

### **What kind of church are we?**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 19, 2015.

*As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.  
Mark 6:34*

If I were to choose one characteristic to describe Jesus, it would be his sense of compassion. It is the basis of everything he says and does. The scriptures record that when Jesus' ministry of healing became known throughout the region many people with all manner of illnesses pursued him. When Jesus and the disciples leave a crowd on one side of the lake, they go over to another side only to find more people waiting anxiously for him. With so many pleading for help, the pressure is exhausting. At some point, they have to withdraw to renew their inner resources.

We all need to draw apart from our everyday demands of school, work and family to renew our energy. I derive great strength from gathering here at the altar each week with you. Here is where we can be still and feel God's presence. Here is where we discern what God is saying to us through scripture and prayer. Here is where we can be ourselves and feel accepted. Just as important as diet and exercise are for good health of the body, we also need to renew our spiritual resources as well. I am renewed and energized in body, mind and spirit while walking in the morning and swimming laps in the afternoon. These are opportunities to think through whatever is on my mind.

Saint Paul writes in the Letter to the Ephesians how being part of the household of God means we are no longer strangers and aliens. Our relationships with each other are the foundation for building the household of God. Developing rhythms and patterns in our lives is essential for balancing our inner resources. I learned the value of developing rhythms and patterns while being part of a cast in theatre productions. When we met for our first rehearsal, we learned to know each other personally as well as the characters we were playing. Members of the cast encouraged each other as we learned our character and the important but necessary patterns and movements of each of us both on and off the stage. The cast and crew learned to perfect our timing in making our entrances and exits, coordinating our movements to allow everyone to be on cue in the right place at the right time. Maintaining the rhythms of those patterns assured a smooth and successful production. Art imitated life as we learned to respect each other in our roles and understand our role in relation to the entire production. In much the same way our lives as Christians requires listening to our mind and body rhythms as a way of monitoring our energy levels. The better we take care of ourselves, the better we are able to serve others.

The ideal of the church is on in which we know each other well enough that we can learn to love and respect each other that allows us to resolve differences. Our worship can be both reverent with a sense of the holy and fun while feeling free to laugh, cry and hug. We are a worshipping community where the Eucharist is the center of our life that sends us out on mission to the world to help us understand why worship is called a service. Here is where we gather to learn to find answers as well as to ask the right questions. Here is where we baptize our children, join together in marriage those who want to make a commitment of their love for each other. Here is where we bid farewell to those who have entered the larger life in God's care and keeping. It takes our full commitment to provide a Christian presence in this place and beyond. It takes our full involvement to carry out our shared vision to be a vital, viable and visible parish church. Each of us serves an essential part in the household of God joined together with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone.

I once lived in a huge old rectory built in an era where the family had a staff of live-in servants that included a cook, a maid, a laundress, a gardener and the coachman to serve the needs of the household. On the wall of our upstairs bedrooms were buttons that were used to summon the servants. A ring box in the servants' quarters indicated who was calling from which

room. I used to push those buttons in the vain hope that someone might appear, but no one ever did! The reality is that we had to be our own cook, maid, launderer, gardener and driver. The era of a staff of household servants living in a wing of that large home disappeared long before we ever lived there. I think of what it took to manage a large staff of household servants like those in the Downton Abbey television series. Their personal lives were as much a story as the lives of the family whom they served. They all needed compassionate understanding and guidance. Jesus saw the people of his time as sheep without a shepherd in need of guidance.

We are no different in our own time. When we go astray like lost sheep, the compassionate Christ warns us of dangers that lie ahead and guides us in finding our way back from our spiritual wilderness. Whether we are facing a serious illness, recovering from an addiction, or going through a difficult relationship, Jesus as our shepherd leads us in the right paths. On visits to the holy land, I saw shepherds leading their free-range sheep in the right paths. Jesus as shepherd of our souls warns us against the dangers that lie ahead. He leads us in our encounters with friends and adversary. He helps save us from being our own worst enemy.

We all like to think of ourselves as having a measure of self-reliance, but being self-reliant means asking for help when necessary. None of us gets through this life without someone giving us a hand up. I am grateful for those who make connections for me and point me in the right direction.

When I reflect on who they are and what they do for me, they are manifestations of Jesus as the shepherd of my soul.