

What do you think?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2009.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

Mark 8: 36

When Jesus asks what others think of him we might wonder why he cares what others think. Here we have a very human glimpse of Jesus. His primary purpose in asking the question is to hear their response. We can just imagine them hesitating and anxiously looking around at each other. To break the awkward silence, someone suggests that there are those who say he is John the Baptist while others say he is Elijah or one of the other prophets. It was a good guess as Jesus at this point is continuing what John the Baptist began. The suggestion of Elijah was appropriate as he is associated with the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus then puts the question directly to them: Who do *you* say that I am? What do you think? Am I an impostor or what? No one is willing to be candid enough to say what they really think until the impetuous disciple Peter blurts out what everyone else is thinking. He declares boldly: *You are the Messiah, the Christ of God.* The term Christ is his title from the Greek referring to God's anointed one who is to come. This is no ordinary title, but a royal one with all the power of a king in the utopian realm of peace and harmony.

Jesus responds with equal candor by telling them what they don't want to hear. He tells them that he will have to endure great suffering and in the end give up his life for them as a crucial part of his mission. The disciples are horrified. They have not gone this far with him only to see him end up dead. Peter takes Jesus aside and vows that he won't let anything happen to him. Jesus rebukes Peter by telling him in no uncertain terms to get behind him. He must not stand in the way of God's plan.

The message for us is that the cost of discipleship is our willingness to take up our own cross, whatever that may be. We cannot be concerned with seeking a comfort level that avoids effort, hard work and self sacrifice. In an era where we can take a pill to avoid every kind of pain and discomfort, Jesus asks just the opposite. He asks us to bear the pain dealing with the harsh realities of living the sacrificial life. If we are going to find any meaning in our lives, we must put aside our own ambitions to follow him who bore his own cross to turn an instrument of torture into a symbol of glory. This means taking what we perceive as problems and turning them into opportunities to make us stronger.

The cross is one of the most widely recognized symbols on the landscape, right up there with MacDonald's arches! If we are ever to come close to the heart of God we have to put aside personal concern for the sake of others. It is in losing ourselves in something greater than ourselves that we find meaning and purpose. It profits us nothing if we gain position and possessions at the cost of our soul. If all we care about is getting what we want, we gain nothing, but if we lose ourselves in reaching beyond ourselves, we have everything to gain. Few of us will ever be another St. Francis or a Mother Teresa, but we have everything to gain when we reach beyond ourselves to an awareness of the needs of others. Self-absorbed people who offer to help others may do so only out of their own need rather than for the need of another. I once knew a man who was so totally consumed with his own plans that never materialized that he cut off everyone in his life only to die a lonely old man.

Think about people who have made a difference in your life. I remember those who helped me along the way in growing up and reaching maturity. They might not even remember what they did or said, but they appeared at just the right time in my life to make a difference and I have never forgotten it. When possible, I try to tell them what they meant to me because it will be too late for them to know if I wait to say something at their funeral.

Participation in the life of the church is an opportunity to become aware of the world beyond ourselves. We are here to not only to worship but to learn how to make a difference in the lives of others. Here is where we are strengthened to participate in the adventure of life. Here is where the poor and needy find help, where the tempted find strength, where the lonely find companionship and the sorrowing find consolation. This is where those recovering from substance abuse find mutual support. Here is where we receive spiritual nourishment to be strengthened for the ministry of clothing the poor, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless.

While sacrifice and self denial aren't popular notions, they help us understand Christ's own sacrifice. Self denial is not for its own sake, but for what it can do for us. In the same way, personal ambition isn't wrong in itself, only when it causes us to be so self-absorbed that we are unaware of others. Everything must be measured against the standard of our being imitators of Christ. This is our standard by which we determine our effectiveness as witnesses of Christ.

I don't know about you, but I am better at being aware of the needs of the world beyond me and I am more articulate in prayers in the company of others than when I am alone. I understand that Sunday golfers claim they can pray on the golf course. I imagine that when their game isn't going well that God's name is brought up from time to time. It is popular for people to say that they are spiritual but not religious. There are those who tell me that they believe but are not involved in "organized religion." All I can say is that being an active part of the Christian community makes my faith more authentic. I can know Christ best within the context of others gathered for the same purpose.

With all of the faults and shortcomings of the church, what the hymnist refers to as the "scornful wonder," it is here that we can best reach the heart of God. To be able to bear the cross given to us, we only need to remember how Jesus bore his own cross. To maintain our integrity, we need to grow spiritually as well intellectually and emotionally. This is all part of the learning curve in the process of becoming the people of God we are meant to be.