

Prophets and losses

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2018.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Mark 8:36

When I was in high school, I worked in a local drug store during the summer. It is an entirely different experience dealing with people when you face them across a store counter. We've all encountered rude clerks but customers can also be very rude. Because of that, I try to treat clerks with the courtesy they deserve. It doesn't take much effort to offer a word of appreciation to cashiers, clerks, and those stocking the shelves. Courtesy really can be contagious.

When I teach young children about the Eucharist, I ask what they first see when they enter the church. One little girl pointing to the altar said that she sees the counter. It made me think. As much as I am accustomed to standing behind the altar, I am struck with the feeling that I might look like another store clerk behind a counter.

People in the business world tell me that they think of the church as a business. One churchwarden referred to the assessment paid to the diocese as our franchise for belonging to the Episcopal Church. We are far more than a business. We are a community of faith that uses sound business practices. We do have a product to offer. We're running a special on the salvation of your soul. There is no expiration date. It's already been paid for and comes with complimentary bread and wine!

When people who move in to the community and are church shopping I only hope they are more discerning than when shopping for a hairdresser, supermarket or plumber. In an era of being tentativeness about making commitments, it is all the more important that we are committed to supporting and participating in the church's life of worship, education, fellowship and outreach.

I have often wondered what it would be like if the heroic figures of our Judeo-Christian heritage turned out differently? What if Abraham had not accepted his role as the father of nations? What if Moses had begged off from leading his people out of slavery into the Promised Land? What if Saint Paul had never been converted to Christianity? God knew that this feisty character was the right person at the right time to advocate for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul first had to be stopped in his tracks to be converted from fighting against Christians to be the foremost spokesman for Christ. Paul eloquently testifies to Christ turning his life around. He writes in his letter to the Romans that no power of any kind can separate us from the love of God in Christ. (Romans 8:27-29) Our adversaries appear in many forms. We are hindered by our doubts, fears, insecurities, anger, hatred, prejudices and addictions. God's unconditional love in Christ overcomes any barrier, any power, even death itself. There is no greater description of the nature of Christian love than in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in which he writes that love is patient and kind; it is not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13)

While Jesus knows that he must suffer a sacrificial death, the disciples don't understand why. He will not allow anyone to dissuade him or stand in his way from carrying out his mission. He knows that instead of a coronation, he will be executed. Instead of a jeweled crown, a crown of thorns will be pushed down upon his brow. Jesus tells us that to save our life we have to lose it for his sake. To live for ourselves alone is to lose our purpose for living. There can be no winning without sacrifice, no crown without the cross. We are able bear our own cross because Jesus bravely bore his. His victory is our victory.

I enjoy reading biographies of people who made history. Professor Nancy Koehn, historian at the Harvard Business School describes in her book, *Forged in Crisis*, some remarkable historic figures who showed extraordinary leadership in times of crisis. One heroic figure is the British explorer Ernest Shackleton. He sets out with his crew of twenty-seven in 1915 to explore the unknown regions of Antarctica. When their ship, the *Endurance* is crushed by the ice and sinks beneath the surface, Shackleton and his men are marooned on the icy wasteland a thousand miles from home. Though they manage to salvage three lifeboats and their supply of canned food, they have no means of communication with the outside world. With sheer courage and determination, Shackleton exercises extraordinary leadership in saving his entire crew and returning them home safely.

During World War II and the rise of Nazism, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the radical decision to join the plot against Hitler. He was imprisoned by the Nazis and executed just three days before allied forces liberated his camp. His legacy is his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he writes that modern popular piety wants forgiveness without repentance, absolution without confession, and a crown without a cross. Without Christ's powerful example of sacrificial love, there can be no triumph of love over hatred or good over evil.

If our priorities are in place, we use things and love people and not the other way around. In a culture that encourages the need to have it all, that need is never satisfied. The true measure of having it all is to realize that we don't need to have it all. When it comes to profits and losses in the business of living the Christian life, Jesus tells us that we profit nothing by trying to gain the whole world at the price of sacrificing our soul. No price can be put on our personal integrity.

If we have a negative attitude and expect the worst to happen, we usually get what we expect. When we have a positive attitude and see problems as opportunities, we can expect the best to happen. We take charge of our lives when we stop making excuses and refuse to let ourselves be the victim of our own oppressive attitude.

The disciples do not fully understand the purpose of Jesus' mission. Some expect him to be a political and military leader who will defeat Israel's enemies and are not able to get their mind around that his kingship is not of this world. For him to die a sacrificial death goes against their expectations.

The Christian life runs counter to the culture of the self-absorbed. It is our business to serve others with no expectation of recognition or reward. What we get out of it is being blessed. One of our best products is putting Christ's love to work in reaching out to those on the margins who have little hope. But for the grace of God they could be any one of us. We make it our business to see Christ in them and hope that they see him in us. Bear in mind that while charity begins at home, it doesn't end there.