



Our search for meaning

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 25, 2017.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 10:39

If you are perplexed about Jesus telling us that we have to lose our life to find it, you are not alone. What he is saying is that in losing ourselves in a purpose beyond ourselves we find meaning for our lives. He is saying that if we lose ourselves in being part of his mission of proclaiming forgiveness and reconciliation in the world, we will find true purpose for our lives.

We are born self-centered creatures and have to get beyond our natural preoccupation with self to an awareness and concern for the world beyond us. Getting beyond being self-absorbed marks a major point in the development of our maturity. It begins with being aware of and considerate of those with whom we live. It extends from those who live in our community to those who live in different conditions on the other side of the world. We are all part of the human family and we all share the same basic human needs. We are mutually responsible and interdependent with each other for survival. Parents make sacrifices for their children until they reach the point where they need to be cared for by their children.

The Christian gospel has always advocated for the poor and those who live on the margins. We cannot ignore the innocent victims of strife and oppression in all parts of the world. Our task is to be a voice for the voiceless, to advocate for those whose rights have been violated, whose lives have been plundered and whose dignity has been assaulted. When we reach out to the least of our sisters and brothers, we see his face in everyone we meet. Every human being is part of God's infinite love and concern, even the most difficult people we encounter with entirely different worldview. They are as much a part of God's love as we are.

Most Episcopalians are not aware that by our membership in the church we are also members of the Foreign and Domestic Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church. You may never have thought of yourself as a missionary, but one of our baptismal promises is to *proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ*. We begin setting an example by the way we live. When people see that the way we live is consistent with what we believe, they are drawn to being part of the life of the church. Conversely, if the way we live is not consistent with what we believe, if we are not transparent, we sacrifice our integrity and our authenticity as Christian missionaries. It is our challenge to be a living example of the presence of Christ to those who don't know him or who have turned away from him.

Think about it. Where was the church's leadership in the 19th century during the abolitionist movement? Where was the church's witness during the women's suffrage movement in the early 20th century? Why was the church silent during World War II when a ship loaded with Jewish refugees was turned away from disembarking in New York and was forced to return to Europe where they were lost in the holocaust? Church leadership was silent in the 1950's when

Senator Joseph McCarthy was smearing reputations and ruining lives by accusation and innuendo. The church was not in the forefront of any of these issues.

It was not until the civil rights movement in the 1960's that the church left the sidelines and got involved in the forefront of social change. For every advance in advocating for a more just society, there was opposition. There were those who thought the church shouldn't be involved in social movements, but it turned out that when both church and society worked together we found purpose and meaning for what and who we are. It is only by those who are willing to give of themselves that there is any meaningful progress.

In Dostoevsky's classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is a scene in which the Inquisitor gives an account of what happens when the human soul no longer has a purpose. He writes: *For the secret of a man's being is not only to live, but to live for something definite. Without a firm notion of what he is living for, man will not accept life and will rather destroy himself than remain on the earth.*

When we lose ourselves in a significant purpose, when we involve ourselves in making a difference in the lives of others, our own lives take on greater meaning and purpose. When we visit the sick and give companionship to the lonely, when we comfort to the grieving and volunteer in service agencies, we are part of making an impact in the lives of others.

The instinct for self-preservation is primary, but it is not the end purpose. The irony is that if self-preservation is our only concern, we lose any meaning for our life, but if we lose ourselves in a purpose beyond ourselves we have everything to gain. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung observed that *only through the mystery of self-sacrifice do we find ourselves anew.*

There are many opportunities to be involved in community outreach programs such as the B-Safe program, tutoring at Epiphany School in Dorchester or being involved the local food pantry. It is said that the church that lives for itself will die by itself. Conversely, the church that reaches out beyond itself does so for Christ.

It is said that charity begins at home, but it doesn't have to end there. It is easy to ignore the needs of those on the margins who are easily forgotten. When we visit the sick and aged, when we comfort the weary, and advocate for the defenseless, we are doing so for Christ. A significant turning point in our spiritual development is when we are no longer content with a nodding acquaintance with God. That is when we come to know the true meaning of perfect service.

