

**That we all may be one**

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, June 1, 2014.

*All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them.*

*John 17:10*

Jesus completes his earthly ministry in his “high priestly prayer” in which he prays that we all be one in carrying on his mission to bring peace and reconciliation. The disciples will need strength and courage to carry on what he began. We may be one in Christ, but history has shown that the fracturing of the church has weakened the effectiveness of our witness to be the visible presence of Christ. We are only as effective as we are willing to work together. What the next chapter in the ongoing story of Christ has to say is up to us.

We all have our stories to tell. There are those who are not comfortable talking about themselves while others are their own favorite subject of conversation. You may have found yourself relating a personal experience only to have the conversation completely turned around to the other person. If you were experiencing a problem, they top it with one of their own. If you were successful in achieving something, they top it with their own success.

It is delightful to meet prominent and accomplished people who have no need to focus attention on them. I once met a prominent artist and was prepared to hear about her life and work. Instead, she asked me what I was reading and what I thought on a variety of issues. She was secure enough in herself that she didn't have to be the center of attention. She had her own ideas and opinions; she just didn't need to impress anyone with hers. Another prominent personality I encountered was a prizewinning author who listens and assured others of the importance their vocation.

There is a correlation between what we expect of ourselves and what we expect of others. If we have low expectations we will not be disappointed. If we expect more of them, it has a way of bringing out the best in them. It is the mark of a secure person to put others in their best light. One who exemplified such a quality was Jennie Jerome Churchill, the mother of England's great prime minister. During the Boer War, she organized and managed a hospital ship to South Africa. As editor and publisher of a literary magazine, she seemed to live on the crest of a wave and was always part of the action and passion of her world. Her biographer wrote that, “She had courage to match her beauty, an excitement to match her intelligence and energy to match her imagination. She had the ability to treat her friends as she did her works of art by putting them in their best light.”

There is no need for any of us to feel that we are above doing menial work. I never asked anyone working for me to do what I wasn't willing to do myself. I am privileged to handle holy things at God's altar and I am willing to do what needs to be done. When I was rector of my first parish, I served on a volunteer ambulance corps as an emergency medical technician and handled some and horrific and grisly situations. Focusing on the immediate tasks at hand in caring for the patient left no time to think about myself. I considered my service in the ambulance corps an extension of my ministry.

The quality of humility leaves no time or place for pretentiousness and pomposity. We have all known those with inflated personalities and clergy are no exception. One such cleric's mother observed that she had provided the circumstance and he provides the pomp. I once met a rather pompous priest, Father George Fox who had the demeanor of a medieval prelate. One day he was pulled over for exceeding the speed limit. When the officer approached him, he leaned out the window and said indignantly, “Do you know who I am, I'm Father Fox!” To which the officer responded, “I don't care if you Mother Goose, you're getting a ticket!”

When we study the life and person of Jesus, it becomes clear that he has the humility to glorify God in everything he says and does. He knows that he can make a sensation of himself performing miracles, but always points beyond himself to give God the glory. On this Sunday after the Ascension, we are reminded that in allowing ourselves to be instruments of God's grace we are lifted up to God's glory. What we offer up is not done casually or without thought.

Our approach to the presence of God is always in humility. We can pray in any place at any time and in any posture as long as we pray for ourselves, for others and to gratitude for all we have. An attitude of humility and supplication is the same as when we take out the trash or scrub the kitchen floor or dig in the garden or change a tire. If we feel unworthy in God's presence we are made worthy in accepting his redeeming grace.

As sons and daughters of God we are all brothers and sisters living together and using the same resources that God has provided for us. Our unity is realized when we learn to live in peace, harmony and mutual respect. We all value a certain right to privacy and place, yet we continue to mark boundaries and build walls that separate us. As one wall comes down, another is built up. We rejoiced over the fall of the Berlin wall dividing East and West Germany and we lament over the wall that divides Jews and Palestinians in Israel. It may be that good fences make good neighbors, but we can't help but ask why? Robert Frost's poem, Mending Wall, asks this same question when he wrote:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.

Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offense.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall that wants it down.

The Christian Church is under siege by those who deny belief in God as well as those who weaken our unity by their divisiveness. If we are to have a strong witness as a community of faith, the walls that separate us must come down. We have to get beyond the barriers of fear, suspicion and distrust that isolate us. Until those barriers are removed, we cannot be of one heart and mind in carrying on the work of Christ. That will be accomplished by our working together with mutual respect to give strong witness to our faith in Christ