

The latitude of our outreach

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2009.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. James 2: 14, 17

If we were to describe what a healthy and vital parish looks like, it would include being warm and welcoming, having good liturgy, preaching and music, a dynamic Christian education program for all ages and a significant portion of the budget spent on outreach. The latitude of our outreach is an integral part of who we are as Christians. If we take the view that charity begins at home and that we have to take care of our own first, then we become the church that lives for itself and dies by itself. From the book of Proverbs we read, *Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.* (Proverbs 22:9) In the letter of Saint James we are asked, *What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.* (James 2:14)

The issue of faith versus works has been debated since the beginning of Christianity. The central theme in St. Paul's letter to the Romans is that we are saved by our faith and not by the law or anything we do. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther, in challenging the spiritually abusive practices of the church, based his stand on the letter to the Romans and argued that we are not saved by anything we do, but solely on our faith in Christ. He took his stand on the claim that we are justified and made right in our relationship with God by our faith. The fact is that we need both faith and good works. We need to have faith to do the work of God. Faith is nothing without works and our works are nothing without faith. James supports this when he wrote, *Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.* (James 2:18)

The thinking of Paul and James are not at variance with each other. We need both. To be authentic, our effective outreach must be motivated by our faith. I am both mystified and humbled by those who profess no faith but whose manner of life has all the marks of a Christian. More often we see it the other way around in those who profess great faith but show little evidence of what they say they believe. Our acceptance of Christ must have an effect not only on who we are but on how we live our life. We cannot have belief without practice. Faith motivates outreach.

The Stoics were Greeks whose lives were marked by their absence of feeling and emotion. They had no empathy for the poor and less fortunate whom they considered no concern of theirs. Any display of emotion interfered with their serenity. Developing an awareness and compassion for the poor requires using both our head and our heart. It means being of practical help while not creating a system of dependence. We can be of support to those going through hard times. With unemployment reaching double digits, this is something to bear in mind in working on the budget for the next year.

In days of the early church, the gospel was preached not to the rich in houses of worship, but to the poor in the streets. The gospel has always offered hope to the poor by expecting more from those who have much. To put things into perspective, the next time you are in your local supermarket, imagine yourself coming in there from a third world nation such as Haiti or Senegal or Darfur. You would not believe your eyes at the plentitude in

America's supermarkets. We are a land of plenty and are blessed with a vast supply of food. It is difficult for us to understand how people in those countries suffer from hunger and malnutrition because world hunger is never a problem of supply, but of distribution.

Jesus reached out to heal and teach everyone, regardless of cultural and religious differences. When he is confronted by the Syrophenician woman pleading for her daughter to be healed, his reply seems harsh and insensitive, but he is testing her faith. When he says that it is not fair to take food for the children of Israel and give it to the dogs, he is aware of the tradition that salvation was intended primarily for the Jews. Gentiles were regarded as puppy dogs not mature enough for salvation. The quick retort of the woman that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table is all he needs to hear to be convinced of her faith and her daughter is healed. Jesus never believes in the barriers that separated Jews from other religious and ethnic groups. God's love and salvation is for both Jew and Gentile alike. When Jesus heals the man of his hearing loss and speech impediment, he doesn't ask about his ethnic or religious tradition. He simply heals the man because he is one of God's own.

To bring this into focus in this parish, I am glad that we are doing some practical things in our outreach program in responding to the needs of the poor. When the food is brought here to the altar each Sunday and blessed before it is taken off to the food pantry think about what more can be done. Volunteers from all over the area go to St. John's Episcopal Church on Bowdoin Street in Boston to serve meals on a daily basis to the poor and homeless. There are also those who once served meals to the homeless who now stand in line for a hot meal. There are those who used to contribute to food pantries who now receive from them. They are there because they have lost their livelihood and their home and are struggling to maintain some semblance of pride and self-worth. As we observe Labor Day tomorrow, give thanks for the privilege of being employed and remember the growing numbers of those unemployed.

While charity may begin at home, it must never end there. The challenge for us is to find how we can use both head and heart to reach out in practical ways to those in need to fulfill our calling and purpose as a community of faith.