

I Was Glad

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on January 17, 1993, on the first Sunday we returned to our church for regularly worship services. Scripture: Psalm 122.

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" I've been wanting to preach on this text for over three years. "I was glad when they said to me" that we could begin our regular morning worship here today. And now "our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem."

The Psalmist who wrote this probably lived far away from Jerusalem. He'd heard stories about Jerusalem. He'd heard stories about the temple, but had never seen it. Then some of his friends asked him to go with them to the house of the Lord, just as, perhaps, some of your friends ask^d you to come to the house of the Lord this morning.

The Psalmist didn't go to the Temple in Jerusalem alone. He went with friends. A group of people joined together to go to the house of the Lord because the journey was long and arduous. When the pilgrims reached their goal, their feet came to a stand-still as if spellbound by the overpowering, glorious sight. And then the Psalmist described his impression of Jerusalem-- it was "built as a city bound firmly together." He wasn't simply describing how the houses were built close together. He's describing a city whose citizens are "bound firmly together" through their relationship to the Lord. To Jerusalem the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord. It was a crowded city, filled with different tribes who were, nevertheless, bound firmly together because of their relationship to God.

1. As a result of our fire we, the people of Oxford, are "built as a city bound firmly together." Let me explain what I mean by retelling a story the Rev. Lee Michaels told his congregation at the Oxford Methodist church shortly after our fire. Apparently Lee once worked on a farm. One of his jobs was to let the cows into the barn. He had to see that there was feed in the manger and the stall was clean. Usually, it was no big deal. But when the young heifers were getting used to being in the barn it sometimes caused a commotion. He would let a young

cow get used to being in a stall and eat there. In time, she'd get used to having people walk and work around her. Then, when it came time to milk her it would be a little easier on her and on the milker. One day Lee let a heifer in the stall of a particularly stubborn cow. When the old cow came in she found a stranger in her place. She stopped in the center aisle, trembled in rage and bellowed. She ranted and raged. She attacked the young animal until Lee was forced to allow her into her own stall.

Well, after the fire a lot of churches in our community let us share their stalls. They moved over for us. They adjusted their schedules for us. None of these churches raged and bellowed when they discovered we were sharing their stalls. It would have been so easy for them to rant and rave and tell us to get lost, but they didn't. They moved over and shared with us. As a result, our town has become a city "bound firmly together".

2. Not only are we a city that's bound firmly together, we're also a congregation "bound firmly together." Burned down churches usually lose more members than they gain. Their attendance slips. Without the physical building the bonds weaken and people drift away. But that hasn't happened to us.^{In fact since the fire we have received _____} Some have left but the vast majority of us have grown closer to one another.[^] We're a congregation that is "bound firmly together."

This is all the more remarkable because we're such a diverse church family. We're liberals and conservatives and moderates. We're Republicans and Democrats. Some of us are deeply committed believers and some of us are honest seekers of the truth in Christ and not at all sure what we believe. We're rich and poor, young and old, single, married, and divorced. We're evangelical and yet also deeply socially conscious. We come from many different backgrounds [^] ~~and~~ ^{and} lifestyles, but we're "bound firmly together" through faith in Christ. Our diversity is a treasure. Our church is committed to drawing the circle larger to include diverse people. We're a diverse church "bound firmly together".

3. When we come to the house of the Lord we not only become aware of how we, as a

congregation, are bound firmly together, we also become aware that death can't separate people who've been "bound firmly together" in the Body of Christ. "In life and in death, we belong to Jesus Christ." In the past three and a half years since the fire some of our members who worked and prayed for this day have died. I ~~remember~~ ^{Think of} Andy Murray in whose memory we dedicated the pulpit Bible. We use to sit in my office over at the Jefferis at Tuesday morning staff meetings and talk. Both he and I loved to tell stories about our fathers that had a theological lesson. Most of the time the stories were more important than the theological lessons they illustrated. And sometimes we'd argue: he'd take one side and I'd take the other. And after the discussion we'd always pray. We were "bound firmly together" in Christ and when I come into the house of the Lord I realize that those bonds are not weakened by death.

I remember many others as well. I remember the strong tenor voice of Harry Ireson singing in the choir. I think of Dr. Leroy Johnson and his wonderful smile and deep Christian faith. I think of Clara Wiley, Julia and Walter Lawrie, Sibyl Pitt, Ann Kelly and who could forget Danny Logan. In the Creeds of our Church we confess that we believe in the communion of saints. We believe that we who are alive are "bound firmly together" with all the saints.

O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

There was a scene near the end of the movie "Places of the Heart" where the sacrament of Holy Communion was being celebrated in a little country church in the South. As the Communion bread and cup were passed from one to another I noticed a black man, who'd been murdered in the beginning of the movie, receiving the bread and the cup from a white man who had also been killed. And he, in turn, handed the bread and cup to a blind man who was still living. I was confused at first and thought the producers had made a mistake, and then I realized that this was symbolically portraying the communion of saints. When we, as the

family of Christ, are at worship, bowing together in prayer before God's throne on high, we are "bound firmly together" with our loved ones who have died in Christ.

So, as we come this morning into the house of the Lord, we "give thanks to the name of the Lord" that we're "built as a city that is bound firmly together"; we're bound firmly together as a congregation as a result of the experience of the last three and a half years; and we're bound firmly together with our loved ones who have died in Christ.

All of this says to me that God didn't make us to stand alone. We were made by God to be "bound firmly together." We weren't made to face depression and grief alone. We weren't made to struggle alone with our sins and doubts. We weren't made to face the threat of unemployment, or divorce, or some addiction alone. And, above all, we weren't made to worship alone; to pray alone; to seek God alone or to serve God alone. We were made for fellowship. We need one another. God has called us into a covenant community and wants to bind us firmly together. On the cross God, in Christ, stretched out his arms to embrace all the world ^{so that} ~~until~~ we ^{may} ~~are~~ "bound firmly together" in him.

It's God's own voice who calls us to go to the house of the Lord. God calls the rich and poor. He calls red and yellow, black and white. He calls the young and old. He calls men and women, the single, married, and divorced. He calls the childless and the widow and widower. He calls the conservative and the liberal. He calls the blind and deaf and the lame. He calls lepers and tax collectors. He calls the poor and the hungry. Whosoever will, let them come. He eats and drinks with sinners. God, in Christ, calls us to his house and wants us to be "bound firmly together" through faith in Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love:
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.
(hymn number 438)

Call to Worship

Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. Psalm 124:8
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Psalm 96:7
Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Psalm 96:6

Prayer

Blessed and glorious Lord God, by whose power, wisdom, and love all things are enlightened and made perfect, be merciful to us and bless us and cause your face to shine upon us, that what we now do in your name and for your Church may please you, who are blessed forever. Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let your favor be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands-- O prosper the work of our hands; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Book Dylan
Wardels Father health
Deno Barkell
Robin Waters
George Snyden
Sunshine
Matt - Wines
Seth Jones
Melinda Suberlin*

Dedication of Bible in Memory of Dr. Andrew Murray and his father, the Rev. Thomas Murray

(I will call upon Dorothea to present the memorial Bible)

Dorothea shall say :

In memory of my husband, Dr. Andrew Murray, and his father, the Rev. Thomas Murray, I "present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is wisdom, this is the Royal Law: these are the lively oracles of God." I ask you to receive it to the praise and glory of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Ted will say :

With gratitude to almighty God, we receive this pulpit Bible as a sacred trust and call upon all of us to treasure it with reverence and godly fear. And now, in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, we set aside this pulpit Bible to the glory of God in the worship of the One who called us out of darkness into God's marvelous light. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Shirley Bea
Janis MS*

Let us pray : Most merciful God, whose Word is a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path, and who are pleased to make us understand your will by your holy Word, let your blessing rest on this pulpit Bible, which we devote to your service. Grant, we pray, that the glorious Gospel of your Son, our Lord, may be made known to your worshiping people and become effectual unto faith and eternal life. When your holy Word is read and preached from this Bible, may we who hear both perceive and know what things we ought to do, and receive grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same, to the end that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith; and we, being rooted and grounded in love, may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all your fullness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of the People

We praise and thank you, O Lord, that you eat and drink with sinners and feed us at your Table. Grateful for your gifts and mindful of the communion of your saints, we offer to you our prayers.

Have mercy upon us, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercies, blot out our transgressions. Wash us thoroughly from our iniquity, and cleanse us from our sin. For we know our transgressions, and our sin is ever before us. Create in us a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within us. Cast us not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and uphold us with a willing spirit.

God of compassion, we remember before you the poor and the afflicted, the sick and the dying, prisoners and all who are lonely, the victims of war, injustice, and inhumanity, and all others who suffer from whatever their sufferings may be called.

silence

O Lord of Providence, who holds the destiny of the nations in your hand, we pray for our country, especially this week when President-elect Clinton will be inaugurated. Inspire the hearts and minds of our leaders that they, together with all our

nation, may first seek your kingdom and righteousness so that order, liberty, and peace may dwell with your people.

silence

O God the Creator, we pray for all nations and peoples; especially the provinces and former republics of Yugoslavia; for Somalia; for Iraq and Haiti. Take away the mistrust and lack of understanding that divide your creatures; increase in us the recognition that we are all created in your image.

silence

O Savior God, look upon your Church in its struggle upon the earth. Have mercy on its weakness, bring to an end its unhappy divisions, and scatter its fears. Look also upon the ministry of your Church. Increase its courage, strengthen its faith, and inspire its witness to all people, even to the ends of the earth.

silence

Author of grace and God of love, send your Holy Spirit's blessing to your children here present. Keep our hearts and thoughts in Jesus Christ, your Son, our only Savior.

silence

O Lord of all worlds, before whom stand the spirits of the living and the dead: We bless your holy name for all your servants who have finished their course and kept the faith, and who are now at rest with you. Grant us grace to follow their good example, that we with them may finally be partakers of your heavenly kingdom. Take now the veil from every heart, and unite us in one communion with all the saints on earth and the saints in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit we ascribe glory in the Church throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.