

Why the Cross is Necessary

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday in Lent, February 28, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

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

Clark Gable looked piercingly at Scarlet O'Hara in "Gone With The Wind" and uttered those famous lines, "Frankly, ^{Scarlet}~~my dear~~, I don't give a damn." That short phrase made cinematic history in the 1930s as the first really big Hollywood film that contained a swear word. Shocked and horrified, many people got up and walked out of the movie in embarrassment and anger. It was described, at the time, as a horrible and fearful departure from the innocence of what had gone before.

Clark Gable's profanity seems tame and innocent in comparison to the widespread profanity we have today. What happened back then seems so minor and innocent to us today because we've gotten used to public profanity. How could people be so upset? But from that one event has evolved the public acceptance of unrestrained vulgarity and profanity on radio and t.v. that reaches it's nadir in Howard Stern. It's hard to go to any movie that doesn't contain a swear word.

I got to thinking about this as I prepared my sermon. What amazes me about the story of Adam and Eve is how minor their offense seems. The first sin wasn't murder. They didn't pull wings off flies. They didn't go on a rampage and kill all the animals and cut down the rain forests. They didn't shake their fists angrily in the face of God. It was the childlike act of taking and eating an attractive piece of fruit that God had forbidden.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate."

John Knox, in the Scots Confession of 1560, describes this eating of the fruit as "the *fearful and horrible* departure of man from his obedience." He sees it as a *fearful and*

horrible act. That's the kind of language we use today for ax murderers. But the eating of a piece of forbidden fruit? Come on now! How's that so fearful and horrible?

St. Paul helps us to understand when he writes, "sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned... the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation... because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one... one man's trespass led to condemnation for all... by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners..." Paul is saying: Sin, death, and hell came upon all of us as a result of Adam's disobedience.

Fifty-five years ago Clark Gable said on the silver screen, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" and we end up up with Howard Stern. Adam takes and eats a piece of forbidden fruit and and there's loosed upon the world fearful and horrible things: Ethnic cleansing, toxic waste, the ozone depletion, Jim Jones, nuclear weaponry, mass murder, Jeffry Dahmer, the holocaust, apartheid, sweat shops, slavery, child abuse, greed as well as all the things we do everyday to hurt and destroy ourselves and those we love.

But the Fall of humankind into sin isn't the whole story. God didn't abandon Adam and Eve to death and hell in their disobedience. God came to them in the garden. They were afraid and ran away and hid from God but he found them. He disciplined them, loved them and promised to destroy all evil and save them through a child of Eve, even our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I have a friend who described for me recently one of the most significant events in his life. He was about six years old, living on a farm. He was playing near the barn with his brother on a warm, sunny, Garden of Eden like summer day. He and his brother were squirting one another with a hose and having a great time. Nothing wrong with that. It was all innocent, childlike fun. Then they heard their father calling them. He called them once. No

response. He called them again. No response. They heard him calling but they didn't answer. A third and fourth time he called. Still no response. Then they looked up and saw their father walking deliberately toward them with a look of anger on his face.

"My heart was telling me to run and hide," my friend said, "but my head was telling me, 'You can't run forever.'"

So he didn't run. He didn't hide. But he was scared. His father came to him, put his hands firmly on his sons shoulders and said, "Son, I don't want to have to call you four times before you answer. I want you to obey me when I call you." And with that his father gave him a couple of whacks on the bottom (I say that not to advocate corporal punishment but simply to relate what my friend said). Then his father hugged him, told him how much he loved him and said, "Come, it's time to eat. Don't keep your mom waiting any longer. She's prepared something you're really going to like."

My friend said, "That was a turning point in my life."

I said, "That? What's so significant about that?"

He said, "I've often wondered what would have happened to the close relationship I've always enjoyed with me father if I had run away and hidden because I had disobeyed and was afraid. The punishment probably would have been much worse. And I may have begun to develop the bad habit of not facing up to the consequences of my actions. Or what would have happened to me if my father had just let me go on ignoring his calls? What would have happen to me if he hadn't come to me, disciplined me, forgiven me, hugged me, told me how much he loved me and walked with me back home to the dinner table? That was one of the most significant events in my life."

God comes to us in our fear and rebellion in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just another religious teacher, a guru, or another prophet. Jesus is the promised son of Eve, fully

human. But Jesus is also God coming to us in human flesh. Jesus is the second Adam who, like the first Adam, was tempted, not only in the wilderness, but throughout his whole life. Jesus experienced the full force of temptation; not giving into the temptation even when it cost him his life by dieing on the cross.

On the cross, God, in Christ, bears our sins, dies our death and suffers our hell. Some people don't like to repeat the phrase in the Creed, "He descended into hell". But that, for me, is the most meaningful part of the creed. I feel like shouting "Hallelujah" when we say those words because hell is the one place you don't expect to find God. But God goes to hell rather than let us spend eternity there. When we're going through hell we don't feel God's presence; we feel that God has forsaken us. We feel cut off and abandoned by God. God knows what that feels like because in Christ, God has experienced those same feelings. God, in Christ, goes all the way to hell *for* us and *with* us in order to bring us back to life. One man who went through hell several years ago told me, "I do not think I could have felt God unless I went to hell first and let him find me there."

Just as sin and death enter the world through the taking and eating of the forbidden fruit, new life comes to us when we receive the grace and free gift of of righteousness offered to us by Christ. "Those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ," Paul writes.

The serpent said, "Take, eat" and Adam and Eve took and ate and died. The Lord Jesus Christ comes to us in our hiding places and says, "This is my body. This is my blood. Take, eat, and live."

Receive today the free gift of Jesus Christ? He comes to us this morning in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and says to us, "Take, eat and live."

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.