

**Pledging our allegiance**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on Stewardship Sunday, the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 2017.

*Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. Matthew 22:21*

Jesus' detractors are testing him. They want to see if he has a conflict between allegiance to the religious tradition and the state. They are trying to entrap him if he can be loyal to both Jewish tradition and the Roman authorities. Jesus knows better than to let himself be put into a bind. When he shows them the coin that has the image and title of the emperor on it, he explains that when it is used to pay taxes to the emperor it doesn't conflict with religious tradition. We give to the government what belongs to government and to God what belongs to God. The duality of our existence is that we are governed by secular authorities as well as the sacred tradition to God as source of all that we have. We pledge our heart, mind and soul to God in a combined allegiance to both the secular and sacred worlds in which we live.

In our wallet, there are images of historic Americans printed on our currency. In our heart we are marked as Christ's own forever that we received at our baptism. We never allow our Christian citizenship to be compromised by our American citizenship. We live by the principles of the gospel, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, as the guide for what is right and good for us as God's people. Our Christian faith helps us to make sense of what we see and hear in the morning and evening news. It applies to all aspects of our lives, including what we report on our tax returns as well as what we place in the church offering plate. Our faith and our citizenship are bound together with how we discern what God requires of us. Government officials may come and go, but our allegiance to God is forever.

Our nation was founded on the principle of separation of church and state and even though we have no established religion, the issues of faith and morality are intertwined with government policies. The issues of abortion, prayer in public schools, and racial and economic justice reach across moral, ethical and political lines. There is no isolation of the issues. The concerns of faith and morality cross over into the political realm in the same way that political issues reach over into ethics and morality.

Our personal worth is measured in the quality of our inner person rather than in our wealth or possessions. In the complicated network of spiritual nerves, there is one that connects our heart with our bank account and our material possessions. It is a sensitive nerve that is a very personal and essential part of our life system. Many of those in the generation that lived through the Great Depression spent all their lives with living with the possibility of losing it all and being left with the specter of poverty and deprivation. They learned the value of economics in a way that those of us in later generations have never fully appreciated.

On this Stewardship Sunday we are asked to pledge our support of God's work here at Emmanuel Church. Just as stewards on a ship and flight attendants on an airplane are responsible for the provisions during the journey, we are stewards of our resources in our journey in faith. Those spiritual provisions include our time, our talent and abilities and our finances.

When you look at a map of the Holy Land, there are two large bodies of water, really two large lakes, known as the Sea of Galilee in the north and the Dead Sea in the south. They are connected by the rather narrow and muddy Jordan River. The water in the Sea of Galilee is fresh and life giving and flows down through the Jordan River down to the Dead Sea at the lowest point on the face of the earth. The Dead Sea keeps everything it receives and contributes nothing. It is known as the Dead Sea because it has no life in it. It is so arid that there is no natural growth. As people of faith, we are the living water passing on what we receive to give life to others.

Our pledge supports the ministry in this beautiful place of worship. It sustains Christian education for adults and children and our outreach to those in the wider community. When you think about it, the church is one of the few places you can go where you are not presented with a bill. Emmanuel Church in West Roxbury has been here since 1893 providing for the spiritual needs of the community of faith. The church is here for worship, for baptisms, weddings and funerals, for learning, fellowship, hospitality and outreach to those in need. No one knows whether or not you pledge to support the important work of Christian witness. You are given pastoral care when you are ill or experiencing difficulty or loss without regard to your ability or willingness to pay for it. Your children receive a good Christian education and you are never sent a tuition bill.

Every year when you prepare your records for filing your income tax, look at what you have given for all charitable purposes. Measure what you give by the biblical principle of tithing based on giving ten percent of what you have for charitable purposes. Ask yourself how close you come to that ten percent for all charitable purposes that you believe are important.

In order to build a budget each year, the church depends on our pledge of support. We can give grudgingly out of duty and obligation or we can give cheerfully out of gratitude for all that we have. It all has to do with our personal commitment. I pledge a portion of my income to the church because I want to support what is the center of my entire life. With all its flaws and shortcomings, the church is the only institution that has never let me down. We are far more than an institution or an organization. We are a living, vibrant community of faith who believe in and follow Christ as our Redeemer. This is what we are being asked to support in the hope that we do so with a generous heart. The choice is ours, now is the time, and we are the ones to make the commitment.