

Religious but not spiritual

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on November 8, 2015, the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost.

For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. Mark 12: 44

We often hear people say that they are spiritual but not religious. In realizing the need to reform his own Jewish faith Jesus saw the hypocrisy of those who were religious but not spiritual. They were going through the motions of practicing their religion with no evidence of inner spiritual conviction.

Christianity sets such high standards and seemingly impossible ideals that we are bound to fall short of the ideal, leaving us open to hypocrisy. So if we are concerned that there are too many hypocrites in the church we have to admit that there is always room for one more! Even though we all fall short of the ideal of the perfection of God, there is no point in aiming for anything less.

In today's gospel narrative, Jesus advises his followers to beware of the Scribes who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with deference in the marketplace and expect to be given places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They give every appearance of being very religious while foreclosing on the homes of defenseless widows. They observe all the outward religious rituals without the slightest clue about the inner spiritual nature of the religion they profess. Their long prayers addressed to God were nothing more than an ostentatious display of false piety.

When Bill Moyers was press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, he was called on to give a blessing before a lunch with the President and some members of congress. Half way through the prayer, the President bellowed out, "Speak up Bill, I can't hear you," to which Moyers replied, "I wasn't talking to you, Sir!" While we all want and deserve a measure of self-respect, those with a large ego have to remember that their place is not in the center of the universe. Jesus uses the example of taking the lower seat at a dinner, lest we take a higher one and then have to be asked to move down.

Humility is an essential mark of the Christian person. Narcissists are so full of themselves that so much of what they do is calculated to call attention to themselves. I knew someone like that who told me that it was his personality type and that he can't change the way he is. We are all capable of changing our behavior if we are willing. Humility is neither taught nor learned. It has to come from within.

Bishop Gates and his wife will soon leave to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In Bethlehem he will visit the Church of the Nativity that was built in the fourth century over the traditional birthplace of Jesus. The site was chosen by Saint Helena who was the mother of the Emperor Constantine. It was his conversion to Christianity that ended the era of persecution of Christians. The entrance to the church was built only four feet high to require those on horseback to dismount and bow their head as they entered that sacred space.

Today's candidates for political office are running for a variety of reasons. Wouldn't it be wonderful if they all really want to serve the best interests of the public? Likewise, those of us who are involved in the life of the church must not seek personal recognition or social prominence. There are many by-products of belonging to the church, including fellowship and mutual support, but self-promotion is not one of them. The most effective church leaders are those who get the job done without concern for that gets the credit.

Jesus' teaching about humility is based on our inner motives that are reflected in our outward actions. The Christian ideal is to be Christ to our brothers and sisters. Thomas Merton said that the Christian reflects the image of Christ as a clean window lets in the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light, the less we see of the glass. We imitate Christ in the same way artists get to know their subjects in order to capture their manner and personality on canvas.

In the gospel narrative today, Jesus is sitting in the temple watching people place their offerings for particular charities. He notices a poor widow who puts a few small coins in the collection box. Others are giving what they have left over after spending what they want on themselves. Jesus makes the point that the poor widow gave more than anyone else because she out of her poverty gave all she had.

The measure of our commitment to Christ is not in how much money we give or how much time we spend or how much we accomplish. Instead, our commitment is measured in giving of our whole selves without reservation or condition. We aren't coaxed and cajoled or made to feel guilty about offering ourselves in the service of Christ.

I am excited about what our new Presiding Bishop calls "the Jesus movement." It's all about imitating Christ wherever we are. WE simply follow the example of Jesus who held nothing back in giving his life as an example of sacrifice. We have to be willing to speak out in the face of injustice and wrongdoing when it would be easier to keep quiet. We have to be willing to take an unpopular stand for we know is right. When we are asked to give our whole selves to Christ without condition or reservation, offering anything less is missing the point.

In the final analysis, we have to know who is really poor and who is truly rich in the sight of God. We can't begin to measure what we give to God anymore than we can measure the extent of God's abundant love for us. Like the poor widow who gave all she had, it is when we give our whole selves to God without reservation or condition that we realize how much more we receive that we can ever give.

Among all the professional and personal papers I have in my study at home, I keep a list of those I love and care for. I pray for them each by name and the list grows as I recall old friendships and gain new ones. Some of them I have lost contact with and others I interact with on a regular basis. Try keeping a list of those who have been or are an important part of your life. Pray for them as a way of heightening your awareness and understanding of what it means to belong to the family and household of God.