

Seeing challenges as opportunities

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Rogation Sunday, May 1, 2016.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. John 14: 27

At each stage in life we face new experiences that may cause us to give in to fear and anxiety of the unknown. Rather than seeing them as problems, it is far better to see them as challenges and new opportunities. It is all a matter of our attitude. The more I see them as opportunities rather than problems the more I am assured of the power and presence of God's Holy Spirit. I may not always be aware of the Spirit's presence at the time. It may be only reflection that I realize how God has acted at critical points to make a significant difference in the directions I have taken. The more I practice the presence of God, the more I realize that the Holy Spirit is not some remote theological theory, but a living presence.

I am fascinated how very young children take such delight in discovering each new thing in the world that we often take for granted. As they increase in stature, they grow into being their own personalities. When we plant a tree, shrub, or vegetable, we know what we are going to get, but in raising children, we can't always know what we are going to get. Parenting has its rewards, some predictable and others not so predictable. Just as we can't take all the credit when things go right, neither can we take all the blame when things go wrong. We teach children our values and train them to be responsible people but there is no guarantee that they will turn out the way we hope and expect. Parenting is planting and cultivating the seeds of character. The rest is up to them.

One of the benefits of our early parenting years was to have a good support system of family and friends available. Grandparents were with us at the births of our children through their growing years. They were there in the bittersweet experience of having our grown children move out to make their way in life on their own. Like planting a garden, we set the conditions; God does the rest.

With each new challenge, we rely on the Holy Spirit to act on our behalf as our advocate. Just as we need an attorney to represent us in handling legal affairs, the Holy Spirit is our advocate in our spiritual life to empower and sustain us.

Much of the action of the Holy Spirit is through the work of our hands. Children are received into membership in the church in the water of baptism. Christ's presence is made real when we receive the bread and wine. Our membership in the church is strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands by the bishop at Confirmation. It is through the joining of hands that two people are united in Holy Matrimony. It is through the laying on of hands that those called to the ordained ministry are empowered to proclaim the gospel and minister in Christ's name. It is through making of the sign of the cross that penitents are assured of forgiveness. Finally, it is through anointing of the souls of those at the end of life as they face eternity. The Holy Spirit works through our hands at each life point to empower us to be the church wherever we are.

Today is Rogation Sunday. Rogare is the Latin "to ask." Historically, Rogation Sunday was a time to bless the newly planted crops in the fields around rural parishes. We ask God's blessing on the work we do. God is involved in the process of planting and nurturing of crops as well as in each new enterprise of our work. We set the conditions; God does the rest.

As we go about our daily tasks, great and small, creative and routine, we are reminded of how God's power is at work in all we do. To look upon our work as a vocation and not just a job is to put our lives in a spiritual context. What we do in God's name is not by our own power alone. We are instruments of God's power. It is by the power of God's Holy Spirit that we represent Christ wherever we are. We set the conditions; God does the rest.

Today, we ask God's blessing upon our vocations at home, in school and in the workplace. It puts things into perspective when we see our vocations not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others as well. You and I share in the responsibility to serve all God's people.

I am grateful for the gifts that you offer here in advancing the mission and ministry of this parish. The response of so many of you participating in the strategic planning process has been impressive. We are moving from maintenance to mission.

When I am frequently asked how things are going at Emmanuel Church in West Roxbury I tell people that one of the distinct advantages of this parish is that we are fortunate to have those with the skills and willingness to do God's work in this place. We are blessed by your commitment and offering your talents and abilities to get the job done. You have given yourselves tirelessly with no need for recognition. You know that the satisfaction of a task well done is its own reward.

Making commitments is challenging in our 21st century culture. Our commitment to be the heart, eyes, ears, hands and voice of Christ is our challenge and opportunity to be part of the mission to serve God. I am deeply grateful to each of you for your commitment to keep this parish strong. I pray that we will continue to be blessed and guided by God's Holy Spirit as we go from strength to strength in God's service.