

You Owe Me One

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 1989 (Oxford High School): Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 33:1-11; Psalm 94:12-22; Philemon 1-20; Luke 14:25-33.

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

Near the end of the Gospel according to St. Matthew Jesus says, "I was hungry, and you fed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you ministered to me." Suppose he had added, "I was lost and wandering far from God, and you pointed me to God. I was burdened by past mistakes and sins, and you told me how I could have my sins forgiven. I was searching for God, and you showed me where God is found."

All of us agree that it's wrong, clearly wrong, to ignore hunger, disease, the homeless and the prisoner. Because we're followers of Jesus of Nazareth we're constrained to address these problems. But too many of us Presbyterians feel that we have no responsibility to point people to Jesus Christ. It's hard for us to see that someone who doesn't have Jesus Christ has a condition that's every bit as serious as the one who doesn't have a home or food.

Tom Long, a professor at Princeton Seminary shared a story he heard recently. A little boy came home from playing at a friend's house. He was uncharacteristically quiet and seemed deeply troubled. The parents gently inquired of their son what could be wrong, but he didn't seem to want to talk about it. The parents, growing worried, encouraged him to get what was bothering him off his chest. "It's about Martin," the boy said, referring to his playmate, "but I can't tell you about it." The parents looked at each other, raising their eyebrows in concern, and prodded the boy to reveal what was wrong. Maybe their boy's friend was seriously ill. Maybe his family was breaking up. Finally their son spilled the beans,

"Martin says he doesn't believe in God," and with that, the parents breathed a sigh of relief that the problem was only theological and not something really bad. That story is all too true of us. We're terribly concerned when our neighbor is sick, we want to help when their marriage is falling apart, we extend help when they experience financial set-backs. But too often we seem unconcerned if our friends and neighbors don't know and trust Jesus Christ within the fellowship of the Church. And I'm as guilty as anyone.

Ezekiel lived in a time when he was called upon by the Lord to pronounce judgment in the name of the Lord on his own people. The Lord spoke to Ezekiel one day: If an enemy comes to invade the nation and the lookout warns the people and they don't respond, those people will perish but they can't blame the lookout. But if an enemy comes and the lookout ignores the enemy and doesn't warn the people, the people will perish and the lookout will be at fault. Likewise, the Lord said to Ezekiel, I will hold you accountable if you don't tell your neighbors about the Lord. But if you do point people to where true life and salvation is found and they ignore you, you can't be blamed. You can't convert them but you can point them in the way of salvation.

Well, maybe the Lord was just speaking to the prophet Ezekiel. Maybe the job of pointing people to the Lord is the exclusive work of ministers and prophets. Not so! The apostles make it clear that all of us are priests and prophets to point our neighbors to Christ.

America has many compassionate and kind people who sacrifice to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and minister to the sick. Not as many as we need but we do have many compassionate people like this. But when it comes to sharing the Bread of Life, Jesus Christ, we feel strangely

powerless. There's a feeling that we have nothing to do with the conversion of another human being. It's all of God. We can feed the hungry and minister to the sick, but salvation is entirely the work of the Lord. But it's not so! Just as we have a responsibility as followers of Christ to feed the hungry and minister to the sick we have a responsibility to point people to Jesus Christ.

Look at our Epistle lesson. Paul is writing a personal letter to Philemon. Philemon had a slave, Onesimus, who had stolen some money from his master and run away. This was a capital offense. He could've been crucified for running away. He could've been crucified for stealing. But Onesimus, the runaway slave, met Paul and through Paul came to trust in Jesus Christ. Paul sent back Onesimus to his master with a letter. He tells Philemon, "Onesimus now shares your faith in Christ. If he's served you poorly in the past, he's going to serve you well now. But I want you to realize that he's not merely a slave; he's also your brother in Christ. He'll serve you well as a brother. And if he stole anything from you put it on my account." And then Paul reminds Philemon, "you owe me your very self."

In other words Paul is saying, "You owe me one. I had enough to do with your conversion that you owe me your very life. Before you met me, you were lost and far away from God, every bit as much a slave to your own desires. Through me, through my witness, you now enjoy eternal life. You owe me your very life, Philemon." You see, Paul had something to do with Philemon's salvation. So often Christians don't share Christ, don't invite people to Christ, because they don't think they have anything to do with the conversion of another. "It's all of God."

God values us as persons... as men and women, young and old. He values us so much that he calls us co-workers. Yes, God can do the work alone

without our help. But God's usual way of feeding, clothing, healing and converting people is to share the work with us. Kay and I can make the beds all by ourselves but I delight in involving our boys in that work. I delight in the vision of my boys being co-workers with us as they grow up and become responsible and useful human beings who see service to Christ and Christ's Kingdom as their primary purpose in life.

God delights to share God's work with us and to call us co-workers. When we share with God in this work we fill the Lord with the delight of a parent for children who are growing up to be responsible and useful.

You are essential to Jesus Christ, who has entrusted those who love and trust the Risen Lord, with the message of reconciliation. There are many ways to point a person to the Lord Jesus Christ. Encounter 89 which begins this evening is just one of many. I hope that God will use you this week to point someone to Jesus Christ by taking them with you to the meetings... by initiating a friendship with a neighbor whom you've ignored... by inviting them to our own worship service and Sunday school where we hope and pray they will come to share your faith and delight in the Risen Lord. Amen.

Let us pray: We pray, O Lord, that this week you would use each one of us to point a friend or neighbor to Christ. For those who have been baptized and made a confession of faith but have drifted away, bring them back to Christ within the fellowship of the Church. May it also be a time for each one of us to renew our own faith in the Risen Christ. We know that you know our secret heart and that you want us to know you. As much as we know of ourselves we now trust to as much as we know of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.