

## Never look back

A sermon by the Revered Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 27, 2010.

*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.* Luke 9:62

In the realm of ancient Roman mythology, Janus, the god for whom the month of January is named, had two faces, one looking back into the past with the other looking ahead into the future. Janus is identified with all gates, doors, and beginnings. As we face into the prospect of the future, we typically look back in retrospect. Nostalgia has a selective memory, recalling imagined better times that seem better than the seemingly not-so-good times of the present.

As he reaches to the end of his earthly ministry, the scripture tells us that Jesus "set his face" toward Jerusalem. To "set one's face" is a Hebrew expression to indicate the determination to move in a certain direction without hesitation or wavering. Jesus knows he is heading straight into the hands of his detractors and never looks back. The end of his earthly mission is the beginning of the Christian mission in which his disciples urgently recruit an army of disciples to join them. There were those who made good on their promise to join up while others with the best of intentions had to tend to other matters first.

There is something in human nature that makes us reluctant to make commitments. Even though we make vows of marriage, sign job contracts, take out mortgages on homes and apply for loans on cars and college tuitions, making a commitment that will mean a change in our way of life can be daunting. It is easier to write a check than to be counted on to change the way we live. Self-absorbed people have trouble making commitments because they want to keep their options open.

Timing is everything. I was once asked to bring communion to an elderly couple who had been married for over sixty-five years. The husband was not feeling well and his wife told me that because they were from different church traditions, they were married before a justice of the peace and never had their marriage blessed. I told them that if they wanted to have some family and friends over, I would be happy to return in a few days for their reaffirmation of vows and a blessing. She did not want to wait and asked me to bless their marriage right then. So they reaffirmed their vows and I blessed their rings and gave a nuptial blessing. Later that afternoon her husband felt worse, was taken to the hospital and died. I've always been glad I didn't wait.

We can't put off doing what has to be done until we think conditions are right. When the call comes, we go ahead. Nothing is ever accomplished by waiting for what might be a more favorable time. If you want to become more committed in your marriage, if you want to have a better relationship with your family and be more involved with the church but think you need to take care of other matters first, that time may never come. The call to discipleship is unconditional and must not be delayed.

What if Paul put off his missionary journeys because travel conditions were unfavorable? What if Peter decided not to go to Rome because of the danger of persecutions? Imagine Stephen asking to be excused from speaking before the council of the Sanhedrin because he might be harmed? Archbishop Thomas Cranmer endured death at the stake for what he believed and Martin Luther was willing to be excommunicated and shunned for taking his stand. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was willing to die for plotting against the Nazi regime. All were heroes of faith because their commitment to Christ was unconditional.

In 1898, when war broke out between Spain and the United States, it was necessary to get a message from President McKinley to General Garcia, the leader of the Cuban insurgents. He was somewhere in Cuba, but no one knew where. There was no mail or telegraph at that time to reach him. Army Lieutenant Andrew Rowan was summoned to deliver the letter from the President to General Garcia. Without hesitation, he set out on a perilous journey to the coast of Cuba and disappeared into the jungle traveling on horseback and on foot through rough and dangerous territory to deliver the letter. He never asked, "Why me?" He never hesitated, never asked where General Garcia was located or how he would find him. He used his initiative and resourcefulness to complete the assignment without question and never looked back.

Jesus says that any one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom. Just as a furrow is kept straight only when we look ahead, once we commit to Christ, if we look back, we lose our direction.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul warns of the dangers of temptation. We must not give in to self-indulgence to the neglect of our soul's health but concentrate on the things of the Spirit. We must avoid becoming involved in contention, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels and dissension at the risk of being alienated from our selves, from other people and, worst of all, from God.

There is a tension between our human nature that dwells on the weaknesses of the flesh and our godly nature that builds on the strengths of the Spirit. Saint Paul urges us to emphasize the fruits of the Spirit that are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Christian *love* involves our whole heart, mind and will, seeking the good of others over our own. There is *joy* in the love that comes from knowing Christ. *Peace* is not just the absence of conflict; it is working to bring unity and harmony. *Patience* with people and situations has its own reward. *Kindness* is being aware of the feelings and needs of others. *Generosity* frees us from self-concern, allowing us to grow and be open to new ideas. *Faithfulness* and reliability in our relationships enhance our reputation. *Gentleness* is having an awareness of the feelings of others. *Self-control* is having mastery over our selves in order to serve others.

We must never put off what we can do now for this is the only time we have to make a difference. This is not a time to be cynical; the world is not too far-gone. Endless war, threats to the environment, crime and dishonesty must not distract us from our mission to advance the cause of Christ. Resist the tendency to be cynical about today's youth. When I was in my first parish on the Hudson River in Cornwall, N.Y. I was asked to give the invocation at the high school graduation. One graduate was headed for West Point and, although no one could have known then, he was destined to command all the forces in the Mideast. He was the future four star General David Petraeus.

This past week, I attended the graduation ceremonies of those who were receiving their GED diplomas from Wellspring Multiservice Center in the town of Hull that my wife founded. The speaker was a young man twenty-four years old, John Earle, known as "Johnny Cupcake." I have to admit I never heard of him, but his story was inspiring. He has numerous learning disabilities and started a small business by selling soft drinks on Nantasket beach. Instead of spending his earnings, he put it into a new business of designing "T" shirts and then took those profits and put them into another business and it snowballed until he is now a national recognized entrepreneur. The point is that you can make your dreams come true if you keep focused on doing what you want.