

The defining factor of our lives

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 8, 2017.

The kingdom of God will be given to those who produce the fruits of the kingdom. Matthew 21:43

It is always good to review the Ten Commandments. To be sure, they are still in effect and have not been downgraded to being the “ten suggestions.” They serve as a guide to prevent us from the sins that separate us from God. The first four have to do with our relationship to God and the last six have to do with our relationship to each other. To state them informally: 1) There is but one God. 2) Have nothing in place of God. 3) Watch your mouth. 4) Get yourself to church. 5) Respect your parents. 6) Do not murder. 7) Be faithful in marriage. 8) Don't take what is not yours. 9) Don't lie or gossip. 10) Don't envy what is not yours. All the law and commandments are based on the one great law to love God and to love and respect others as we love and respect ourselves. God's law of love is the basis of all laws and commandments, but human laws do not always guarantee that justice and common sense will prevail.

The imagery of the vineyard to describe conditions among the people of God is familiar to workers in ancient Palestine. The vine grower carefully prepares the fertile soil by clearing it of rocks, planting a protective hedge around it to keep out predators and installing a wine press in which the grapes are crushed to make the wine.

It was common practice in Jesus' time for an absentee owner to hire tenants to work in his vineyard. Jesus sees Israel as a vineyard taken over by dishonest tenants who plot to keep the produce for themselves. The vineyard owner is God. The owner's agents who are sent to collect the produce are the prophets who mistreated and rejected. The vineyard owner then sends his own son who is Jesus who is killed by the workers so that they can take the produce for themselves. Jesus is telling his disciples that he faces suffering at the hands of the authorities.

Jesus uses a portion of 118th psalm in referring to himself as the chief cornerstone in building up the people of God. We have to give more than lip service. We must not make promises and good intentions that won't be followed through. What gives us our identity as a people of God can be easily undermined. We need to give an accounting of ourselves in producing the fruits of the Spirit. What contributes to the integrity of our character is the Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi's version of the seven deadly social sins: politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, science without humanity, and religion without sacrifice.

The subtle forces of apathy diminish the values by which we live. Where there is no respect for people, there is chaos and disorder. Where there is no compassion, people are demeaned. Where there is excessive desire for gain, there is diminution of standards.

The tragedy of the shooting in Las Vegas last week is another case of a shooter with pent up hatred for everyone in general and no one in particular. When a mass murderer ends up killing himself it tells us that the shooting of innocent people was motivated by self-loathing and guilt. James Baldwin wrote that one of the reasons that people cling to their hate so stubbornly is that once their hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their pain.

We run the danger of becoming numb to the spiraling incidents of violence that cause multiple injuries and loss of life. It is popular for gun enthusiasts to say that guns don't kill people; people kill people. The reality is that people with guns kill people. It is time to enforce restrictions on who can own guns, especially with regard to automatic weapons. The more that Americans are gripped with fear and paranoia, the more the gun culture grows more out of control to the benefit of gun manufacturers and dealers. The fear that dominates the American psyche challenges our whole system of understanding right from wrong, moral from immoral, and ethical from unethical. There is a need to get better treatment for those living with the inner turmoil that motivates conflicted minds that seek to harm people.

Martin Luther King wrote that within the best of us there is some evil and within the worst of us there is some good. The person who hates you has some good in the same way the race that hates you also has some good. When you are able to see the image of God in the face of everyone you encounter you can learn to love them in spite of who they are or what they do. He

wrote that hate can't drive out hate; only love can do that. If justice is not for every one, it is not for anyone.

Economics determines much of our culture and value system. It can be a means for accomplishing great good as well as for corrupting what is good. The power of economics is an indication of what lies at the very depths of our soul. It is so much a part of our mindset that it determines more of the quality of our lives that we realize. The obsessive desire for gain only results in a lust that is never satisfied.

We are part of the household of God who set the cornerstone from which the world was constructed and humanity was created. The author of the letter to the Ephesians tells us that we are all members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ himself as the cornerstone. In him, the whole structure grows into a holy temple that is the dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:19-21)

The next time you go out in front here take a look at the cornerstone of this building. It was the first stone laid in the foundation when the construction of this church began in 1893, marking the reference for which all the other stones were laid.

The kingdom of God is given to those who produce the fruits of the spirit that requires a generous and giving heart and true compassion that never holds back. To guard against the erosion of values, we have to be strong in our witness to Christ. Where our witness to him is evident, there is true compassion. Where his presence is upheld, there is true justice. With Christ's power at work in us, hearts of stone are warmed and we are transformed by the grace of God to be people of healing and hope.