



The polity of living

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on June 18, 2017, the Second Sunday after Pentecost and Father's Day.

Suffering produces endurance, and endurances produces character, and character produces hope.
Romans 5:3-4

Jesus sees God's people as sheep without a shepherd and prepares the disciples to be shepherds of their souls. He begins his mission by assembling an unlikely group of twelve to prepare them to be sent out into the world. An apostle is one who is sent out as a messenger. In this case, they are sent to do the unfinished business of proclaiming the message of forgiveness and reconciliation. He sends them out to proclaim the good news, cure the sick, cleanse the lepers, and cast out the demons of sickness. The essential component of the church's mission is to change the way we see ourselves in relation to God and how we relate to each other.

He goes first to the burly fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James and John and tells them that they will be fishing for people. He calls Matthew the tax collector, in whom he has confidence even though tax collectors are known for cheating people. Simon the Zealot is a romantic social reformer and idealist. Those two alone would hate each other were they not in the company of Jesus. The impetuous Peter pledges his loyalty, but in a weak moment will deny knowing Jesus. Thomas the carpenter is used to having everything squared away to exact measurements before he will accept anything. The group is rounded out with Philip and Bartholomew, James, son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, and finally Judas who, because he does not agree with the aims of the mission, will ultimately betray Jesus.

These twelve ordinary men are sent out on an extraordinary mission. They have no formal education or social status. None of them has any political clout or friends in high places. They really don't have a clue about what lies ahead. What they do know is that Jesus brings them closer to the heart of God. They are forewarned that there will be times and places where they will be rejected. They and their successors will be under persecution for the next two hundred years. Saint Paul encourages them by writing, *suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.* Romans 5:3-4

In gathering together the twelve, Jesus has to deal with the politics of organizing his mission. From the beginning, there are sharp disagreements about teaching and authority. When there are conflicts within the life of the church it is easy to disparage organized religion and church leaders. The reality is that wherever people are organized for any purpose, including marriage and the family, there is the necessary politics of organized human relationships. Because we are social animals we can't avoid being organized to live and work together. Structure in any organized group is necessary in order for it to function and fulfill its purpose.

I admire the sense of idealism of those who venture out with a vision that holds little promise of security. In particular, I admire those high school graduates who put off their college acceptance to take a gap year to work with people at home and abroad in disadvantaged conditions.

On this Father's Day, I think of the inevitable and essential organization of relationships in the human family. All of us had fathers who played a role in our family life, some more than others. When our children were young, we used to get sales calls asking to speak to the head of the household. Because we believed in gender equality, that depended on who answered the phone! Each generation of children thinks their parents are hopelessly out of touch, making it seem as though we live in totally different worlds. The humorist Mark Twain told the story of when he was a boy of fourteen he thought his father was so ignorant he could hardly stand to have the old man around. When he got to be twenty-one, he was astonished at how much his father had learned in seven years.

There were times when we wondered if there was anything we could tell our children that wouldn't be challenged. Then I remembered being that way in my own childhood and realized that all the challenging and questioning is a necessary part of young people learning to think for themselves.

The most important thing that I could do for my children was to love them as much as I loved their mother. A stable and loving relationship between children and parents provides security and it models healthy family relationships for their future. Our children are only on loan to us. When they were ready to go off on their own we couldn't help but wonder if we had done all we should and taught them all they needed to know. When our son Dave finished college he packed up a rented truck and drove off to Chicago with no prospects for a job or a place to live. Waving goodbye to him involved a mixture of emotions. We were proud of him wanting to be independent and sad at seeing him off on his own. As parents we plant the seeds to develop our children's character and the rest is up to them. Whatever rough times we may have had during their growing up years is all worth it when the phone rings and I hear "Hi, Dad."

The most important thing in both marriage and parenting is unconditional love. It is important to teach children the basics of thoughtfulness and consideration, taking responsibility for themselves as well as good grammar and good manners. The rest is up to them. Many of the same dynamics in family relationships apply to our relationships in the church. In either case, we seek to bring out the best in each other by having a greater awareness of what it means to be human in the midst of a world of so much inhumanity. The church has always reached out to outcasts, minorities, those with different sexual orientations and gender identities, many of whom suffer abuse, exploitation and abandonment.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is our emancipation proclamation that frees us from all that is wrong and unjust. We follow in that long line that began with those twelve that Jesus called together. Just as they bravely faced the unknown, we bravely face the unknowns of witnessing to him wherever we are.