

Life Together

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 8, 1996.
Scripture Lessons: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalms 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20.

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

"If another member of the church sins against you (some ancient manuscripts omit the words 'against you' so that it reads, "If another member of the church sins"), go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." If that doesn't work explain the situation to two or three fellow members and, then, all of you go and reason with your fellow church member.

What Jesus tells ~~says~~^{us} sounds so foreign, so out of synch with our times. It's like walking into a living room filled with Victorian furniture and old tin-type photographs from the nineteenth century. What Jesus says reminds us of the good old days in Oxford when the elders were the policemen of the community whose job it was to rein in those who broke God's laws.

A century ago church discipline was exercised with great seriousness. Before Holy Communion the elders gathered members in the sanctuary for a service of preparation for Holy Communion, like drill sergeants gathering their troops for inspection. After the inspection the elders distributed communion tokens that gave you access to the Lord's Table.

A couple years ago I visited the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia to do a little research on the history of our church. I read session minutes of the Oxford Presbyterian Church dating back to the 1700s. One interesting case comes to mind. Two elders were sent to the home of a farmer to ascertain why his wife didn't come to church. The farmer said it was because he wanted her to prepare a good dinner for when he got

home from church. The elders told him it was sin to prevent his wife from going to church. The farmer basically told the elders to go to hell. The elders told the farmer he would go to hell if he didn't publicly repent and ask forgiveness from his wife, the Lord and the congregation.

Can you imagine anything like that happening in our church today? The spirit of our day is expressed in the words of a poem that was popular back in the sixties.

I do my thing, and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.

Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." The spirit of our age says, "I do my thing, and you do your thing."

----- We live in a day when it's not politically correct to tell anyone that what they're doing is^{considered} a sin.^{by the church} After all, we all sin. How in the world can I have the audacity to point out a sin in my neighbor? Didn't Jesus say "remove the plank from your own eye before trying to remove the speck from your neighbors eye"? Yes he did, but Jesus also assumed that the Christian life was not a private affair just between you and God. The Christian life is life in a community - with rules, moral rules, like the rules in our homes to help us get along with one another as a family.

Several years ago the *Wall Street Journal* contained an editorial. The editorial recounted a number of public sex scandals - Anita Hill's abuse charges against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, Magic Johnson's confession that his HIV infection was a by-product of promiscuous sexual athleticism,

William Kennedy Smith's grimy testimony in his Palm Beach rape trial.

The *Journal* then said, "The United States has a drug problem and a high school sex problem and a welfare problem and an AIDS problem and a rape problem. None of this will go away until more people in positions of responsibility are willing to come forward and explain, in frankly moral terms, that some of the things people do nowadays are wrong."

The *Journal* strongly implied that we need to retrieve the word "sin" from the attic^{where it had been placed along with all the antique Victorian antiques bequeathed to us by our grandpa's} and begin to use it again, and explain what sin is, and what sin does, and how we must repent of sin, and how we can have our sins forgiven only by God's grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ ^{and as a Christian family, how we need to be responsible for one another and to another ...}

"If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault." ^{This past summer} Recently I saw a couple at an ^{amusement park} ~~sports~~ event. They'd been eating hot dogs and still had paper napkins in their hands. As they walked ^{away from the concession stand} ~~back to the stands~~ they threw their paper napkins on the ground. They littered. I hate littering. I wanted to say, "I think you dropped your napkins". But I didn't. I might offend them. Worse yet, they might beat me up. So grumbling to myself self righteously, I picked up the napkins myself and threw them in the garbage can.

"If another member of the church sins, go and point out the fault." "What right does the church have ~~even~~ to tell me what sin is? I'll decide for myself what sin is. The church should stay out of our private lives. What I do is between me and God, nobody else." Sound familiar? Radical individualism. The seeds

of radical individualism - that is, the absolute right of individuals to decide for themselves what is right and wrong - have been sown in the church and have grown like weeds. But most of us don't notice. Most of us see ~~this~~ radical individualism, not as weeds, but as a beautiful plant. We Presbyterians pride ourselves on being a church that encourages people to decide for themselves what's right and wrong.

"It's a free country. I can do what I please. I can live anyway I want to. Who are you to tell me that I'm sinning?" And the church which is obedient to Christ responds, "It is a free country and you can live any way you want. But you can't live any way you want and enjoy good working relationships with colleagues and employers; and stay married; and raise healthy children; and keep your friends; and call that kind of life Christian. We can't live however we want to and enjoy a close relationship with the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ."

Years ago John Steinbeck and his French poodle Charley toured the country and wrote about it a little book entitled, Travels with Charley. One Sunday morning in Vermont, having nothing better to do, Steinbeck dropped into a worship service. And he wrote:

The service did my heart and soul good. It's been long since I had heard such an approach. It's our practice now, at least in the large cities to find from our psychiatric priesthood that our sins aren't really sins at all, but accidents that are set in motion by forces not under our control. There was no such nonsense in this church.... For some years now God has been a pal to us.... But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity....

"Our pschiatric high-priests". Most of us know just enough psychology to be dangerous - just enough to prove to ourselves

that we aren't responsible for the choices we make. We're passive victims of uncontrollable internal drives and external pressures and we plead that we can't do and can't be other than the way we are.

But the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ asserts that we are responsible for what we do and should be held responsible by our brothers and sisters in Christ. No amount of psychology can explain away the fact, the irrefutable fact, that we have to live with the consequences of the choices we make. We are responsible before the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ for the ways our lives affect one another.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not longing for the good old days when church sessions sponsored public trials for people caught, in the words of St. Paul, living in reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, in quarreling and jealousy.¹ But there must be middle ground between the church's ^{interfering or} interfering with intimate details of our personal lives (as the church appears to have done in the past) and our present *laissez faire* attitude where ~~we seem not to care about our brothers and sisters in Christ, where~~ everybody decides individually what is a sin, ~~and does~~

We must find middle ground between these two extremes because I don't believe we're good enough or smart enough to decide ^{all by} ~~for~~ ourselves what is or isn't a sin - it's a decision the whole church makes as we pray and study the Scriptures together. The church ^{recognizes that sometimes} ~~has sometimes recognized that we've~~ made wrong judgments ^{sometimes} "in the past" about what sin is and is not - such as when we justified the sin of slavery. But I believe the

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safest course to take - the course that Jesus himself set for us is to test what we believe to be right and wrong against the wisdom and the authority of the Church.

I'll close with just one more illustration. Session minutes of one Presbyterian church reveal that in 1892 a wealthy and well-respected woman from the church met with the Session with a request for their mercy. She announced that her unmarried daughter had given birth to a child, and she begged the Session, when they removed the girl's name from the roll of the church, not to multiply her shame by making a public spectacle but to do so quietly and with discretion. The session refused to honor her request. They refused to remove the girl's name from the roll at all. Instead, the session appointed two elders to visit the girl to determine her needs as a young single mother. The session took responsibility for providing guidance and advice during this difficult period in the young girl's life. The session took a special effort to provide for the spiritual nurture of her newborn child.

I think that when those two elders went to visit that girl, ^{just like he said we would...} Jesus went with them. And what that session did, what those two elders did, is an illustration of church discipline at its very best.

Let us pray:

This sermon has been pretty much plagiarised from a sermon by Patrick J. Willson entitled, Taking People Seriously. Also I have used Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.'s book, Not the Way It's Supposed to be: A Breviary of Sin.