

It's not as easy as we think

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on June 22, 2008, the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

Jesus said to his twelve apostles, "See, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." Matthew 10:16

Much of our commitment to being part of Christ and the church is our commitment to being missionaries. Effective missionaries have the gumption of salespeople who believe in their product enough to convince others. Whenever I see Mormon missionaries walking about, I can't help but admire their perseverance. Former Governor Mitt Romney spent an entire year as a missionary in France only to convert one person the entire time.

My mother loved being with people and particularly craved the attention of men. She would welcome every Mormon missionary or Jehovah's Witnesses that ever knocked on her door and talked to them endlessly about religion and every other subject under the sun until they were probably sorry they ever came in. Still, you can't help but admire those who are willing to give two years of their lives to go out to evangelize for their faith. They are following in the steps of those sent out by Jesus to proclaim the Good News of the gospel.

Jesus wanted to be sure that the apostles knew what they were getting into. It wouldn't be easy. In some places, they would not only be unwelcome but they would be scorned and persecuted. He encouraged them to fear nothing and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide them in speaking boldly. As much as he tried to prepare them for what they were facing, there was no way they could know what they were up against until they actually encountered the challenges and difficulties. What others might think of as problems they saw as challenges and opportunities.

Those who were part of the early Christian community had to be willing to pay the price. According to tradition, Peter, Andrew and Simon the Zealot were crucified. James, son of Alphaeus was beheaded. Matthew was slain with a sword, Philip was hung, James the Less was thrown from a pinnacle of the temple and Bartholomew was flayed alive. Thaddeus was killed by arrows, Thomas was killed by a spear and Matthias, who replaced Judas, was stoned and beheaded. Though the evangelists Mark and Luke were not part of the original twelve, they too suffered martyrdom. Only John, apostle and evangelist, for whom this church is named, lived to a very great age and died a natural death. All of them left no doubt in anyone's mind as to their resolve. To have made such a sacrifice, they had to have far more than a benign faith practiced for social convention.

When the church has a low priority in our lives, it causes a gap in our spiritual and moral integrity. There is no substitute for applying our faith at home and in the marketplace. Personal one-on-one evangelism and witnessing is simply being Christ to our neighbor. I am convinced that this church will be strengthened by your reaching out to others to share what the Christian faith means in your lives. You may not think of yourselves as evangelists, but every time you witness to what is right and true, you are witnessing for Christ. Every time you make a stand against what is evil and wrong, you are witnessing for Christ.

We face some of the same challenges today as the apostles long ago. The Christian faith is and always has been counter cultural because it runs against much of our post modern culture. It takes conviction and resolve to speak out boldly against injustice and oppression. We are

taking our faith seriously when we refuse to remain silent in the face of wrong. I am disappointed when someone tells me that someone was being maligned and they just listened and didn't say anything. Our silence is misleading and implies agreement. All you have to do is to think how you would feel if you were the one being criticized and maligned.

Oppression of minorities, women and children was once acceptable until someone had the conviction to speak out against it and said it was wrong. People are abused and exploited far too long before the victims have the courage to speak up and efforts are made to correct the wrongs. Their silence is often out of fear that no one will believe them.

Over the years I have listened to stories of unhappy marriages in which there is emotional manipulation and sadly, physical abuse. Seldom is the abuser willing to seek counseling and the only thing that can be done is to get out of the dangerous situation. The experience of weaving in and out of peoples' lives in ministry is often like picking up a book and reading only a few chapters in the middle and never knowing what becomes of the characters in the story. When it comes to witnessing for what our faith means to us, we must never be timid. You may feel that faith and religion are private matters, that it is none of your business what other people believe. But, there is an essential difference between imposing our beliefs on others and sharing what our faith means to us. We can acknowledge what other people believe without having to agree with them. When it comes to doing what is right and true, there is no need to be self-conscious or embarrassed.

When we hesitate to stand against what we know is wrong, we compromise both ourselves and our faith. Elie Weisal, who survived the holocaust, said that the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. The opposite of life is not death, but indifference. In opposing racial injustice, sexism, war, genocide, homophobia, and all other forms of oppression we must be prepared to take responsibility for the consequences. When we fail to stand up for what is right and good and true, Christ is hung on the cross all over again. When we compromise our faith with indifference and timidity, we drive another nail into his body on the cross.

We must first learn to listen to others to learn their story before we tell our own. When we listen with reverence, the Spirit guides us as to what and when and how to respond. I have had people walk out on sermons on difficult and controversial subjects. In talking with them afterward, they just couldn't stand to hear anything contrary to their thinking.

Advances in the quality of life have been made by those who refuse to accept the status quo. Were it not for progressive thinkers, African Americans would still be slavery, women would never have gotten the vote and children would still be working in factories. It has been through the efforts of those who felt they must do what is right that changed the systems. Those who witness boldly give voice to the voiceless and hope for the hopeless. We must expect nothing less of ourselves.