

On being lifted up

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 8, 2015.

...they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, Isaiah 40:31

Years ago there was a popular movie titled, "Chariots of fire." The name of the movie is taken from the Second book of Kings in the story about the prophet Elisha who prayed that his army would have chariots of fire. (Isaiah 6:17) The English patriotic hymn "Jerusalem" is based on that passage in a poem by William Blake.

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O Clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!

The movie is based on the true story of the lives of two cross-country runners who were students at Cambridge University in England. Eric Liddell was a Scottish Christian and Harold Abrahams was an English Jew. Eric Liddell is serious about his faith and believes that he was created for the purpose of glorifying God in his running. After intense training and winning competitive races, the two athletes are selected to represent Great Britain in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. When Liddell learns that the 100-meter race is scheduled on a Sunday, he refuses to run because his Christian convictions prevent him from running on the Sabbath. That Sunday, Eric Liddell is the lector in church in which he reads from the book of the prophet Isaiah: they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk, and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31 King James Version)

One of Eric's teammates offers to yield his place in the 400 meter hurdles the following Thursday. Eric enters that 400-meter race and defeats the American favorites. Though Harold Abrahams is beaten in the 200-meter race, he later enters the 100-meter race and wins. Their years of training and competing paid off as they ran as though they had wings of eagles to receive their Olympic gold medals.

If you have ever seen an eagle in flight, it is indeed impressive and you can understand why it was adopted as our national symbol. However, if you see a carving of an eagle in church, it has nothing to do with the American eagle. It is the symbol of Saint John the Evangelist whose gospel with highly its highly symbolic imagery is said to be like that of a lofty eagle.

Inevitably, when we work hard and put everything we have into our efforts, we grow weary. We may become discouraged and even feel that what we are doing is not worth it and want to quit. Whenever we are confronted with solving a problem, having a difficult time in our work or enduring a serious illness, it is like running a race. Just when we think we can't endure the strain, God gives us the inner reserve of strength. Just when we think we can't, we can.

I have a plaque on my desk at home that reads, "It can't be done." The apostrophe and the "T" are crossed out to say, "It can be done." Our attitude toward life makes all the difference when we are able to see challenges instead of problems, opportunities instead of roadblocks. When facing our challenges, God has a way of providing us with the will and strength for us to make our very best effort. Nothing is accomplished unless we have the attitude, the vision and the determination to make possible what seems impossible.

During his ministry, many people approached Jesus to be healed of their sickness or disability. They had to have the necessary faith that they could be made whole and well. They didn't passively hope in vain that their illness would go away. They had the faith and the confidence that healing was possible.

In the gospel story today, Jesus along with James and his brother John are staying at the home of Peter and his brother Andrew in the town of Capernaum. Peter's mother-in-law, who lives with them, is sick with a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up and she is healed. She then prepares a meal and serves the household guests, recalling the biblical verse that wait upon or serve the Lord shall renew their strength. The desire to be useful to others gets our mind off ourselves and is integrated into being a whole person in body, mind and spirit.

I visit someone in my former parish who is now over a hundred years old. When women were first elected to the vestry, she quipped that there should be something left for the men to do! Not only was she among the first women to serve on the vestry, she became the first woman to serve as senior warden. When I visit her, there is little or no apparent response. When I speak to her there is little or no hint of recognition. I don't believe that a visit like that is ever wasted. You never know what it means to hold someone's hand. That can communicate far more than attempted words of comfort or an eloquent prayer. When we think about who has meant the most to us in our lives, more than those who gave advice or offered solutions are those who stood by us when we were perplexed and didn't know where to turn. We don't forget those who were with us in tough times.

Facing a serious illness is a battle requiring the will to recover and be whole again. Healing of an illness or learning to live with a disability requires the right attitude and determination. We can become distracted if our head is wracked with pain or our stomach is churning or we are feeling so depressed that we can't perform the basic functions of daily living. The will to live and be healthy can overcome any pain or depression as we seek any means necessary to be made whole and well again.

Christianity is primarily concerned with healing the mind and body and redeeming the whole person. We seek wholeness for ourselves as well as for others. Sadly, religion is too often used as a pretext for violence, no matter what the excuse that religious extremists use. Now more than ever, we must mount up with wings like eagles and not grow weary working to overcome the divisions between the nations and cultures of the world that Jesus came to redeem.