

At what price?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2015.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Mark 8: 36

It is during those growing up years that we may have been overly self-conscious. What we didn't realize is that others felt the same way. At some point we matured and gained enough self-confidence not to worry what others thought and just learned to be ourselves.

When Jesus asks what others think of him we might wonder why he cares what anyone else thinks. While this seems like a very human glimpse of Jesus, he is actually asking the question to find out what his disciples understand about him and his mission.

Imagine for a moment you are there with the disciples. You and the others are hesitant to answer as you look anxiously at each other. To break the awkward silence, someone says that there are those who say Jesus is John the Baptist while others say he is Elijah or one of the other prophets. Jesus then puts the question directly to you: Who do you say that I am? What do you think? Am I an imposter or what? None of you is willing to say what you really think until the impetuous Peter blurts out what others are reluctant to say. He declares boldly: You are the Messiah. Yes, Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one of God.

The term Christ is significant. It is no ordinary title. Neither is it honorary. It carries with it both great authority and the heavy responsibility of being anointed by God for a mission to lead the people of God. Jesus then tells them that he will have to endure great suffering and in the end give up his life for them. The sacrifice of himself is a crucial part of his mission. The disciples are horrified. They don't want to hear this. They have not gone this far only to see him end up suffering a grim death. Why is this necessary? Peter takes Jesus aside and vows that he won't let anything happen to him. Jesus rebukes Peter by telling him that he must not stand in the way of what he has to do. We all ask the same question. Why was Jesus' sacrifice of himself necessary? Jesus' willingness to give himself up for us is the ultimate example of sacrificial love. When Jesus asks us to take up our cross he is referring to the harsh realities of living the sacrificial life. The cost of Christian discipleship is being willing to take a stand for what is right, especially in the face of opposition. Jesus tells us that if we are to find any meaning in our lives we must deny personal ambition and take up our cross to follow him. We take up our cross when we take a moral stand beyond our comfort level. It means that we let nothing stand in the way of doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. If we are going to find any meaning in our lives, if we are going to be true to ourselves, we must put aside self-concern to do what is right.

The cross is still one of the most widely recognized symbols on the landscape, right up there with the American flag and MacDonald's arches! If we are ever to come close to the heart of God we have to put aside personal concern for the sake of others. It is in losing ourselves in what is greater than ourselves that we find meaning and purpose. Jesus tells us that it profits us nothing if we put ambition above personal integrity. If all we care about is getting what we want, we gain nothing, but if we lose ourselves in the right cause we have everything to gain.

Self-absorbed people tell you that you have to look out for yourself because no one else will. They are the ones who would step over someone lying in the street and give them a lecture on personal responsibility I once knew someone so totally consumed with pursuing his own ambition that it cost of cutting him off from virtually everyone in his life.

Think about the people who have made a difference in your life. Remember those who helped you along the way to reach maturity and understanding. They might not remember what they did or said, but you do. They appeared at just the right time in your life to make a difference. You don't forget people like that. It is important that we tell them what they mean to us because it will be too late if we wait to say something at their funeral.

This past week was the fourteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. We once again heard stories of those brave firefight-

ers who went toward the danger while others were escaping from it. We remember those brave souls who made the decision to stop the hijackers of flight 93 over rural Pennsylvania. They knew they weren't going to survive but they were not going to let the hijackers reach their target. They had nothing to lose and everything to gain by giving their lives to save those who might have perished had they reached their destination.

Personal sacrifice and self-denial help us understand Christ's own sacrifice of himself. It is its own reward. Ambition in itself isn't wrong unless it causes us to be blind to the needs of the world around us. Everything we do is measured against the example of Christ.

If you are anything like I am you are better at getting a worldview in the context of others than when you are alone. I pray better and think better in the context of this faith community. We live in an era when it is popular to say that they are spiritual but not religious and that they don't need "organized religion." We know all too well that the church has its faults and shortcomings. This must have been what the hymnist was thinking when he wrote, though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed. (Hymnal #525) For me being an active part of the Christian community encourages and strengthens me in thinking through what my faith means to me. It gives greater authenticity to who I am and what I do in God's world.

With all of our faults and shortcomings it is here that we can best reach the heart of God. Here is where we are strengthened to participate in the adventure of life. Here is where the poor and needy find help, the tempted find strength, and the lonely find companionship, and the sorrowing find consolation. Here is where we receive spiritual nourishment to be part of clothing the poor, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. I want to be part of a community that ministers to young and old alike, gives comfort to the weary, companionship to the lonely and comforts those who mourn. I want to be part of the church that welcomes the outcasts and loves the unlovable. By so doing I can learn to love that part of myself that feels outcast and unlovable.

When going through times of moral crisis we are sustained in remembering how Jesus bore his own cross. We are all a work in progress in becoming the people God intends us to be. We can do this if we are willing to take up our cross to follow him who leads the way.