

Beyond ourselves

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 6, 2015.

What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. James 2: 14, 17, 18

A few years after we were ordained I met up with a seminary classmate who told me how he tried starting a new congregation with the intent purpose of not having a church building. They would be the church without walls. They gathered together in rental halls and occasionally in a tent. It was a bold experiment for a congregation to be free to pursue their mission to the world beyond themselves. It was an intriguing idea, but it didn't last. It seems that they needed a place they could call their own.

I grew up in Saint Thomas' Church in Washington, D.C. Howard Wilkinson, a former rector of this parish, was rector there during the years that President Franklin Roosevelt attended. Years ago, that beautiful church building was destroyed by fire that was set by an arsonist. It was a bitter lesson that the church is people, not buildings. The still vital congregation of Saint Thomas' continues to meet in their parish hall.

We are blessed with this beautiful space in which we meet and worship. For over a century our parish has offered a warm and welcoming place for worship, Christian formation and the ministry of caring for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. The challenge for us is that these walls don't keep us from the concerns of those beyond ourselves.

You have heard that charity begins at home but like other popular quotes you won't find it in the Bible. Our outreach may begin here but it must not end here. Reaching in and reaching out happen at the same time. It is an integral part of what we are. If we have no concern for those beyond our membership, then we become the church that lives for itself and dies by itself. In the letter of Saint James we are asked, what good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14)

The issue of faith versus works has been debated since earliest times in the history of Christianity. The central theme in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans is that we are saved from our sins not by anything we do, but by our faith alone. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther took his stand against the practice of the church of buying salvation through the sale of indulgences. What became the Protestant Reformation was based on the principle that we are saved by faith alone. Paul emphasizes *justificatio ex fide*. We are justified or made right in our relationship with God by our faith and not by anything we do.

Saint James emphasizes the importance of both faith and works. He wrote that faith is nothing without works and our works are nothing without faith. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. (James 2:18)

The emphases of Saint Paul and Saint James are not at variance with each other. Our efforts at doing good works are authenticated by our faith. We can't profess a strong faith without practical evidence of it in the way we reach beyond ourselves. I am both mystified and humbled by those who profess no faith at all whose manner of life has all the marks of a Christian.

In ancient Greece, the Stoics were marked by the absence of evident feeling or emotion. They showed little or no empathy for the poor and the less fortunate. They avoided displays of emotion that might interfere with their need for serenity. Christian thought knows that developing an awareness and compassion for those on the margins of society requires both head and heart.

In the days of the early church, the gospel was preached not to the rich in houses of worship, but to the poor in the streets. The gospel offers hope to those who have little by expecting those who have much to share their abundance. To put

this into perspective, the next time you are in your local supermarket, imagine what it must be like for someone coming in from a third world country to marvel at the abundance of food and other basic necessities. Living in the land of plenty makes it that much more difficult for us to an awareness of those who live without the basic necessities and for whom life expectancy is half our own.

Jesus reached out to everyone, regardless of cultural and religious differences. When he encounters the Syrophenian woman pleading for her daughter to be healed, his response seems harsh and insensitive when he says that it is not fair to take food for the children of Israel and give it to the dogs. Rather than being rude and insensitive, he is testing the strength of her faith. He is aware of the tradition that salvation was intended primarily for the Jewish people and that Gentiles were regarded as puppy dogs not mature enough for salvation. The woman's quick retort that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table convinces Jesus of the strength of her faith and her daughter is healed. Jesus did not believe in the barriers that separated Jews from other religious and ethnic groups. He believed that God's love is for both Jew and Gentile alike. When he heals the man of his hearing loss and speech impediment, he doesn't ask about his ethnic or religious origins. He heals him because he is one of God's own.

The Book of Proverbs tells us that all who are created and loved by God share in common the same human needs. We like to think of ourselves as having no prejudice. We like to think that we have learned from the history of racial and ethnic injustices. However, much of the on-going political rhetoric carries a real danger of encouraging racial and ethnic prejudice. Our awareness and concern for those beyond our walls defines who we are as a people of God.

In this era of climate change and weather extremes, the weather prophets tell us that we are in for a harsh, cold winter. This will particularly affect the poor and homeless in our midst. Food pantries have been around for decades in both poor and prosperous areas. There are those who once contributed to food pantries and served meals to the homeless who find themselves standing in line to be served. There are signs of hope in seeing those who have received help can now give back to those in need.

Now that our summer travels are over and another program year is at hand, the growing numbers of those who go without the basic necessities tell us that poverty never takes a vacation.

Charity may begin here but it must never end here. Our awareness and concern for those beyond ourselves defines who we are as a people of God.

We are planning our backpack program again this year to provide the basic necessities for homeless youth. We need to think about additional ways that we can increase our outreach to those beyond us. The challenge for us is to keep focused on how we can use both our head and heart to fulfill our mission as a community of faith that reaches beyond ourselves.