

The Gift of Suffering

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Pentecost, May 31, 1998. Scripture lessons: Romans 8:14-17.

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

Last week I thought of a speech Winston Churchill made during World War 2. Winston Churchill, as you know, was the Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War 2, one of the great statesmen of the twentieth century. Some people say that Churchill's speeches to the British people during the darkest hours of the war kept the Brits from giving up. I wasn't able to discover the context of his speech but he must have given it either after the Battle of Britain in 1940 or the D-Day Invasion in 1944. Anyhow, this is what Churchill said after the victory, "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it may be the end of the beginning."

And so I say to the Confirmation Class of 1998 - This is not the end! The confirmation class has ended 9 months of study and service. They have it much rougher than adult new members. Adults simply go to four or five new member classes, write a confession of faith and they're in. But the confirmation class really has it tough. They have two all day retreats with their sponsors. They participate in several service projects. They do homework. They memorize the books of the Bible. They memorize Scripture verses. They develop disciplines of prayer and Bible reading. It's a long process. And when they get to confirmation day they have a tendency to think it's the end.

That reminds me of a conversation I had last week with Father Dooner of Sacred Heart Church and Greg Bruce of the Oxford Baptist Church. We've all been plagued with bats in our churches. We've had bats in the bell tower. We've had bats on the third floor. And I was surprised to discover that both Sacred Heart and First Baptist churches also have a big problem with bats. It's a bat epidemic. Father Dooner said they've tried to smoke out the bats. Roman Catholics use a lot of incense. So Father Dooner lit incense in various parts of the church to smoke out the bats. It hasn't worked. Greg Bruce said he's tried to drown the bats at the Baptist church. They have a big baptismal tank. He catches the bats and immerses them in the baptismal tank. But they still have bats. I told Greg and Father Dooner that *our* session has

solved the problem. We got rid of our bats. We put them in a confirmation class, confirmed them, and we haven't seen them since.

That happens a lot when young people get confirmed. A lot of members of former confirmation classes get the idea that ~~after~~^{when} they're confirmed, it's the end - the end of Sunday School, the end of church, the end of Christian service and fellowship. Statistics tell us that only about two out ten young people who are confirmed will continue to be involved in the life of a local church ten years from now. That's discouraging. We're losing our young people as a denomination. The average age of a member of the Presbyterian Church USA is 57 years old! We're a rapidly aging church. Our denomination and our session need to make it a priority to hang on to our young people, to find ways to minister to them in meaningful ways, and to find ways to enable them to minister to us. So the first thing I have to say to the Confirmation class is ~~this~~: this is not the end.

Secondly, this is not even the beginning of the end. It's the end of the confirmation classes but it isn't ~~even~~ the beginning of the end of a life of Christian service. The purpose of the confirmation process is to prepare young people for a life time of witness and service to Christ as their Lord and Savior. I don't know when Winston Churchill gave his speech but if he gave it after the Battle of Britain in 1940 victory was still years away. Britain still had to go on alone for years before the United States came in. If Churchill gave his speech after the D-Day invasion in June of 1944 we still had over a year of fierce fighting before the end of the war. So I tell you, Chene, Ashley, Megan and Christy, today is ~~the end of the beginning. It's not the end. It's not~~ ~~even~~ the beginning of the end. You are about 15 years old. You can expect to live another 60 or 65 years. Hopefully sixty or seventy years of Christian ^{Joyful} witness, service, and worship are ahead of you. What we hope to begin to do in confirmation class is to start you on your Christian pilgrimage that will take you to your life's end.

This is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. But, thirdly, it is the end of the beginning. In what way is confirmation the end of the beginning? Well, up to now you probably have come to church and Sunday School because of your parents. You may even be in

the confirmation class because your parents made you participate. When our boys were really young, they didn't have a choice about Sunday School or Church. We made that choice for them and they really never complained that much. We made lots of choices for them. We made them go to Public School. We made them brush their teeth. We knelt beside their beds at night and made them pray. But now we can't really make them do anything. And the same is probably true of our confirmation class. Most of the decisions up to now were made by their parents. We told our boys that they had to go to confirmation classes, but they had to make their own choice about publicly renouncing sin and accepting Jesus as their Savior. And that is the end of the beginning of our Christian life - when our parents tell us that the decisions is ours. Hopefully now Chene, Megan, Christy and Ashley will come to Sunday School and church, not because their parents make them, but because they want to. ^{They were glad when they said...} They will publicly tell everybody in the congregation that they want to make one of the biggest decisions they will ever have to make - they want to turn from sin and accept Jesus as their Savior and be a faithful member of Christ's church. ^{So it's the end of the beginning when their parents made all their decisions for them.}

Part of what ^{it} ~~that~~ means ^{to be a professing Christian is} is found in the words of Paul. "We are children of God... if, in fact, we suffer with him." That's a sobering thought with which to conclude this sermon. Notice how Paul phrases it: he calls us to suffer *with* Christ. There are two ways to suffer. We can suffer from something. For example, we can suffer from a toothache. We can suffer from an algebra class. Some children suffer from physical abuse or sexual abuse. Sometimes women suffer from spousal abuse. Suffering *from* something is not a virtue. Sometimes the cross of Christ has contributed to spousal abuse because some churches tell wives to be like Christ, just put up with the suffering. That's terrible. That's pious masochism. Christ doesn't call us to that kind of suffering.

But there's another kind of suffering. We can choose to suffer *with* someone. The kind of suffering that Christ calls us to is suffering *with* someone. We suffer with people when we choose, freely, to let their hurts hurt us. St. Paul says that when we're led by the Spirit we are children of God and we suffer with people. For example, years ago I was talking with someone

who was actually in tears because a friend of hers was having all kinds of problems with her teenage daughter. She was suffering with her friend. ^That's one of the surest indications that we are children of God, when we suffer with someone. Jesus puts himself into the shoes of anyone who suffers. Jesus feels the hurt of the high school kid who has no friends. He feels the hurt of the kid who isn't good looking or popular or athletic or smart. And the Spirit of Jesus leads us to suffer with the outcast. We suffer with Jesus whenever the hurts of our neighbor begin to hurt us and concern us.

So - this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It is only the end of the beginning. And - all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God... if, in fact, we suffer with Christ.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you that we have not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but we have received a spirit of adoption whereby we cry to you, Abba, Father. May your Spirit lead us.