



The animating Spirit

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Rogation Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 21, 2017.

The God who made the world and everything in it...who is Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands...since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath. Acts 17:24-25

Today is traditionally known as “Rogation Sunday” the name of which is taken from the Latin, *rogare*, which means, “to ask.” In days of an agricultural economy, it was the tradition in the springtime of each year to ask God’s blessing upon the newly planted crops. Processions were held around the bounds of the fields with prayers that the newly planted crops would come to fruition. In modern times we ask God’s blessing on what has been planted in farmlands across the country as well as in the garden in our own backyard. We also ask God’s blessing on new enterprises and projects that what we have planned will be productive. We have to come realize the importance of treating the care of the environment with the same respect and care for all humanity. We owe the same respect and care for the earth’s resources that we care for human souls.

In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is speaking to the Athenians about their religious shrines and symbols that include an altar bearing the inscription, “to an unknown God.” Paul proclaims the importance of knowing the God who made the world and gives life and breath to all humanity. Being ultimately descended from a common ancestry makes brothers and sisters out of strangers. Paul quotes from the sixth century B.C. poet, Epimenides, *In him we live and move and have our being* and from the poet, Aratus, *we are all God’s offspring*.

Jesus tells us that if we love him we will keep his commandment to love and respect our neighbor with the same love and respect we would have for ourselves. This makes the “Golden Rule” not a mere suggestion, but a commandment. It is not original with Jesus but is taken from the Old Testament and is found in various forms in other faith traditions. It means that we treat each other as children of God who deserve the same respect that we want for ourselves. It is easy to love and care for those with whom we agree. It is easy to love and care for those who feel the same way about us. The challenge is to love and respect those who come at life from completely different points of view. We all know someone with whom we have little or nothing in common. We may not understand or appreciate their rationale, but we can’t avoid the fact that what we do have in common is that we all share the same humanity and have the same human needs and feelings.

Maintaining a clear conscience requires speaking up when we disagree, lest we mislead by our silence. When someone is demeaned for the color of their skin, their religion, nationality, sexuality or gender, we have to speak up. When we try to do the right thing, we can’t expect that it will be appreciated. If we are kind and forgiving, honest and compassionate, we may be ignored or scorned. Peter assures us that it is better to suffer for doing good than to suffer for doing evil. The oft-quoted verse attributed to Mother Teresa speaks to this point:

Anyway

People are often unreasonable and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people will accuse you of ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are honest, people will cheat you,

Be honest anyway.

If you find happiness, people may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Give the world your best and it may never be enough.

Give your best anyway.

In the end, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway.

To read history is to read the biographies of those who made history. One of the lesser-known but no less great figures of the twentieth century was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a remarkably selfless and giving soul. He studied theology at the University of Strasbourg in preparation for becoming a pastor and published his classic work, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* in 1914. He supported himself as a pianist and organist and later decided that he could be of more use as a medical missionary. After years of attaining his medical training, he founded a hospital in what was then French Equatorial Africa, now known as Gabon. He continued as pastor of a congregation while treating victims of leprosy. When he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, he used the prize money to expand his leprosarium hospital. He was a kind, good and compassionate human being who gave up a life of greater prosperity and ease to help those who had no access to health care. Schweitzer wrote that *Christ comes to us as one unknown...to those who know him not. He sets us at tasks that he has to fulfill for our time. He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings that they shall pass through...and they shall learn in their own experience who he is.* On a lamp outside his hospital in Gabon were the welcoming words: *Here, at whatever hour you come you will find light and help and human kindness.*

It is easy to love those who love us. The challenge for us as Christian is to love and respect those whose attitude and behavior are contrary to ours. While it is important to stand up for what we believe is right and just, it is equally important to maintain good relationships with those of opposing points of view. Our respect for each other can always override philosophical differences.

The survival of humanity depends upon regarding each other as fellow members of the family of God. The Spirit of God within each of us animates in welcoming the stranger as a brother and sister in Christ. It is in the household of God that they have a place at the table with us. The host at that spiritual table is the one God who created us all who has given us in Christ the best example of what it means to be human.