

A man for others

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventh Sunday after Easter, the Sunday after the Ascension, May 17, 2015.

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.
John 17:18

When the apostles meet to choose someone to replace Judas, they don't draw up a slate of candidates nor are they subject to parliamentary procedures. Their way is to leave the decision up to God by casting lots, resulting in Matthias being chosen to join the other eleven disciples. We don't know much about Matthias except that he was a faithful companion to Jesus and was a witness to the resurrection. His service is largely unnoted and he therefore is an example of Christ's humility as a man for others.

Compare the selection of Mathias with a parish in search for a new priest. That process is long and exhausting with the intention of discerning what God wants for the congregation. A profile of the parish is developed with a review of candidates' resumes and a series of interviews held in hopes of matching the right priest with the right gifts in the right parish. Given the number of mismatches with both priests and parishes, they might just as well cast lots. It's simpler and doesn't take as long.

Most congregations place high on the list of priorities one who is a good pastor in addition to being a preacher, teacher and administrator. They want one who cares for them and listens to them as a model for a congregation that upholds and supports each other. It should not be so difficult to focus on others, but too often we find ourselves with self-absorbed people who make no effort to know us. I once knew someone who could turn the conversation around to himself before you knew what happened. Even worse, he would relate in excruciating detail each and every move he made in his latest bridge game. For one who doesn't play bridge or card games of any sort, it was a challenge to get to know him!

I have come to believe that it is a mark of humility to be genuinely interested in knowing other people. We must never make assumptions about people. We only have to take the time to listen and learn to find that there is more to knowing people than our first impressions.

I enjoy reading biographies of people who pioneered in developing new ideas and concepts. One of my favorite authors is Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough who writes history from the standpoint of the lives of those who made history. His latest book, *The Wright Brothers*, is a detailed account of how Wilbur and Orville Wright designed and developed the first powered aircraft. While working as mechanics in their Dayton, Ohio bicycle shop, the two brothers came up with the idea of developing the first heavier than air powered flying machine. With no more than a high school education and limited funds, their courage, inventiveness and ceaseless determination enabled them to develop powered flight that up until then had only been a dream.

They began experimenting with gliders and later built a motor to power the flying machine. It was a cold windy day in December 1903 when Orville Wright took off from the windswept shores of the outer banks of North Carolina and remained aloft. They mastered the art of powered flight. Each time they went aloft, their flights lasted longer. One of the witnesses of that first flight said that it wasn't luck that enabled them to fly; it was hard work and common sense. The two brothers put their heart and soul into an idea and with faith in what they were doing were able to realize their dream of powered flight.

A quarter century later in May 1927 Charles Lindbergh captured the imagination of the world by making the first solo powered flight from New York to Paris. When Astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the moon in July 1969, he brought with him a small piece of the Wright brother's original flying machine.

These pioneers in aviation and space exploration did not set out to achieve fame and fortune. Indeed, there was little notice paid to the Wright brother's first flight because many could not believe that man could actually fly. Neither the Wright brothers nor Lindbergh were particularly religious people, but they possessed a quality of faith and determination and just enough stubbornness to succeed in reaching their goal. God has a way of using people with imagination and determination who have faith in what they are doing to turn a dream into reality. If those early aviators and astronauts were in it for themselves,

they would not have been willing to risk personal danger to achieve what they did to advance the cause of aviation and space exploration.

Jesus was always focused on others. His miracles and healings were not for the purpose of drawing attention to himself, but to reveal the kingdom of God. In the gospel narrative today, we read that on the night before he died he prays that his disciples would carry on his mission. He prays that they will be strengthened and protected and that their joy will be complete. As he was sent into the world, he sends them out to proclaim forgiveness and reconciliation. The more we pattern our lives after Christ the more we are encouraged to do our very best to emulate his example of selflessness and compassion. It is a gift of grace.

We won't be disappointed if we don't expect much from others, but if we expect more they just might exceed our expectations. There are always those who disappoint us, as there are those who are disappointed in us, but if we encourage the best in others we must expect no less of ourselves. It is often that we discover those who appear to be rather ordinary have a way of doing extraordinary things because they make even the most ordinary task an offering to God.

In the life of the early church, those who followed Christ were referred to as the saints. Those great heroes of God who are remembered in books and carvings and stained glass began as very fallible people who grew stronger by being tested over and over again. They chose perseverance over whining and learned from their mistakes. They chose to create the life they wanted rather than to accept the life that just happens.

Who among us is willing to deny ourselves basic comforts to work for the betterment of humanity? We would all do well to take seriously the example of Jesus to live more simply and learn to do without to provide for those in need. This is what makes Jesus "a man for others."