

Being creative with stress

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, November 13, 2016.

By your endurance you will gain your souls. Luke 21:19

The great temple in Jerusalem is central to the faith and national identity of the Jewish people. In the year 586 B.C. the Babylonians destroyed the first temple built by King Solomon. It was rebuilt in the year 515 B.C. and enlarged under King Herod the Great. It was again destroyed in 70 A.D. during the siege of the Roman army. If you go there today, all that remains of that holy place is the portion of the foundation known as the Wailing Wall. It is there that the faithful come from all over the world to pray.

In our gospel narrative today Jesus challenges the corruption of the religious authorities while warning against false prophets who lead the people astray. He foresees a time of great tribulation in which there will be wars and insurrections when nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes, famines and plagues. He envisions a new kind of temple. Instead of being built with stones it will be a spiritual temple as the Kingdom of God.

We must not give in to fear and anxiety over the divisions in our nation. While understanding the many who are disappointed I deplore violence as a way of protesting. It is all the more important to hold fast to the principles of mutual respect and non-violence. The power of love, goodness, and compassion are greater than divisiveness, innuendo, and name-calling.

Our value system hasn't changed. We must appeal to our better nature. It is still unacceptable to be crude and vulgar. There is no place for bigotry, misogyny, racism, and bullying. It is wrong to demean anyone, especially those who are feeling vulnerable: girls and women, those in same sex relationships, minority groups, including Muslims, Jews, Latinos, African Americans, immigrants, and those with disabilities. While engaging in civil discourse, we must respect each other's right to hold their point of view. Be careful not to confuse courage of conviction with being too stubborn to see any other point of view or confuse truth with opinion. Christian discipleship requires discipline. The cost of discipleship is great, but the reward is even greater. By our endurance we gain our soul. In this great meantime in which we are living, our job is to reflect the true nature of the person of Jesus Christ. The author of the letter to the Thessalonians urges us to live in a state of readiness and expectation. We are to avoid idleness and do our share for the good of all. Resist antagonists who have nothing better to do than to cause division.

I don't have to tell you that balancing work and personal responsibilities is stressful. Raising a family and caring for aging parents while working full time is challenging. It is all the more important to keep things in perspective. There is stress in the disappointment of not attaining hoped for opportunities.

Today's fast-paced culture robs us of quality time with our family and friends. When our children were young, our family mealtime was still possible, but as they grew older with their own schedules that all but disappeared. Past generations whose lives were based on an agricultural and trade economy worked long hours and had more family time with fewer distractions. Today, too many choices cause too much stress. The more balance we have in our working life, the less stress we have in our personal life. We can't always control what is happening, but we can control our response to it.

To maintain a healthy balance in our lives, we have to respect both body and soul. Regular exercise and a healthy diet contribute to a better equilibrium. We really don't have to have it all. We have to decide what is most important and put our time and energy into giving it our best effort. The more balanced we are, the less stress we have.

When we are under pressure identify the stress points that trigger depression and distraction. Starting a new job or facing the loss of one is a major cause for stress. It can happen in a new relationship as well as in the break-up of an old one. There is stress in beginning a new job that means relocating and grieving the loss of everything familiar. There is stress in the arrival of a new child and again when they grow up and leave home. Anyone who has endured a serious illness or grieved the loss of a loved one knows the stress that brings. Life stages are rarely permanent but it is important to identify and focus on positive energies replacing negative anxieties.

When under pressure, we are tempted to engage in multi-tasking that often results in getting little accomplished. It is better to finish one task before going on to the next. In meeting personal and work related demands, we need not be too proud to ask for help and delegate responsibilities. I was raised with a deep sense of conscientiousness and I make the time for what needs to be done. I also know that conscientiousness sometimes means not taking on more than I should. Learning to say “no” has its positive effects.

Managing our time requires not placing unrealistic expectations on our selves. We have to put things into perspective by developing priorities. A good practice is to begin our most challenging task first to get it out of the way. On the other hand, you may want to begin with the smaller tasks first to gain the momentum for taking on more challenging ones. In either case, it is important to take a break to renew your energy and insight. A healthy diet, staying hydrated, regular exercise, prayer, meditation and good breathing techniques keep us focused.

Each stage of our lives brings a certain amount of stress. What is essential is learning the art of channeling stress into creative energy. It takes practice, discipline and endurance. It is, after all, by our endurance that we gain our soul.