

Never look back

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2016.

No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. Luke 9:62

The ancient Romans had a god for most everything. Janus, the mythical god for whom the month of January is named, had two faces, one looking forward and the other looking backward. He is identified with gates, doors and new opportunities. We tend to look back in retrospect while anticipating prospects for the future. It is perhaps a way of getting a perspective on where we are heading. It is a selective memory that claims nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Some are convinced that we are living in the worst of times while others are equally sure that these are the best of times. Many in my own generation are reminisce about the decade of the 1950's. It was an era of complacency in which old assumptions were taken for granted and never challenged. It was a time of "Come weal or come woe, we'll keep the status quo." The "red scare" was at its height with Senator Joseph McCarthy making himself famous with false accusations of communists in the State Department and in the film industry. It was all a fabrication to advance his infamous political career. Before he was discredited, he had ruined numerous careers by rumor and innuendo. His scam did prove that if you tell a lie often enough people would begin to believe it.

Saint Paul in his letter to the Galatians exhorts us not to give in to the self-serving desires of fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness and carousing. He emphasizes the fruits of the Spirit that are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. They are as relevant and important as they ever were.

When Saint Luke writes that Jesus "set his face" toward Jerusalem, he is using a Hebrew expression for focusing on the direction that leads to the purpose and goal of his mission. He knows the destiny that awaits him in setting his face toward Jerusalem. He is assured of support from those who proclaim that they will follow him wherever he goes. They tell him that he can count on them, that is, as soon as they can take care of personal matters.

The original twelve disciples sacrificed everything: their work, their families and friends to face an uncertain future with an itinerate rabbi they hardly knew. They were drawn to him by the sheer power of his presence and mission.

What makes us reluctant to make commitments? Where once couples were married right out of college, today's young adults remain single longer, keeping their options open before making the commitment to marry. We apply for school loans, sign job contracts, purchase cars and take out a mortgage on a home, yet the vows of marriage are the most important we ever make. The time for making commitments may never seem right. We can't delay taking seriously the promise to live the Christian life.

The future is full of unknowns and "what if's." What if Saint Paul hesitated going on his missionary journeys because of evident dangers he faced? What if the early Christian martyrs were reluctant to proclaim Christ out of concern for their own safety? What if Martin Luther didn't take his stand for the reform of the church or if Dietrich Bonhoeffer avoided taking part in a plot to stop the evils of Nazism? All of them took seriously their commitment to do what they needed to do. They never looked back nor did they try to anticipate what lay ahead. They pressed on with their purpose and mission.

The following lines adapted from a poem by Helen Steiner Rice, speaks of the importance of knowing that the present is the only time over which we have any control:

Never borrow sorrow from tomorrow,
Deal only with the present,
Never step into tomorrow,
And borrow sorrow.
For the future is not ours to know,
And it may never be.
So let us live and give our best
And give it wisely.
For to anticipate tomorrow's troubles we can't see
Is to guarantee a self-fulfilling prophecy.
So let us work on today's problems as we can,
And deal with tomorrow's troubles then.

I reject the cynicism about today's youth. Many valedictorians among today's high school graduates are minorities and children of immigrants. They worked hard to achieve what they did because they "set their face" on their goal, remained focused and never looked back.

We have to remember that we are all descendents of immigrants. I am quite sure that my ancestors who arrived on these shores many generations ago were not subject to documentation. I would hope that we could provide the way for today's immigrants to become full citizens so they can become a legally productive part of American life.

I recently attended the graduation of young men and women who received their graduate equivalent high school diplomas from the Hi-set program at Wellspring Multi-Service Center in the town of Hull. They "set their face" toward their life goals and are now going on to college or trade school in preparation for entering the work force. They were encouraged to focus on setting their goal and not look back or blame their circumstances. They took the initiative to make their own circumstances that assured them success in reaching their goals.

Today, as I mark fifty years in ordained parish ministry, I think of how the church has undergone enormous changes. We were involved in the social justice issues of civil rights and the war in Viet Nam. Lay people were becoming involved in the liturgy in administering the chalice at the Eucharist. The revision of the Prayer Book was just beginning. Girls began serving as acolytes and women stopped wearing hats! The ordination process was opened for women to be ordained as deacons, priests and ultimately as bishops. The LGBT community has taken their rightful place in the life of the church because the gospel demands the full inclusion of all the people of God. There are no outcasts. The "Episcopal Church Welcomes You" sign you see outside churches lists no exceptions.

Instead of trying to look back and return to some imagined mythical past, our challenge is to apply the issues of the day to what the gospel demands. Unafraid of the future, we keep our hand on the plow as we sow the seeds of the gospel and never look back.