

Thou Shalt Be Called Hephzibah

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 15, 1995, the second Sunday after Epiphany. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11.

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

I want to talk to you this morning about God. I want, rather, for God to speak to us. I don't have any good advice for you this morning. I don't have any practical, self help techniques to improve our lives. I'm called to proclaim ^{the} good news of God and of God's kingdom. I'm called to talk about God, to point us to God- to plead with you to turn to God who has already turned to us in Jesus Christ. My prayer is that God will speak to us through me and through the ancient words of Holy Scripture.

The Lord tells us that he delights in us. The Lord takes great pleasure in us. Isaiah the prophet lived hundreds of years before God came to us in Jesus Christ. We'd been conquered. By "we" I mean our spiritual ancestors. I mean the children of Israel. Pagan Babylonian soldiers marched thousands of our ancestors into exile. They scattered us throughout the inhabited world - North, South, East, West. Our Temple in Jerusalem - where we worshiped God before Jesus came - our temple was burned and leveled. Mount Zion was left desolate. Jackals and Hyenas roamed the streets. Weeds grew in the ruined walls. Homes became piles of rubble. Jerusalem was forsaken.

This happened, our prophets said, because we had turned from the living God. We had turned from the living and true God to false gods. Time after time we'd turned from the Divine Lover to false lovers. We turned to false lovers who deserted us. They left us desolate.

Yet the prophet Isaiah sees us, not as we are, but dreams of what we will

become. "You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah."

Hephzibah - it's a Hebrew word. Hephzibah means "my delight is in her". God doesn't simply forgive us. The Lord delights in us. God doesn't simply tolerate us. God genuinely delights in us. God delights in his people. God delights in his church - his unfaithful church - his disobedient church. God delights in us.

Grace - God's grace enables God to delight us. God's grace enables God to see us, not as we are ^{in ourselves} sinful - rebellious - wayward. God's grace enables us to see us ^{as we are} in Christ. Grace - God's grace leads us to become Christlike. God's grace does not make us better people by bullying us into moral improvement. God's grace makes us more like Christ by persuading us ^{that} ~~the~~ we can never be condemned for what we are. No judgment, no catastrophic guilt can hurt us in the end.

Some of you have seen, "The Man of La Mancha". Don Quixote is a knight - a silly, ridiculous knight. He's a wonderful example of God's amazing grace that delights in us. Don Quixote meets a woman - a rather seedy woman named Dulcinea. Let me just say that Dulcinea is not the kind of woman most parents want their sons to marry. Don Quixote met Dulcinea in a beer garden. Everybody knew she was a "bad" woman. Since everybody knew she was a "bad" woman, they all treated her like a hopeless, dirty sinner. And since everybody treated her like a dirty sinner, she felt "bad" - she felt horribly bad. So she acted the part. She became the kind of woman everybody thought she was.

Then Don Quixote rode into town. He looked at her through the eyes of grace.

He saw a beautiful woman. He ignored the icy judgment of the moral majority. He took delight in her. He fell in love with her. And when Dulcinea was sure- was absolutely convinced that Don Quixote wasn't playing games with her- that he was absolutely sincere and serious- that he really did delight in her- she embraced the grace with which he embraced her. She began to feel the power of grace. She began to feel that she was really delightful. She started to become what Don Quixote saw.

Don Quixote is a fictional character but God is real. God is holy and just. The Lord who delights in us is the Lord who gave the Ten Commandments to us on Mt Sinai. The God who delights in us is a God who expects us to be holy and knows that we aren't. But his way of making us holy is not the way of threats. His way of making us holy is by delighting in us. Delight is a great motivator. ^{My Father...} The moment we know God delights in us even though we're in the wrong, we're liberated from our burden of failures. We're given the power to become the sort of person God wants us to be.

God delights in us. And, more than anything else, the God revealed in Jesus Christ desires that we delight in him. God wants to intoxicate us with his delight. Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water to wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. The wine had run out. There was despair. What's a wedding- especially a Jewish wedding- without wine. Jesus turned water to wine. He turned despair to ^{delight} ~~joy~~. God came to us in Jesus Christ to turn our despair to ^{delight} ~~joy~~. Jesus came to intoxicate us with delight in him.

Shortly after he completed *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy wrote *My Confessions*. There he stated, "It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; as soon as we are sober again we see that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion." That was

certainly true in the life of Anna Karenina. Anna becomes happy only when she experienced the intoxication of her forbidden love for Vronsky. But when this intoxication ^{wore} wears off, life becomes a stupid delusion for her. Love turns to hate. She ends up tragically destroying herself. Levin, on the other hand, discovers intoxication with his beloved Katerina. But he fears that the intoxication of his love for her will run out. Then he returns to the church, to the Gospel. Despite his doubts, he prays, and he discovers that when he prays, he begins to believe. He discovers that the Gospel of Jesus Christ provides an intoxication that makes all of life worth living and assures him that his love for his wife will never end.

God has come to us in Jesus Christ because God delights in us. And God wants ^{to intoxicate us with delight for him.} us to delight in him. Jesus gave us the sacrament of Holy Communion to remind us that God delights in us. Men and women have celebrated this sign of his delight for us for nearly two thousand years. In the last nineteen hundred years, not one day has gone by that the sign of Christ's delight in us has not been offered and received by his people. Each time we take that bread and drink that cup God reminds us that he delights in us. Men and women will drink this wine till the world's last night and it will never run out.

Let us pray: Great God, your delight in us is an unexpected miracle. Help us to believe that you delight in us. He us not only to believe, but to feel the delight you have us so that we will obey you till our righteousness shines out like the dawn, our salvation like a blazing torch. Fill us with the wine of new life promised by Jesus Christ our Savior who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one god, now and forever. Amen.