

### Why Are We Here?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 1995. Scripture Lessons: 2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:7-16; Luke 10:1-11; 16-20.

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

In 1984 I traveled to Guatemala with a member of our church. We spent two weeks visiting Presbyterian churches in the cities and small villages of Guatemala. We visited a medical clinic supported by our church and saw young pregnant women receiving needed pre-natal care that they couldn't afford anyplace else. We visited a school our church supports and talked with teachers and students. We saw our mission dollars being used to heal and convert people to Christ. Marg and I returned with joy, enthusiastic about the mission work of our church. What caused our joy? Personal involvement in the mission of Christ.

That summer our Presbytery sent ten young people back to Guatemala to paint a school. They returned with joy, telling their congregations about the power and goodness of God. What caused their joy? Personal involvement in the mission of Christ.

Last summer about 25 junior high young people from our church went to the Great Escape. Among the adult volunteers was Cynthia Sawaya. I wondered what her reaction would be after spending a week with some pretty rowdy junior high kids. She came back filled with the Spirit. Do you remember how she got up with some of the kids in front of the congregation the first Sunday back and led us all in a rousing chorus they'd learned? What caused the excitement and enthusiasm? Personal involvement in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Some of us expect our faith in Christ to come alive passively. We hope that when we come to church a sermon will be so dynamic or the music will be so exciting that we'll return home with joy. But neither preaching or even music turn on God's people like personal involvement in the ministry of Christ.

I discovered in college that the best way to study for a test was to participate in a "bull session" the night before an exam. Do you know what a bull session is? About five of us would gather in a dormitory room - sometimes with a case of soda and several pizzas. We'd compare our notes. We'd try to anticipate what the professor would ask. We'd argue and discuss various answers. When I did this, not only did I do far better on the exam than if I studied alone - I really enjoyed it. In the same way we grow in our knowledge and love of God best through personal involvement with others in the mission of Christ.

Jesus once sent out 70 disciples to heal people and to announce, "The kingdom of God has come upon you." Days past. Maybe weeks. Maybe months. We don't know how long the seventy were gone. They traveled two by two through the little towns and villages of Galilee. And then, "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'" Personal involvement in the ministry of Jesus filled them with joy.

Do you want more joy in your life? You're a Christian. You belong to Christ. You've been baptized into his church. But do you enjoy God? Our chief end in life is to glorify and enjoy

God. Do you enjoy God? What difference does being here for one hour make in your life? Do you sometimes grow discouraged with how things are going in your spiritual life or in the life of the church? Someone told me recently, "I want to go the next step in my Christian commitment. I'm not satisfied with where I am now." Do you sometimes feel that way as a Christian? What are you going to do about it?

Don't wait for something magical to happen. Get personally involved in the mission of Christ in some way! The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few.

For example, how many of you are involved in a small group Bible study? If you're not - why not start one? Don't wait for somebody else to start it. You start it. Many of you could simply invite some friends over and ask if they'd like to meet for six weeks. You could just read a chapter from one of the gospels and discuss it. Or you could buy an easy to use study guide like this one for parents of pres-schoolers.

Several weeks ago Suzie Jefferis stopped by the office. She was excited. (When is she *not* excited)? She asked a few post-high school kids to get together regularly to help one another grow as Christians. Six young people showed up the first night. She was so enthusiastic about the experience that she talked with me for about an hour - I thought I'd never get rid of her. She returned with joy. Personal involvement in the ministry of Christ turns us on and sets our hearts on fire.

Janet Hudler was in the office last week preparing for Daily Vacation Bible School. She mentioned how her family gets

together every once in a while with a few other families on her street for a game night. Nothing religious. Just a time to get together with friends. But she said "nearly every time we get together Bob gets into an discussion with some of our neighbors about some aspect of Christian faith and life". Personal involvement like this, personal sharing of our faith, discussion, bouncing ideas off one another helps us grow in our faith in Christ.

I'm glad we're all here this morning. It's great to have the discipline to worship regularly every week. But I'm convinced that if you want to experience the joy of Christ in your life more deeply - if you want to see the kingdom of God come with power into your home and family and neighborhood and church - you need to get personally involved in the mission of Christ in some way; visiting shut-ins, volunteering for the Neighborhood Services Center, baby-sitting so some young parent can participate in a Bible Study, praying systematically every day for our church and our members. The disciples heard Jesus preach and teach many times but it was only when they got personally involved in his mission that they were filled with joy.

Liz Abel shared with me a page from a newsletter of the Oviedo Methodist Church in Florida. The newsletter contained a page entitled, "Ministry Classifieds". The introduction read: "Every Christian is called to be in ministry... To assist you in finding just the right 'ministry' for you, we will publish monthly... an assortment of ministries needs...." There followed

a whole page of ministry ideas including Newsletter proof-reader, bulletin folder, delivery person (to deliver the newsletter personally to families in the church), gardeners for flower beds, greeters, creative persons, letter writer, children's church and many, many other ideas. The leaders of the Ovieda Methodist Church know that personal involvement in the ministry of Jesus is essential for spiritual growth.

Tom Dodge is an associate minister at the Highland Presbyterian Church in Lancaster. Tom's main job is to get new members involved in at least one aspect of ministry over and beyond the weekly worship service. He says, "We've discovered if we don't get new members involved in some area of ministry beyond the corporate worship service within a year of joining they're liable to drop out of the church entirely." Personal involvement in the ministry of Jesus Christ is the key to spiritual growth.

Stop and think. Try to identify one area of ministry that you're involved in. Some of you already do so many things. You may even be too involved for the sake of your health. But others may not be able to identify even one area of ministry that you're involved in outside the Sunday morning worship service. Don't wait to get turned on to Christ before getting involved - get involved and you'll get turned on.

Next month about 25 junior high young people are going to the Great Escape again. We have one volunteer adult chaperone - Suzie Jefferis. We have one involuntary adult chaperone - that's me. But we need one more adult woman to ride herd on thirteen

junior high girls. Will you be the one who will come back next month rejoicing in the Spirit?

Finally, we need to get over the idea that the church exists primarily to meet the needs of our members - or to meet your own needs. We're not like a country club. A country club exists primarily for its members. You pay your annual fee and you get to use the club house. You get to use the golf course. Your annual fee buys you privilege. That's how some people see the church. You pay your annual dues. That entitles you to use the church. It entitles you to visits from the minister when your in the hospital. It entitles you to the baptism of your children. It entitles you to vote for elders and deacons. It entitles you to get married and buried from the church. But there's something wrong when we think of the church as a country club. There's nothing wrong with country clubs. There's nothing wrong with belonging to a country club. But there's something terribly wrong with a church that sees itself as a spiritual country club.

The church is not like a country club. The church is more like a farm - a wheat farm. Farms require lots of hard work. And our town and world are God's wheat fields. The risen Lord sends us out to gather in God's harvest. The church exists primarily to harvest the wheat. The church exists primarily for those who pay nothing. The church exists primarily for the men and women who aren't worshipping anywhere this morning. They may not know God. They may not know Christ. But they're God's wheat. They belong to God. And this town is ripe for God's

harvest. The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few. The church exists primarily to bring in God's harvest.

God has created us in such a way that the best way to have our own spiritual needs met is, ironically, to become personally involved in some way in harvesting God's wheat - bringing those outside into the people of God. Now you've heard the Word of God preached. How are you going to respond? What are you going to do?

Amen.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of your faithful people is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayer, which we offer before you for all members of your holy Church, that in their vocation and ministry they may truly and devoutly serve you; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.