

Go... Make Disciples!

A sermon preached by Mr. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 9, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 67; Acts 1:1-11; Matthew 28:16-20.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once a man was walking along the ocean shore when he heard the cry of someone drowning. "Help! I'm drowning!" The man quickly plunged into the surf and swam out to the drowning person, dragged her to shore and saved her. A deep friendship developed between these two and together they resolved to try to save other drowning men and women. Every evening they walked up and down the shoreline listening for the cries of drowning people. Nearly every week someone was saved and enlisted in the task of saving others. Their numbers quickly grew from two to ten to over a hundred. All of them felt a deep obligation to save others who were drowning.

When their numbers had grown to about 200 someone said, "Let's build a club-house where we can rest and have fellowship with those who've been saved." And so they did. As their numbers grew they added rooms to the club house. They put in comfortable padded chairs and wall to wall carpeting. They added a kitchen. They bought an expensive stereo and VCR so they could enjoy good music and entertainment. But as time went on it got increasingly difficult to get volunteers to go out and walk the shoreline in all kinds of weather. There was too much to do right there in the club-house. Then someone said, "Why not hire lifeguards, then we can all spend more time here in the club house and people will still be saved."

The club house was a great place to go if you'd been saved from drowning. Men and women would come together and talk with one another about how they got saved. The leaders of the club house started providing

all sorts of programs; lessons in swimming, lessons in life-saving. They enjoyed reading and discussing books about the great Life Guards.

Finally, a new generation arose who didn't know why the club-house was originally built. They still offered courses in swimming and lifesaving, but they enjoyed their fellowship in the club house so much nobody really went down to the shore any more. As the club house got older it began needing repairs. As the cost of repairs and upkeep increased they began to look for places to cut the budget in order to keep the club house in good condition. The first budget line to be cut were the life-guards. "We can't afford them anymore," people began to say. "The government should provide lifeguards", others said.

Not only that, people simply lost contact with their lifeguards. People began to say, "You know we use to have annual conferences where life-guards came from all over the world to tell of their experiences and encourage more people to become life-guards. But, you know, I don't even know the names of our lifeguards anymore". Others criticised the life-guards. "I heard about some life guards who are protesting to the government that people are being deliverately thrown overboard and left to drown. Why can't they just stick to saving the drowning?"

In the end, they forgot all about those who were drowning. They forgot why their clubhouse was built. They forgot it's original purpose. They didn't know what it meant to be lost and drowning anymore. They didn't even like to think about the possibility of people drowning. The thought was too disturbing. They stopped giving money altogether for life guards. All their money went to keep the club-house in good shape. They finally insulated and sound-proofed it because, from time to time, their meetings were disturbed by the cries of drowning men and women.

This, of course, is a parable of a church which forgets its purpose. It's a parable of a church which no longer hears and obeys the authoritative commands of the Risen Lord. It's the story of a church which concerns itself increasingly with its own material needs and forgets why it's in the world.

How easy it is to forget our primary and unique purpose as a church. Can you imagine the steel industry forgetting its purpose; to make steel? Can you imagine the banking industry forgetting its purpose? Can you imagine the farmer forgetting what his job is? Can you imagine the hospital spending increasing sums of money to change the snack bar into a first rate steak house while at the same time reducing the amount of money allocated for medical research, medicine, nursing staff and doctors? It's inconceivable. But how easy it is for the church to forget its purpose.

God created the church to go save the lost by making them disciples of Jesus, incorporating them into the Ark of Salvation (the church) through baptism, and teaching them to obey Jesus as Lord in every area of life. This mission is the life-blood of the church. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us to "preach good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." It's the mission of the whole Church, to take the whole Gospel, to the whole world, to the whole person. Just as Jesus saved people from disease and oppression as well as from their sins, so also our mission is to the whole person. As Christians we believe that the world is lost and *will be* lost; truly and irrevocably lost, unless we go... make disciples of all nations, incorporate them into that trans-national Kingdom of Christ, and teach them to observe all that Jesus has commanded us.

John R.W. Stott writes, "Mission is the global concern of the global people of a global God." He goes on to say, "Do we belong to the Church? It is a missionary society. It is impossible to evade this. The authentic Christianity of the Bible is not a safe, smug, cozy, self-centered escapism. It is deeply disturbing to our sheltered security. It is an explosive, centrifugal force, which pulls us out from our self-centeredness and flings us out into God's world." The living God of the Bible is a sending God. He sent forth Abraham, commanding him to go from his country and family into the great unknown, and promising to bless him and to bless the world through him if he obeyed. The Risen Christ sent out his apostles into all the world to preach the Good News.

Today we return our pledge cards. Before we do, let's ask ourselves some questions. Why do we contribute money to the church? What do we hope to accomplish? Do we give simply to keep the church in good repair; simply to maintain things as they are; simply to assure that you have a minister to visit you when you're in the hospital, a place where your baby can be baptized and where your children can be married. Do you give *solely* because you need a place to come on Sunday to be refreshed in your own spiritual life; to be reassured and comforted against a horde of doubts and fears? I hope your motivation for what you've pledged will go deeper than that.

If we've been truly baptized into the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and if our desire is to observe all that Jesus has commanded us, our motivation for giving will go deeper and farther. We'll give because we've been ignited by the flame of Christ's compassion for all his sheep without a shepherd.

If Christ is really present in this service- and he has promised, "Lo, I

om with you always."- if he's really present, then something of his passion for a world torn apart by violence, war, oppression, poverty, starvation, disease and ignorance must be present too. Without this, churchgoing can become a mere pious indulgence, and all the other congregational activities trite and petty. If our congregational life ever becomes an end in itself, we become introverted and satisfied; if our horizon is only this building and this particular church and this minister and people, we've insulated and sound-proofed our sanctuary from the cries of drowning men and women.

Christ is present as he has promised. He's present to redeem our worship from spiritual self-centeredness. He's present to send us out, through our tithes and offerings, and through our own personal involvement, into the world, in loving service of the men and women Jesus died to saved.

Let us pray: O God of all the nations of the earth: Remember the multitudes who have been created in your image but have not known the redeeming work of our Savior Jesus Christ; and grant that, by the prayers and labors of your holy Church, they may be brought to know and worship you as you have been revealed in your Son; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.