a feisty, opinionated, retired Presbyterian Minister, whose letters to *Monday Morning* (a magazine for Presbyterian ministers) I have read with delight for many years, most recently wrote this letter:

Vernon begins by telling us that he has a sickness unto death. "My doctor", he says, "just gave me a death sentence, telling me that cancer has spread throughout my lungs. My wife is legally blind and needs me. I want to fight a bit more for peace and justice. I would like to challenge our church to focus on the Kingdom of God that we are to seek first to get God's will done on earth as it is done in the eternal world. Therefore, I will struggle to live as long as possible. All of us have the fatal problem called life, so you also will try to live as long as you can to do God's will."

Then he tells us how we should pray for him. He writes, "Some have said that they *will*, and I *should*, ask God to prolong my life. When I consider the millions dying of starvation, disease, and senseless war, the needed mothers and fathers who die too early, and good leaders cut down in the midst of needful service, what right do I have to ask a special favor of longer life for me? *I do hope that some of you, as I, will pray for stronger faith, for positive hope and courage to accept what you must.* Such faith, hope, and positive attitude are *powers* to heal and add life. My doctor said, 'Keep playing tennis,' and I will. I will also keep preaching the gospel of [the Kingdom of God] that Jesus proclaimed throughout his ministry and to his disciples after God lifted him out of death" (emphasis mine. TSA).

After he tells us how to pray for him, he affirms his faith. He writes, "At 86, I believe that God always was, is, and always will be. I believe that God is our loving, merciful, and forgiving creator-parent. I believe that Jesus is our savior because *when we follow him we are led to God, who is our salvation from sin, for good and forever.* I believe that each of us and the church are called to be working citizens of the Kingdom of God and to be willing to suffer and die, if necessary, to get God's will done, as Jesus did. I believe that God will lift us out of death. I believe it is a copout, a failure to follow Jesus, and sinful disobedience to live as though the Kingdom of God were beyond history and not for the here and now."

He concludes by humbly asking for forgiveness. "I have tried to live by this faith, but have failed far too often and now ask God, the church, and many others to forgive me."

And so he concludes his letter. As I read that letter, I thought, "This isn't the letter of a dying man. It's the letter of a man who's more alive than many men and women far younger and more physically healthy than he is." Where did Vernon get that courageous, balanced, life affirming Christian faith?

I profoundly believe that no one can have that kind of faith outside the church of Jesus Christ. I'm not saying that everyone outside the church is lost. I'm saying that the richness of Vernon Smith's faith can't be experienced outside the Church. With all the noise in our lives it's always difficult to hear the voice of Jesus *even inside the church*. But it's all the more difficult *outside the church* where we're more apt to mistake our own voice for the voice of Christ -- or the voice of our culture, or our political leaders, or radio talk show hosts. Of course, we can also mistake our own voice for the voice of Christ within the church. I don't deny that. But I believe that we're more apt to hear the authoritative, animating, voice of Christ calling us to new life within the church.

Dostoyevsky's, *Crime and Punishment* tells the story of two dead people who hear the voice of Christ calling them to new life. Raskolnikov, a young university student, murdered an old woman with an ax to demonstrate that he was above the ordinary rules that govern human behavior. Sonia also was a murderer. She had not killed another person, but had "killed" herself by sacrificing

herself as a prostitute for the sake of her starving family. So Raskolnikov and Sonia are two dead people.

The turning point takes place in Sonia's apartment when both she and Raskolnikov have hit rock bottom. Raskolnikov sees a Russian New Testament on a table. He remembers having heard in the dim past the story of the raising of Lazarus. He hands the New Testament to Sonia and begs her to read it to him even though he isn't a believer. Sonia finds the story and she reads. And as she reads, the seed of faith is planted in Raskolnikov. They hear the voice of Christ calling them to new life, awakening them from death. They come out of their tombs and they begin to live again.

That's how Christ ^{usually} awakens us to faith and new life. We listen ^{within the church} for the voice of Christ calling us to new life. We, the Church, must recover our boldness. ~~We must tell the story to our unbelieving, doubting and non-churched friends. We don't need high pressured, manipulative evangelistic techniques. We simply need to invite men and women to listen for the voice of the Risen Christ as he speaks to us in the preaching and reading of the word within the community of faith, the church.~~

To our non-churched friends we must begin to boldly say, ~~"Believe and you will see. You will never see, unless you first believe. Come faithfully to study, to worship and to serve. Come faithfully, in season and out of season!~~ Listen for the animating voice of Christ. Listen and you will hear and believe and receive eternal life."

Let us pray: Almighty God, your son came into the world to free us all from sin and death. Breathe upon us with the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, and serve you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.