

Giving it all we've got

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on August 31, 2008, the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who want to lose their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 16:24-26

Jesus tells us that the only way we can save our life is to lose it in a cause that has meaning and purpose. On this Labor Day weekend we remember that it is in having a purpose that we find our life and the meaning of who we are.

I have a passion for reading history and biography and especially of the lives of the great and not-so-great leaders of our country. One whom I enjoy reading about is President Theodore Roosevelt who, in 1901 invited an African American, Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House. That a black man would dine with the President in the White House was considered then considered quite scandalous. Now, a little over a hundred years later, an African American has been nominated to *be* the President.

While this in no way signals an end to racism in our nation, it is possible because of those who dedicated their lives to advancing racial understanding and establishing equal opportunity for all people. Most prominent among the leaders in the civil rights movement was Dr. Martin Luther King who gave his life to breaking down racial barriers. It was 45 years ago this past week in 1963 that Dr. King gave his famous "I have a dream" speech. I will never forget that very hot humid day when 200,000 of us from all over the country rallied at the Lincoln Memorial.

When Dr. King was struck down in April 1968, riots broke out in cities across the country. Living in the nation's capital at the time, we loaded our cars with supplies and bought them down to the inner city to people in areas affected by the riots. The irony was that the murder of Dr. King, the apostle of non-violence, should have triggered so much violence and destruction. Here was a man whom God raised up to lead us in getting involved in peace and racial justice issues. Here was a man who found meaning and purpose in losing himself in helping us understand, in his words, to "judge a man not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character." Few others in history have given themselves so completely to a cause so important to the ideals and aspirations of American life.

Over the centuries God has raised up statesmen and leaders in the fields of science, medicine, engineering, invention, teaching, law, literature, religion and community organizing who have found meaning in immersing themselves in causes to benefit the quality of life for all of us. Having a passionate belief and dedication to a cause requires the complete attention and energy of their body, mind and soul. They were motivated by a combination of courage and bravery, vision and righteous indignation. Their very dedication defined them as people called to do God's work.

Those whose chief concern is security and self-preservation never know the joy of the passionate giving of self for the benefit of others. Self-preservation is one of the most basic of human instincts and the disciples didn't want to do anything that would endanger them. Jesus made it plain to his disciples that they would have to be willing to lose themselves in taking up their cross to find true meaning and purpose. In the end, the apostles were more than willing to suffer any hardship and make any sacrifice to give up everything for his sake.

A life lived solely for its own sake is of little value until we make a commitment to do our part in making this a better world. I have been impressed with those who have held positions in the financial and corporate world only to give it all up to work to make a difference in their communities. They take seriously what Jesus meant when he asked, *what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?*

Self-denial and self-sacrifice are not popular values for this age. We live in an acquisitive society expecting to have what we want when we want it. Self-preservation and the need for security keep us from taking risks and making sacrifices.

This past year I am aware of how you have done a remarkable job of picking up the pieces of a divided parish and giving yourselves tirelessly to strengthening and building up this parish. I am seeing a rebirth of a viable gospel-centered community of faith. The goal is to grow spiritually and reach out to new members.

While it is natural for us to avoid unnecessary pain, there is no gain without sacrifice. As Christians, we don't ask for suffering anymore than Jesus wanted to suffer and die on the cross. Just as he did what was necessary to accomplish his goal of reconciliation, we give our best efforts based on what our faith demands. I sincerely hope that you see your work not just as a job or something you do, but as a calling and vocation. To put our heart and soul into your vocation is to take up your cross and follow the example of Christ in giving yourself wholeheartedly.

If it hasn't happened already, there may come a time when you have to stop and reassess the direction of your life. It can be a risky thing when that time comes when you realize that you need change directions, especially if it is later in life. It is worth the risk and effort if it adds meaning and purpose to your life. Losing yourself in the work of making a difference in the lives of others is its own reward.

You may not be able to do much of anything alone, but when others join you in a cause it can change the world for the better. That is what St. Paul refers to in his letter to the Romans about presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice. We are all members of the body Christ with each member having a function and purpose for the good of all. Each of us is given gifts to offer cheerfully, diligently and generously in teaching, in leading and giving. True Christian compassion must never be restrained, but generous in every way.

Making a difference in the lives of others begins with making some changes in our own lives. When we think of others first, we find them aware of us. When we engage in active listening, we are also heard. Reaching beyond ourselves can be the most important step in maturity. We never know what it means to give all we've got until we learn how to give wholeheartedly without preconditions. And we have much to give.