

The best of intentions

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 1, 2017.

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interest of others Philipians 2:4

Jesus has his skeptics. The chief priests and elders of the temple questioning his authority for what he teaches and for healing the sick. As he often does, Jesus uses a teaching story to illustrate his point about authority and intent. In his parable about two sons, one of them refuses his father's request to work in the vineyard, but later thinks better of it and goes to work. The other son with the best of intentions assures his father that he will work in the vineyard, but he never does. The point is that the one who at first refuses but has a change of heart is the one who ultimately does God's will rather than the one who doesn't deliver on his promise. The worse sinners who repent are better off than those who don't follow through on their intentions.

How often do we assure someone that we can be counted on but when we are asked to help it's not convenient? How many times do we promise ourselves that we will lose a few pounds, cut down on drinking, be more thoughtful of others, think before we speak and be better at listening and nothing comes of it? What really matters is not what we intend to do but what we actually do.

Of all that I learned growing up, what stands out in my mind is the importance of being conscientious. It is an indication of good character if we are reliable in following through on our intentions. To say what we mean and do what we say is essential to having personal integrity. Worse than failing to follow through on our good intentions is to make assurances with no intention of honoring them. The 19th century English poet and writer William Blake expressed that in these lines:

The truth that's told with bad intent
Beats all the lies you can invent.

Auguries of Innocence 1803

It doesn't take long to realize who is reliable and who is not. In the business world, success depends on whether or not contracts are honored, services are delivered in a timely manner and when confidences and assurances are kept.

If we were to leave behind a significant legacy, we don't need to have our name on a building or a monument erected in our memory. Neither do we need to write a book or have a patent on an invention. Would it not be sufficient to be remembered for being reliable in following through on our intentions?

In the letter to the Philippians, we read how Christ emptied himself of all self-interest. This is known as the kenosis of Christ in which he released all energy in giving up himself in his sacrifice on the cross. He knew what he had to do and made good on his promise to bring God's unconditional and forgiving love. If possible, his human side would have avoided suffering, but he knew what he had to do and was willing to pay the price.

The world is better off for those who have an awareness of others and are ready and willing to be of help. I have had perfect strangers help me out when I needed it and never saw them again. For me, they qualify as angels sent from God. They may not think of themselves that way, but I am thankful for them and what they did for me when I needed them.

Most of us have someone in our memory who made a significant difference in our life. They might not know it, but we will never forget what they meant to us. They had no ulterior motives other than wanting to be useful. I am grateful for those who were there when I needed someone to listen. They may not remember what they did or said, but I do. You don't forget people like that. They remind us of what little acts of kindness can mean. As a result, I've learned not to make up my mind too quickly about people. Keep in mind that everyone is fighting a battle or bearing a burden of which we are unaware.

Young Franklin Roosevelt was raised in a privileged and wealthy environment. As a young man, he had reserved and haughty manner and expression. In 1921, when he was struck down with infantile paralysis at the age of thirty-nine he was never again able to walk on his own and was dependent on others for nearly everything. At one point, a reporter asked Mrs. Roosevelt if

she thought that her husband's disease had affected his mind. "Yes, I think it did," she replied, "I think it made him more sensitive to the feelings of others." Having led the nation through the Great Depression, it was said that it took a crippled man to teach a crippled nation how to get back on its feet again.

Saint Francis was born to wealth and privilege as the son of a prosperous merchant in Assisi. He gave it all up by forming a community of friars to serve the poor by living in poverty. Though few of us would choose to live such a rigorous existence, Francis found fulfillment in doing without all but the barest essentials. He is an example of not being possessed by our possessions or being owned by what we have. Francis loved nature, the outdoors and animal life. I have a seated statue of Saint Francis in my garden and love to watch the rabbits, birds, squirrels and chipmunks scamper about his likeness there. Today we are having a blessing of the animals in the hope that you are the really wonderful person your pet thinks you are.

Our relationship with God lasts into eternity. What this is like is a mystery, but I can't help but think that the destiny of our soul has something to do with the relationship we have with God in this life. So, if you haven't given much thought to long term planning for your soul, now is the time, this is the place, and you are the one.