

Giving back

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 27, 2015.

Whoever is not against us is for us. Mark 9:40

If we were to take literally the hard saying of Jesus about cutting off our hand or foot or our eye if it causes an offence, we would all end up unable to see or walk or hold on to anything. Jesus is clearly using extreme hyperbole and metaphor to emphasize that it would be better to eliminate a part of our body that causes us to sin than to be separated from God.

No behavior is so offensive that we cannot change. No repentant sinner is so notorious who cannot be forgiven. We have the choice to change our behavior for the better. An offensive compulsion has to heal from the inside out. In Jesus' time, it was thought that mental disorders were the result of being possessed by demonic spirits. In modern times, we use more enlightened terminology in a diagnosis, but the symptoms are similar. Serious mental disorders and extreme depression make it seem as though inner forces possess the victim. When someone is consumed by increasingly out of control and destructive behavior, it requires radical changes. It is necessary to get at the root of a physical or mental disorder to prevent it from over-coming the person.

What keeps us from doing something about a behavioral disorder is our uneasiness with change. It is part of human nature to accept unhealthy behaviors and to become so accustomed to the way we are that we no longer feel the need to change. We must never be afraid to acknowledge a weakness or vulnerability. It takes radical measures to overcome bad habits and to end unhealthy relationships that prevent us from maintaining our personal integrity. To be free from self-destructive tendencies, it is necessary to take the radical step of cutting out the offensive behavior. We're not talking about superstition or black magic, but about real ways to treat the destructive forces that cause confusion and chaos.

Mahatma Gandhi, the Hindu lawyer from India had much in common with Jesus, the Jewish rabbi from Galilee. Gandhi determined to do something about the social and political oppression of his people. He led a non-violent revolution to bring about independence for India. Through determination and self-sacrifice he persevered in standing up to political oppression. Compassion did not come easily to him. He had to rid himself of anger and self-concern that would distract him from his purpose and mission. The more he did without material possessions and comforts, the better he was able to think and the happier he became. He learned the joy living as simply as possible.

Self-denial does not come easily in an age of consumerism. We need and want the advantages of a good education, decent housing and quality health care. We want future generations to have the advantages that we did not have. Finding contentment in being satisfied with what we have is made difficult by our tendency to want more. True fulfillment is in knowing what is essential and what we can do without. Contentment is found in giving more than receiving. So much of what Jesus teaches us is about living a life of simplicity and self-denial. He spoke more about money and material things than any other subject.

On this Stewardship Sunday we are being asked to consider the best use of our time, our talents and our resources. Being good stewards is about being responsible for all of God's gifts, including returning a portion of what we have for God's work. Just as a ship's steward and a flight attendant are responsible for the provisions for the journey, so we are also responsible for the right use of what has been provided for us in our life journey.

Let me share with you why I make a pledge to the church. I pledge a portion of what I have received because the church has never let me down and I won't let the church down. I pledge out of profound gratitude for what I have been given. I pledge because I want to witness to the Christian faith in an increasingly secular society. I do so not out of guilt or duty but out of a sense of joy in knowing that I am loved and forgiven by God. Our pledges, yours and mine, will enable us to know what to expect in developing a budget. We are far more than another community organization; we are a living community of faith and fellowship of those who believe in and follow Christ Jesus as our working example God's grace.

We ask that you give serious and prayerful consideration to make a generous pledge for the work of Christ in our time and place. When you think about it, the church is one of the few places you can go where you don't have to buy a ticket for admission. We are open every day, including Sundays, for public worship and private prayer. We are available for baptisms, weddings and funerals, for learning, fellowship, pastoral care and opportunities for outreach. You can receive spiritual counseling as well as a visit when you are ill or experience a loss. Your children receive a Christian education and training in music and you never receive a bill for tuition. Here is where your soul is nurtured in your commitment to follow Christ in all areas of your life. I am glad to share this journey of faith with you and ask you to join me in supporting our parish's life and mission. I am glad to belong to a Church that stands for justice and equality with regard to gender, sexuality and marriage that assures the dignity of every human being.

It all comes down to knowing that when Christ is central in our living, he is central in our giving. The choice is ours. It's as simple as that.