

Imitators of God's grace

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 9, 2015.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:31

When we read certain Old Testament writings, especially in the Book of Leviticus, we read things that seem to be concerned with matters no longer relevant to our time. We no longer take seriously prohibitions against eating leftovers, (19:5), planting two kinds of crops in the same field, wearing garments made of two different kinds of cloth, (19:19) having a tattoo, (19:28) or handling the skin of a pig. (11:8) If handling pigskin were forbidden, we would have no football, no Patriots, no NFL! By searching the scriptures we can find a Biblical quote to back up most any claim and even to support a personal prejudice about race, gender or sexuality.

What you can find in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy is the Golden Rule about loving our neighbor as we love and respect our selves. It is the basis of how we are to live and get along with each other. The essence of the Golden Rule is found not only in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, but also in the Koran and writings of Confucius. Applying our faith on a daily basis requires the realization that as social creatures we are dependent on each other.

Today's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians has some practical advice about living in community. Let's look at some of the practical points of daily living. First, Let no evil talk come out of your mouths. Our use of words and language has the power to build up or tear down. It is easy to be critical of others when a more positive approach is to encourage them to do better. It can make someone's day to offer a compliment or encouraging word. Those who serve the public in business, education or community need to know when things are going right and not just hear complaints about how things are going wrong. An acerbic and critical remark is demeaning and demoralizing while a constructive and encouraging word can do wonders. It is important to encourage the person behind the counter and service people and not take them for granted. A good compliment can make someone's day! When kindness and consideration are part of who we are, we are evidence God's grace in action.

Next, Be kind to one another and tenderhearted. A kind word and a thoughtful gesture make the difference in how we are perceived. To have no ulterior motive in helping those who cannot repay us is an unselfish act of kindness.

Finally, forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. It is humbling to remember that we are all under judgment. To pass judgment on others without regard for their feelings is to cast judgment on ourselves. When we find it difficult to forgive someone who has offended us, we have to put things into perspective and realize that we also need to be forgiven. We have no business accepting our own forgiveness when refusing to forgive others. To have no ulterior motive in helping those who cannot repay us is God's grace in action. These basic points of Christian living are summed up in the timely and universally relevant Golden Rule about treating others the way we want to be treated. When we are so focused on ourselves we can't see any other point of view. We have to be willing to see both sides of an issue to maintain a trust among those with whom we live and work.

The most real way to make Christ's life our life is when we partake of the elements of bread and wine of the Eucharist. When we become one with Christ he dwells in us and we in him. Christ dwelling deep within our very being widens our realization of who and where we in God's universe.

This past week I was on a windjammer cruise, an adventure that was a microcosm of what it means to live and work together for the common good. We were aboard the Isaac Evans a ninety foot fifty-two ton schooner built in 1886. It has been kept in its original condition with no engine or electricity, only kerosene lamps and a wood stove for cooking.

We sailed out of Rockland, Maine around the Penobscot Bay with eighteen passengers and five crew. Our experienced captain handled the vessel beautifully throughout the three-day voyage. Our very capable first mate worked tirelessly moving from one end of the vessel to the other handling lines and the canvas sails with great ease. With no noisy engine on board, we let the wind and tide move us across the water.

Our multigenerational passengers lived in very close quarters. We learned the value of being aware of each other and the necessity of working together. We helped with hauling the anchor and hoisting sails. As with so much in life, timing is everything and we had to be alert to the changing direction of winds and adjust the sails accordingly. The experience of all of us doing our part in closed space was necessary for a successful adventure. It was microcosm of community life in which we all had a part in working together for the good of all.

The motivation to have the experience in close quartered community life on a sailing vessel inspired me to reread John Masefield's poem, Sea Fever:

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And the grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the seagulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.

John Masefield
1878-1967