

Investing our inheritance

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 19, 2017.

For to all those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.
Matthew 25:29

I have a cartoon I keep on my kitchen cabinet that shows a couple opening their mail with a startled look at a letter. The caption reads, "It's from our church. We've been called up for active duty." It illustrates the importance of doing more than just being a member of the church. Jesus teaches about using our talents, our skills and abilities in being an active participant in the life of his church and mission. Now I realize that I am "preaching to the choir" because Emmanuel Church would not be where we are today if it were not for your committed efforts.

At first glance, this Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard appears to say that God rewards the "haves" and punishes the "have-nots," but that would be to miss the point entirely. The wealthy landowner leaves the care of his property in the hands of his servants. He knows that he can trust them because if they were to run away they would be worse off than staying in his employ. The first two servants who invested and doubled what they were given are rewarded with the promise of greater responsibility and opportunity.

The third servant who puts away the one talent he has for safe keeping gains nothing. He is denying himself the possibility of further opportunity. He represents those whose main concern is to preserve their religious heritage and tradition rather than use it to glorify God. Jesus as the Jewish reformer emphasizes that faith is not an artifact to be preserved but a way of life to be practiced. We find meaning and meaning and purpose for living by investing what we have been given to build up the church and advance the Christian mission.

The greater risk is to be overly cautious and not use the gifts we have. We must be fearless and strong in using the gifts we have been given. Some have more gifted than others, but we all have something to give. Not all of us have the same gifts, yet we use the gifts we have to the fullest. The worst thing is to hoard what we have. To those who make full use of their gifts, more will be given them and more will be expected of them.

The Christian faith is not a commodity to be hoarded but an adventure to be lived. That is why faith in Jesus Christ is of little value if it is not applied in real and practical ways. Whether you are fearful of failure or fearful of success you never get anywhere if you succumb to the real failure of not doing anything at all. The old axiom that nothing ventured, nothing gained is quite true. The best way to keep a gift is to use it; otherwise we run the danger of losing what we have. If we feel we are not up to the challenges and want to stay in our comfort zone with what is safe and familiar, we underestimate ourselves. If we are concerned about looking foolish in front of others, we lack faith in ourselves.

A working faith is to have confidence in the possibilities, especially when we don't know what lies ahead. Applied Christianity enables us to go forward when we don't understand why things happen the way they do and why people behave the way they do. It enables us to live and work under difficult conditions with difficult people. It helps us cope with the natural order of things that seem to work against us. If we make full use of the skills and abilities we have been given, we discover other gifts that enable us to do far more than we ever imagined. If we don't make use of what we have, we risk losing it all.

I have heard it said that the church is just a business. The reality is that we are a community of faith that use sound business principles. The church is effective because of those who use entrepreneurial and marketing skills. The use of business ethics in the operation of any enterprise is essential. To know Christ and make him known, read the bible as regularly as you read and listen to the news reports. If you want to know the essentials of Christian teaching, read the Sermon on the Mount found in chapters five, six and seven of Matthew's gospel. Don't just read the beatitudes, but all of what is really a series of talks

on a series of topics. You will find instruction and advice on the right interpretation of the law, dealing with adversaries, divorce, swearing, encountering manipulative and difficult people, loving your enemies and forgiving those who revile you, not being hypocritical about what you believe, and not giving into worry and anxiety.

We must learn to reach beyond what we think is our grasp. Michelangelo, one of the most talented and the brilliant minds of the Renaissance once observed that, "The great danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low, and we reach it."

The 19th century English theologian Frederick Denison Maurice believed in addressing the problems of society with radical, non-violent reform. He believed in redeeming humanity by a renewal of our faith. One follows the other. It was his intent to bring together unsocial Christians with unchristian socialists. He believed rightly that the divisions within Christianity hamper and weaken the effectiveness of the church's witness and mission.

While our liturgy provides the energy and spirit for our mission, we should not place too much emphasis on the externals of faith. Faith is useless if we fail to make the connection with what we are called to be. Applied Christianity requires that what we read in the Bible and declare in the creeds must be connected with our daily lives. In your vocation, in your trade or profession, look upon everything you do as a gift offering to God. It must be our very best. Anything less is unworthy.

Your involvement in the ministry of this parish, whether in the liturgy and choir, in education and formation on all levels, in parish outreach efforts, in promoting fellowship, in administration and in the care of this place in which we meet and worship is essential. As we approach this wonderful season of Thanksgiving, we are fortunate to have those whose investment and unselfish use of their talents makes Emmanuel Church what we are. If you are not yet a part of that effort, you are being called to active duty. For those of you who are involved, you are to be commended for your willingness to step forward and do your part as we move ahead. For me personally, it is an honor to be part of our life together in this parish. It all comes down to the fact that the more we give unselfishly the more we live abundantly.