

## Spiritual and religious

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 10, 2010.

*"You are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Luke 3: 22

An epiphany is an enlightenment, a revelation and a realization. During this church season of Epiphany we have a series of scripture narratives that tell us how God is revealed to us in the person of Christ Jesus. It was anticipated that God would be manifested in human form at his birth and later at his naming and dedication in the temple. It is revealed again today in the God's approval at Jesus' baptism.

Jewish tradition had a baptism of repentance whereas in Christian tradition it is initiation into full membership in the church. You might wonder why Jesus felt he should be baptized as he had nothing for which to repent. Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist was reluctant and felt that he should be baptized by Jesus. But Jesus wanted to identify with the human condition and be an example for us. Because Jesus is no ordinary person, we are no ordinary people.

Each time we welcome a new member into the full membership of the church in baptism, we have the opportunity to reflect on how we are living out our own baptismal promises. It marks the time when we are commissioned for the mission and ministry of Christ

In the days of the early Christian community, Peter accepted the conventional notion that Jews were the chosen people when in fact they were chosen to be the people through whom the whole world would be saved. Peter argued that if Gentiles wanted to become Christians they first had to become Jews. His personal epiphany was to realize that the religion into which we are born is not the issue. God shows no partiality regarding our origin and is far more concerned that we know that we are saved by grace.

If you had certain attitudes and assumptions with which you were brought up that you no longer find acceptable about people based on color, sexual orientation or religious background, it was a personal epiphany. You came to understand that you can't make prejudgments about people. If we are completely honest with ourselves, none of us can claim to be completely free of prejudice. The most effective tool in breaking down the barriers of prejudice is to admit to it and deal with it. None of us is in a position to judge who is and who is not worthy of God's love and forgiveness.

Responding to the call to Christ's mission and service means working for justice by breaking down religious and cultural barriers. While we are accepted as we are, God expects us to grow as a people who are both spiritual in our beliefs *and* religious in our practice as a people on mission to represent Christ and his church wherever we are.

The value of this parish as a viable, healthy and gospel-centered church depends upon our willingness to move beyond a maintenance mode to being a people on mission. This coming year will be a time of transition for you in which you will need to envision how you can further your commitment to the ministry of witness and service of Christ. It will be an exciting and challenging time. Living out our baptismal promises, means resisting evil and breaking down the barriers that separate us. It means seeking Christ in others and learning to love and respect other people in the way we want for ourselves. It means striving for the justice and dignity that all of us deserve.

As Jesus was immersed in the waters of the Jordan at his baptism, he invites us to immerse ourselves in the example of his life that he gave for us. The call to be his followers is our call to his service. It is not lip service, but real sacrificial giving of our selves, our time, our abilities and our offerings. As Jesus was anointed with God's approval at his baptism, we are anointed and commissioned as God's servants.

This morning, our friend Bill Bates is being baptized and formally received into the body of Christ. You may wonder why this eighty-eight year old man who flew bombing missions over Germany in World War II has never been baptized. In searching, we found that there is no memory or record of his ever having been baptized. So it is right that we do this now to secure his bond with God in Christ. Be assured that I won't attempt to carry an eighty-eight year old man down the aisle, but we are formally acknowledging that he is most assuredly a full member of the servants of God in Christ. We pray that he will continue to grow in Christ in a life that is a matter of both head and heart, that he will be guided by both his spirit and his intellect.

If we truly believe that God is working for reconciliation and healing in the world, then we must be part of that mission. Our calling is to equip ourselves to be servants of Christ through prayer, worship and scripture. Our life as a Christian is to respond to the call to be sent out to do the work of Christian ministry wherever we are and make good on our promise not just to belong, but to be an active part of the life of the church. That is what it means to be both spiritual *and* religious.

With that in mind, I want to you to think seriously today about naming just one gift that God has given you to enable you to serve Christ in the world. Once you name that one gift that God has given you determine how you can use it most effectively. Then give serious thought to where you can best respond to God's call to serve. And when you determine what you are going to do, know that you go with God's grace empowered by the Holy Spirit.