

Instruments of peace

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost & Saint Francis Day, October 2, 2016.

God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:7

Jesus encourages us that to accomplish great things, we only have to have faith even as tiny as a mustard seed. We only have to seize the moment to do what we think can't be done. It has been said that if you want to move a mountain, don't be surprised if God hands you a shovel.

Local history shows that faith has moved mountains. In the early days of expanding the city of Boston, there were originally three hills, all the size of Beacon Hill. These three hills or mounts are the origin of the name Tremont Street. Two of them were entirely moved by rail car to be used as landfill in the creation of the area known as Back Bay. It took a great deal of faith and nineteenth century ingenuity to accomplish moving such large amounts of land to expand that part of the city of Boston.

The early Christians under persecution required a strong faith to fulfill the command to take the gospel to the whole world. Because of their profound faith in their mission, they did more than their duty, more than what was expected. On their own, they could do little, but working together Christianity has spread throughout the world. It is God's power working in us that enables us to carry on the fight against hatred, fear, prejudice and injustice.

It is our sense of duty that motivates to have the courage and the willingness to do what we think is impossible. In the second letter to Timothy, we read that God does not give us the power of timidity or cowardice, but the power of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7) More important than anything I have accomplished, I'd rather be remembered for having the discipline to be caring, conscientious, dependable and reliable.

Jesus tells us that we must do more than what is required, more than the minimum to go beyond what is expected of us. The qualities of integrity, self-discipline, and duty require a mastery of our selves for us to be servants of others. Self-discipline is the quality that enables us to do what needs to be done willingly. It is what enables us to love the unlovable. If we only do only what is expected, if we only act out of duty, we need to make a greater effort. Idealism must never give way to cynicism. When we hold to our youthful ideals and have faith in what seems impossible, we are amazed at what can be accomplished. Shortly after the close of the Civil War, the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

When Duty whispers low, Thou must,

The youth replies, I can.

Voluntaries, no. 3, (1867)

We are perplexed by almost daily news reports of horrible crimes committed by those who appear to lack any conscience. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that basically good people will behave dishonorably because human frailty sometimes allows us to do what we know is wrong. It is a healthy conscience and the voice of duty that motivates us to resist what is wrong and strive for what is right. Wherever and whenever there is hatred and injustice, we must have the courage to stand against it. If we are fearful and timid and do nothing, we share in the wrongdoing. Fear causes us to compromise our basic principles of fairness and honesty. Fear causes the paranoia over issues of immigration, out of control gun culture and racial strife. Fear causes police officers to overreact and shoot where there is no credible threat. Too many unarmed people, most of whom are people of color, are victims of bad judgment. Rioting in the streets of American cities goes on because black lives haven't mattered.

Good things can come out of flawed personalities. What good work they do is not be invalidated by their personal weaknesses and failures. We are willing to forgive some failures, depending on how we feel about them. When basically good people compromise their principles, the right thing to do is to take responsibility for their actions.

Excessive guilt can be damaging and unhealthy, but not entirely. If we feel guilty about something, it is because of the inbred moral integrity of our informed conscience. Those who engage in evil acts and feel no remorse have a dysfunctional conscience. As damaging as excessive guilt can be, a healthy amount of it motivates us to admit our wrongs and take responsibility for them.

Saint Francis of Assisi suffered guilt for his youthful narcissism and self-indulgence. Born Francesco di Pietro in the late twelfth century in a family of wealth and privilege, he took full advantage of his wealth as a merchant, soldier and playboy. In time, he heard the voice of God telling him to renounce his wealth to repair the church. He shed his expensive and elaborate clothing in exchange for a simple patched tunic and gave away all his money and possessions for a life devoted to serving the poor and the sick. After receiving the stigmata, the marks of Christ on his hands and feet and side, he eventually founded the Order of the Franciscans dedicated to carrying on his work. The laity who joined his tertiary order worked for peace and justice that eventually led to the end of feudalism in Europe. Francis had no need for recognition or reward. He found satisfaction in his uncompromising efforts to do the right thing. The life of Francis of Assisi is a superb example of having the discipline to do what is right and just.

One of the writings Saint Francis left behind is his "Canticle of the Sun" that begins:

Most high, omnipotent, good Lord,
To thee be ceaseless praise outpoured,
And blessing without measure.
Let creatures all give thanks to thee
And serve with great humility.

Francis had a particular love for all nature and animals. If you have pets you know what their companionship means to you especially, in times of stress and perplexity. Their devotion makes it all the more difficult when they suffer the same illnesses as humans. It is for their companionship that we bless them today.