

Starting With Your Own Experience

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Lent, March 25, 1990. Scripture Lesson: John 9 (selected verses).

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

Jesus has restored the sight of a man born blind. Because it happened on the Sabbath the man is led before the Pharisees to give an account of this breach of the law. They interrogate the man. They call his parents to testify that their son was, indeed, born blind. They mount an attack on Jesus and characterize him as a sinner. And when they finally turn again to the man formerly blind he gives this testimony: "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know." His theology is terrible. His knowledge of who Christ is is woefully incomplete. But, he says, "One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."

Can we, who profess faith in Jesus Christ, like that man, testify publicly to our experience of Jesus-Christ--testify publicly to the difference that Christ has made and is making in our lives? What do we know about Jesus Christ that we believe with conviction? What do we profess personally that we are willing to confess publicly?

What difference does your faith in Jesus Christ make in your life? I don't care, at this moment, whether you think of yourself as a conservative or a liberal, a Republican or a Democrat, pro-life or pro-choice, an evangelical or a charismatic. What matters for my question is that you understand yourself to be a believer in Jesus Christ and a member of his church. If that's the case then what difference does your faith in Christ make in your life?

What is it about Jesus for you that makes knowing him and trusting him good news? If your answer to that is "Nothing" then you're excused from the rest of the sermon, but if your answer is something-- anything-- but

something, then the next question is whether or not you think that something is worth sharing with someone else. My assumption is that a difference worth claiming is a difference worth sharing. The difference Christ makes in your life, he can make in the lives of others.

Presbyterians are simply not accustomed to talking out loud about their faith -- not even in church. Dr. Thomas Gillespie is the President of Princeton Seminary. Before he came to Princeton he was the pastor of the Burlingame Presbyterian Church in California. His church was composed of business and professional types, mostly well educated and upperwardly mobile people. They were knowledgeable about many things and articulate on just about anything but they were frightened to death to speak to each other about matters of faith.

While he was their Minister, the Session instituted the policy of the Passing of the Peace. They placed the Passing of the Peace at the end of the service, after the benediction. After the benediction the Minister would say to the congregation, "The peace of Christ be with you." And the congregation would respond, "And with you also." Then the minister would say, "Let us pass the peace of Christ." And then, instead of justing walking out, the congregation was supposed to turn to people in the pews and in the aisles and say with a smile and a handshake, "The peace of Christ be with you."

You'd have thought the revolution had come. Even in this kind of safe, formal setting, Presbyterian men and women had a difficult time naming the name of Christ. Some people were so terrified at the thought that they'd begin to leave the worship service during the last hymn just to avoid the embarrassment. Others decided to tough it out and after the benediction would turn to those around them and say, "Hi". Still others

wrote angry letters to the Session protesting this unwanted innovation.

But the Elders knew ~~that~~ that there was something more deeply at stake here than simply a formal Christian greeting. They were determined, not only to keep this practice, but to provide new opportunities for people to share with others where they were on their spiritual journey. They encouraged small groups within the church for women and men, for divorced people and single people, for single parents and couples-- groups which encouraged honesty in the context of acceptance.

I served the Reedsville Presbyterian Church in Mifflin County for nearly eight years. The first three years nothing much seemed to happen. At the time I was involved in a small group of Christians that met every other week in State College. The leader used a book by Bruce Larson and Keith Miller, The Edge of Adventure. We studied the Bible in the light of our everyday experience. This was something new for me. As I began to trust this groups of eight people we began to share our faith and joys and concerns and struggles as Christians. We shared what we believed and what we found hard to believe.

I was so excited that I started a group at my own church on Sunday evenings. The first night we had about eight people there, half of whom weren't church members and one of whom was a professed agnostic. At the end of the first session I suggested that we all pray-- each one of us. The atmosphere was filled with tension. I suggested that we just say one word prayers, "Peace, Joy, Hope, Faith, Help". The silence was deafening but I kept at it and slowly over the weeks and months that followed we began to be more and more free to share and to pray with one another.

That group began to transform the church. The church began to grow. People would first come to the small group to see what kind of reaction

they'd get when they declared they were atheists or worst. They discovered that no matter what they believed or did not believe, no matter what they had done or had not done, they were accepted as fellow strugglers. Many of these people came to the place of wanting to profess Christ as Lord and Savior within the fellowship of the church. Like the man in our Gospel lesson -- they began to see-- they began to see the difference that Christ can make in their everyday lives. ~~There is a small group~~ ~~that is formed~~

Too often, though, people don't see, in the Presbyterian church, the difference Christ can make in their lives. I was reading an article in Monday Morning, a magazine sent to all Presbyterian ministers. It was a letter from a fellow pastor. He wrote, "I recently talked with a young couple who attend a Presbyterian church out of habit, but attend 'real' church on Sunday nights at the Nazarene congregation. I could almost hear them repeating a text from Luke, 'Why seek ye the living among the Presbyterian dead?' They were uncomfortable telling me because they knew my loyalty to our denomination, but I heard what they and others who attend 'Full Gospel' type worship are saying. They wonder whether we Presbyterians have any living faith."

He goes on to write, "Imagine the impression it would make upon our children if they could see adults... who have joy and willingness to name that inner bliss in connection with Church and a community of people they know. Think of the power given to a congregation to help shape the lifestyle of young people as they observe mature men and women declaring faith in Christ. Ponder the impact of the Church on society as people become curious about Christian faith, who love the unlovable and who have the nerve to work for justice and peace."

One of the exciting things that I've experienced over the last several

weeks has been our Wednesday evening Lenten services. It's a kind of informal service. We don't even have a bulletin. We begin by singing a few hymns, read a passage of Scripture and then, each week, one of our members shares the difference Christ has made in their lives. Afterwards we continue in prayer for the concerns of our church, community and world.

I wish more of you were there. Maybe next year we need to find a better time. In the past weeks June Hoffman has shared the difference her faith in Christ has made as a superintendent of nurses. Dave Cedarberg shared something of the difference Christ makes in his life as a teacher of the deaf. Darlene Alford shared, two weeks ago, very movingly of how her faith in Christ has brought her through some rough times. Last Wednesday Peter King shared how his faith in Christ affects his attitude towards the environment as a toxic waste disposal engineer. In the coming weeks Ann Terry, our church secretary, and Mel Johnson, an Elder and a truck driver, will share with us the difference Christ makes in their lives.

They've shared or will share their story. But more of us-- all of us-- need to begin with our experience of the grace of Christ in our lives and find ways to share our story with others. Nearly all of you are members of this church. At some time in your life you stood before the congregation and professed your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I dare say that nearly everyone in this auditorium this morning if asked, "Do you believe in God?", would say, "Yes." For some that "Yes" might be a tentative "Yes". You're not absolutely sure. Your "Yes" is hedged with all kinds of questions and difficulties. But most of you, I'm sure, would say that you believe in God, that you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

But what kind of belief is it? Does your faith in Jesus Christ make any

difference in your life? When you or a loved one walks through the valley of the shadow of death can you say with any conviction and assurance, "The Lord is *my* Shepherd." Or is God a kind of abstraction, a theoretical God, a merely traditional God?

We don't need to know all the answers before we begin telling the story. Our story doesn't have to be like somebody else's story. The wonderful thing about how Christ works in our lives is that he works in our lives differently. He works uniquely in the lives of each one of us. All we need is a story of our own to tell, a story of how our faith in Jesus has made a difference in our individual lives.

Let us pray: Lord, open our eyes to see Christ. Open our ears to hear his word. Unshackle our wills to obey your Word. Open our lips to tell others of the difference Christ has made and is making in our lives. In his name we pray. Amen.

Based on Hellenistic address to Synagogue
Prayers of the People *Reformed Evangelical* 10/89

Lord God, your eyes are open day and night watching your children, your ears are always ready to listen to their prayer. We have come to worship you. We come tired from our work, in need of refreshment and recreation. We come with worries, in need of your guidance. But first, lift us out of our preoccupation with our own needs. Allow us to see you with the eyes of faith, and to hear with understanding what you say to us. Make us thankful for all the good we have received from you. Awaken in us a longing to do what is right. And make us aware of the great company, past, present and to come, with whom we join to worship you.

*The Greatest
Challenges of
Evangelism
Today*

Almighty God, our Father, we have seen you in the evidence of changed lives and in the growth of the Church from eleven people in Jerusalem to a world-wide fellowship which has spread through time and space: We have seen present day missionaries leave all to follow you... we have seen famous sceptics changed into compassionate, caring Christians... we have seen the joy of men and women who have undergone great torture and persecution for their faith... Use what we have seen to build up our faith.

And now we bring to you our concerns for our church, community, nation and world.

Remember, Lithuania and the Soviet Union in their disputes, remember Hungary and as those nations go to the polls.

Remember, our nation, our president and all in authority;

Remember those who engage in sports and contests, for their own pleasure and the entertainment of others, especially the Little League in our community... also the NCAA basketball championship games. We pray that they may be kept from harm and injury. We ask that through their knowledge of the rules of the game, they may see that there are greater rules; that through their experience of training and discipline they may see that there is a nobler discipline; that through their desire for victory they may be directed to the greatest triumph of all, and the goal which is Christ, the Saviour of the world.

Remember our community, our schools, our businesses, our industry.

Remember our church, its physical rebuilding and its spiritual rebuilding. Keep our eyes on Christ and the purpose for which you have called the church into being.

Remember those who are sick, hospitalised, and suffering in body, mind and spirit... minister to them according to their various needs and bind us all together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

And now as Christ...