

Walking in the Light

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Sunday after Easter, April 10, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31.

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

People crying out for fellowship! In a world of big, impersonal institutions - big business, big government, big labor - we're reduced to a number. Churches increasingly look to big business for a model for operation. The denominational church is highly organized and structured just at a time when its members and people all around are caring less about organization and more and more about personal relationships and fellowship. Just the other day I read someone who has written, "I just don't find within the institutional church that winsome intimacy where masks are dropped, honesty prevails, and there's a sense of communication and community beyond the human."

Someone has said, "Our churches are filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them just as they are. But the other people in the church look so happy and contented that one seldom has the courage to admit his or her own deep needs before such a self-sufficient group as the average church meeting appears to be."

Probably the most serious obstacle to real fellowship - Christian fellowship - fellowship with God and fellowship with one another - is fear. We're afraid that people won't like us - won't accept us - if they knew us like we know ourselves. So many people feel that, when we join the church, it means that we've got to start pretending that we're somebody we aren't.

When I was a young boy my mother announced one Sunday afternoon that Rev.

Adams was stopping by for a pastoral call later in the day. Now my dad and I enjoyed playing cards on Sunday afternoons. But card playing was considered worldly by most people in our little church. So my mom ordered, "Hide the cards before Rev. Adams gets here!" Mom didn't want Rev. Adams to think we were worldly. My dad, however, didn't care if Rev. Adams thought we were worldly, so he pronounced, "Bessie, leave the cards on the table! There's nothing wrong with playing cards." When Rev. Adams arrived, my mom made nervous attempts to direct Rev. Adams away from the cards, but he saw them. He picked them up and looked at them and then said, "It looks like somebody besides me likes to play cards." And he smiled at my dad and my dad smiled back.

That was the beginning of fellowship between dad and Rev. Adams. That fellowship was based on honesty - on walking in the light. My dad felt it would be dishonest to hide those cards. We'd be deceiving ourselves as well as Rev. Adams. He wanted Rev. Adams to know us as we really were. Honesty creates fellowship - honesty before God - honesty with our brothers and sisters in Christ - honesty with ourselves. As we allow others to see us as we are and as God sees us we begin to enjoy fellowship.

But wait a minute! Honesty isn't the same as flaunting our sin or "letting it all hang out" as we used to say in the sixties. No people on earth has ever let it all hang out the way Americans do. Celebrities race each other to the publisher with their secret sins. I've listened to talk-show hosts and marveled at the willingness of people to divulge their private sins to millions of people who enjoy

eavesdropping.

So confessing our sins isn't the same as blabbing our sins. Confessing our sin isn't the same as flaunting our sins. Here are a few ways Christians confess their sins without blabbing or flaunting them.

1. Simply by being a member of the church we make a confession about our sinfulness. When we go to church we declare to all the world that we're a sinner who needs Jesus. We declare that our sin is so great that only Jesus Christ can forgive and cleanse us. When we receive baptism, which is the sign of Jesus' blood, we declare to all the world that we need Jesus. When we eat the bread and wine of Holy Communion we make a confession of sin. Every Sunday we set aside time at the beginning of the service to confess our sins.

2. We confess our sin to God personally and privately, without excusing ourselves. We don't need a sanctuary. We don't need a minister. We can confess our sin directly to God. God has promised to forgive our sins when we confess them. We shouldn't think it's easy for God to forgive. It isn't easy. God forgives us only at the cost of dieing for us. Nothing less than the death of Christ could be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Nothing less than his death can cleanse us. We confess directly to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. There's also a place for confessing our sins to another. When we husbands or wives hurt our spouses with our words and actions, we need to confess our sin to them as well as to God. Fellowship between a husband and wife can't really be restored without mutual confession. When we fathers or mothers

hurt our children with our words and actions we need to confess our sins to them as well as to God if we hope to have our fellowship restored. Sometimes we need to confess to a neighbor or a church member - confess that we've wronged them and that we're sorry and that we want and need lost fellowship restored.

4. Some Christians have experienced a new relationship with God and one another as they mutually confess within a small group of fellow Christians who meet to study Scripture and pray. Many of us have come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior through the ministry of meeting with a small group of five or ten people for prayer and Bible Study and fellowship. As we get to know and trust one another we increasingly feel freedom to share with the group some of the sins we struggle with.

Sometimes, however, our sins hit the headlines. There we are on the front page of the paper. All of a sudden, everybody knows our sins and we didn't even have to confess them. The news media confesses them for us. You read a name on the front page of a newspaper. "Hey!" we say, "He's a leader in his church isn't he?" The whole community hears about it. Some people say, "Those Christians are a bunch of hypocrites. Look! He's a leader in the church and look what he's done!" Even some church members wonder how these public sinners can continue to be members of the church. "How do they have the nerve to go to church?" they ask.

When they ask that question, though, they don't understand. They don't understand that when we walk in God's light we aren't surprised by sin in ourselves or in fellow Christians. We're saddened by it, but we're not surprised.

If we confess our sins every week at the beginning of the service we shouldn't at all be surprised when we discover that a fellow Christian is what we all say we are. We're not shocked because we know the reality and power of sin in our own lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living lies and hypocrisy." The truth is that we're all real sinners. Some of us have respectable sins. Respectable sins are sins which we can commit and maintain our respectability, like overworking. Most of us also have disreputable sins. Disreputable sins are sins which others condemn when they discover them in us. When these disreputable sins come to light, Christians are often horrified. But both respectable sins and disreputable sins make us real sinners.

Christians walk in the light when they accept and embrace one another whether we're respectable or disreputable sinners. We all have some sins squirreled away in a dark corner of our closets. Unless you're different from the rest of us, you have some secret sin that you're ashamed of and which you've never told anybody about. If we realize that we're really a sinner, we won't be shocked or disgusted by the sins we discover in others. That's why when people fall and their sins become public, a real church opens its arms to them and announces the merciful forgiveness that's possible through what Jesus did on the cross.

God of light, in whom there is no darkness: look to your wayward children. Forgive our sin, and give us such joy in Jesus that darkness may be driven from us, and your light shine in our lives by faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.