

**Beyond ourselves**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016.

*If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10*

We have all known chronically unhappy and negative people. Nothing ever suits them. For them, nothing is ever right. When I reflect back on times of controversy in parish life, people would tell me, "Well, I know you have to keep everybody happy." Not really. It is impossible to keep everyone happy; it's not even my job to try.

Saint Paul was right. Our job is to please God. If people are not happy with what we do and say, they have to take that up with God. Too many unload their anger by blaming God for their unhappiness. If they are reluctant to confront God personally the next logical target is the church. Preachers have to say what they know is right. A homiletics professor who taught preaching in seminary used to say that if you aren't making people angry you're not doing your job. It is the preacher's business to speak for God, even when it upsets people.

There is a story a meek, soft-spoken young woman named Mary who spent her whole life trying to please people. She never asked anything for herself. Yet, she never felt she could succeed in pleasing anyone. Her mother died when she was a child, leaving her with an alcoholic father. She spent years trying to please him to no avail. She was never allowed to have a social life. After her father died, she spent years in the same job dutifully trying to please her boss who only criticized her and never gave her any credit for her work. One day, it all came to a head when she began crying at her desk and couldn't stop. She was taken to a psychiatric facility for an extended stay. The sunshine committee at her office sent her a get-well card and a potted plant, but she was soon forgotten and no one ever heard from her again.

Malcontents and antagonists are never happy because nothing pleases them. Most likely they are unhappy with themselves and take out their unhappiness on others by making life miserable for everyone else. They are stuck in a pattern of negativity that sucks the life out of everyone around them. Their supercritical attitude becomes second nature and they see no need for changing their behavior.

The Christian ideal is to have a positive attitude with integrity and wholeness. It doesn't take long to set a positive tone for those around them. I have a glass with a line in the middle and under it is the word "pessimist" and over it is the word "optimist." You get the idea. The glass is either half empty or half full, depending on how you look at it. It is said that the difference between an optimist and pessimist is that an optimist believes that we are living in the best of all possible worlds while the pessimist fears this may be true. Healing of an attitude can only happen when we decide to do something about it. For some, it may take a miracle, but miracles can happen.

I became familiar with the narrative in today's gospel when I was a high school student and played the part of the centurion in a church play. It may seem presumptuous for a Gentile officer in the Roman army who worships many gods to approach Jesus as a Jewish rabbi to heal his servant. The Jewish elders plead on behalf of the centurion because he cares for those in his household and is willing to go beyond his own belief and culture to heal one of his servants. The elders testify that the centurion has even built a synagogue for them. While he is a man of authority, the centurion believes that Jesus has even greater authority and feels unworthy to have him come under his roof. Jesus recognizes a greater faith in the Gentile centurion than many of his own people. The result is that the servant is completely restored to good health on the strength of the centurion's faith.

To recover from an illness, it is essential to have a positive attitude. Caregivers have to take care of their own health. When we board a plane the flight attendant tells us that in the event of a loss of oxygen an oxygen mask will drop down. We are told to put on our own mask first before helping someone else. Prayers for our selves are just as important as prayers for others. Prayers for those who are terminally ill are just as important as prayers for those who have hope for recovery. We pray for the healing for those who are ill, for healing of broken relationships and for healing among nations, races and faiths. There is much power in prayers for healing. It is one thing to pray for what we believe can happen and another thing to pray when the odds are against us. Miracles can only happen when we expect them. Miracles happen when we are open to possibilities

beyond our limited understanding. All that is required is a simple trust and faith like that of the centurion. He had the faith to could go beyond his own belief for his servant to be healed.

We all have times when we are discouraged and feel sorry for ourselves. To guard against becoming self-absorbed we have to think beyond ourselves. The 16th century astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus was the first to discover that the earth revolves around the sun instead of the other way around. Those who believed that the earth was the center of the universe scorned him. The sooner we realize that everything doesn't revolve around us the better. So, whenever you are feeling discouraged, get your mind off yourself. Go visit in a hospital or nursing home or rehab center. Volunteer in a food pantry or serve meals to the homeless. You will soon forget why you were feeling sorry for yourself.

When we encounter difficult people it may be that they are living with a burden of which we are unaware. We don't appreciate how well off we are until we know what others are living with. We don't appreciate our own health until we become ill ourselves or know someone who is enduring a serious illness.

Dr. Martin Luther King said that we can accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope. Hope is what enables us to go on in the face of what seems hopeless. We can too easily take our own good fortune for granted. The practice of the presence of God opens our heart and widens our perspective. It recognizes God as the source of all health and wholeness. To remain open to God's presence is especially important when everything seems to be going wrong. A good, positive attitude can be just as pervasive as a negative one. The choice is up to us.