

Whose service is perfect freedom

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on October 18, 2009, the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost.

...whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. Mark 10:44

In the early days of our nation, European settlers found a rich and vital land spread out before them, offering a variety of natural resources and opportunities for survival. They did not share the attitude of respect for resources of the Native Americans who saw themselves as partners in being caretakers of the gifts of nature. Native Americans were far ahead of us in having a sense of responsibility for custodial care of our environment. If we had shared their concern from the beginning, there wouldn't have been such a waste of natural resources by those more concerned with consumerism than protection of the environment.

We are also caretakers and custodians of our faith as well. It must not be wasted nor taken for granted. Jesus began with but twelve disciples to form a new community to reform the religion of the one God of Israel and eventually transformed the world. Three of the disciples, Peter, James and John, became part of an inner circle that maintained a close relationship with Jesus. Inevitably, the two brothers, James and John have the audacity to ask for special places and honor. Jesus tells them that they don't know what they are asking. When he asks them if they think they will be able to endure what he is facing, they respond with great confidence, "Yes! Of course we can, we are ready; we can do it! We are up to it!" They haven't a clue as to what they are saying. If we seek honor, all Jesus can promise us is sacrifice. *"Whoever wishes to be great must first become a servant and whoever wishes to first must be slave of all.* There can be no seeking of status among the servants of Christ. At the heart of discipleship is neither privilege nor honor, only selflessness and sacrifice. Our only ambition must be the humility to serve others. Jesus sets the example by telling us that he did not come to be served, but to serve.

When I talk with people today I find that they want to put their faith into action by serving in practical ways. In this age of high technology and instant communications, ironically we are becoming increasingly distant from each other. The very means to keep us in contact becomes a barrier for human contact. In a constantly changing world with access to unlimited communications and information technology, we sit in front of our monitors for hours, keeping in touch by E-mailing, facebook and twitter, often when it would be just as easy to speak to them personally. At work, people E-mail between cubicles a few feet with those a few feet away when they could just as easily communicate face to face. We all know what it is like to hope to find a live person to answer our questions only to be confronted with a series of numbers to press often leading to an aggravating recording that cuts us off with a "thank you and good-bye."

The Bible, like any other book, can be found on line, but people say they don't get much out of reading it. More than likely they are trying to read it from beginning to end as we would read any other book. The rich history, prophecy and poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures and teaching of the Christian faith in the gospels and epistles can best be learned by reading the Bible in parts. When it comes to finding encouragement in the midst of things we don't understand, we don't need to be biblical scholars, just critical thinkers. The Bible has many answers, though there are few easy answers.

People often say that they are spiritual but not religious. There are also those who don't realize that they are religious but not spiritual. I see a genuine need for getting in touch with the holy by drawing closer to God. Doing yoga and meditation, walking in the woods and gathering with the Christian community for prayer and worship are all ways of getting in touch with a sense of the sacred. Our search for holiness begins with an awareness of the personal presence of God in the events of our time. In the midst of an uncertain world, we need to get in touch with the God who transcends the seamy and spiritless side of life. We are not alone in our search for answers to the great questions as well as the need for greater depth in our personal relationships.

With word processing as an essential part of our lives, we need to process the Word of God that relates our lives to what God is saying to us. The bible that I use and in which I have made notes for many years is marked, worn, and battered from use. I have sought and found answers and as well as questions that have no answers. For me, faith is all about living with the meaning of why there is so much human suffering in this world. I wish I knew why terrorists inflict pain and suffering on others. I wish I knew what drives bullies who beat to death or set fire to another student. I wish I knew why such terrible genocide is inflicted against people in places such as Darfur and why it hasn't been stopped or why there are so many inequities between the rich and the poor. Faith enables us to live with the questions for which there are no easy answers. It is our Christian faith that enables us live into the ways in which we can be part of the solution.

It is in the context of the community of faith that we can share our convictions as well as doubts and uncertainties. Here is where we can be affirmed and develop an understanding of the world and our place in it. Here is where we find forgiveness for the wrongs we have done as well as for those who have offended us. Here is where we can grieve our losses and rejoice in our gains and offer thanks to God for what we have. Here is where we find the some of the best opportunities to serve those who can't do anything for us in return. As we gather here to celebrate the Eucharist each week, the real service begins as we go out and do what we say we believe- to serve Christ in others.