

Down to earth

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on Rogation Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2009.

And I am appointing you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

John 15: 16

Today is traditionally known as Rogation Sunday, from the Latin, *Rogare*, "to ask." In ancient times in rural areas, it was the custom to ask God's blessing on the newly planted spring crops. In modern times, we ask God's blessing not only on our plantings, but on any new beginning and enterprise that leads us in new directions. James Russell Lowell's lines remind us of how we are constantly challenged to broaden our vision when he wrote:

New occasions teach new duties;

Time makes ancient good uncouth.

We can be too accustomed to the old ways based on the old dictum that:

Come weal or come woe,

We'll maintain the status quo.

This parish has come through a journey not just surviving, but thriving with the vitality that comes from following the lead of the Holy Spirit. In keeping with today's gospel, this parish has been fruitful and productive in our ongoing life with your participation in worship, pastoral and financial support, Christian formation and reaching out both to members and those beyond our membership. This is what it means to be faithful to Christ's call to live out the gospel. Rather than being a museum for the way things have always been, we are a place of healing and being equipped to be a living, growing community of faith. The only constancy is God's unchanging love for us. I know that many of you are engaged in ministries of your own, known and unknown.

It is Christ who challenges our old assumptions and pushes us to think beyond our self-imposed limits. As long as we remain connected with Christ as the head of the church, we move boldly and confidently into the future. With our roots firmly planted in Christ, there is no limit to being productive with the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Spiritual virtues are manifested in our caring for the widow and the orphan, visiting the elderly, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and reaching out to lost souls. This has been the calling of the church since the early Christians faced persecution and were steadfast in serving Christ by respecting the dignity of every human being.

We refer to people who are genuine and without pretense as being "down to earth." Nothing reminds us that as much as working in a garden and literally getting down to earth as we work our hands in the soil. You can't dump a plant in the ground and expect it to take care of itself. It needs to be planted in the right soil, have room to grow and nurtured with proper amounts of water and light. Weeds and thorns will grow up almost overnight and if not uprooted, will choke the life out of what has been planted. In the same way we must not allow the weeds of idleness, selfishness and resentment to accumulate in our own personal garden of life.

In the Bordeaux region of France, the wine vineyards are planted in arid, rocky soil. The vine is forced to grow deeper to reach the necessary amount of moisture and nutrients. In the same way, when children are baptized, their relationship to Christ and the church must have roots deep enough to be fed and nurtured to bear spiritual fruit. To do anything less is to leave a child with nothing more than a name recorded in the parish register.

In the same way, a marriage cannot survive on its own. It must be fed and nurtured with the example of Christ's sacrificial love. Those united in marriage must give each other room to grow, deal with problems right away and learn to adapt and change for the future. To be spiritually fruitful and productive each must be aware of and responsive to the other's needs.

The Christian church is like a great vine with roots firmly planted in Christ Jesus. We are all interconnected and interdependent with no single branch making the claim of being the one true church. To make such a claim is spiritual arrogance of the worst kind and denies the validity of other churches that come from the same root source. Our salvation is not dependent on membership in any one church, but in our own personal acceptance of Christ as Lord and Savior. When Christian churches work together, we are fulfilling what Saint John refers to in his letter about faith conquering the world. Working together, we can accomplish much. Acting alone, we have very little effect.

In the Holy Land, you can see the same ancient olive trees in the garden of Gethsemane that were there when Christ prayed the night before his death. They are some of the oldest living things in the world and have survived all these years by a process in which the outer bark peels away to reveal fresh new growth from within. In our own lives, we need to peel back the old crusted layers of irrelevance that accumulate over time to allow new growth to take hold and flourish. In the life of our own personal spiritual garden, we have to root out the old sins of bitterness, hatred, and resentment that choke out our being spiritually fruitful and productive.

In the end, we are judged by how we respond to the needs of the world. Of the Thirty-six million people in our own country who live below the poverty line and go without decent nutrition, clothing and housing, how many more in other parts of the world have even less? Of the forty-five million Americans who are without health insurance, how many more in other parts of the world have no access to adequate health care? We have the resources and the imagination to make this a priority for those who are marginalized by apathy and self-interest.

On this Rogation Sunday, we ask God's blessing not only on crops and garden plantings, but on all our new beginnings. We will never cure all the world's ills, but together we can make a difference. For the Christian faith to have an impact, we must remain strong in our commitment to Christ. With a firm faith in Christ as the source of power, the fruits of the Spirit will flourish.