



## Christian citizenship

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, July 2, 2017.

Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me." Matthew 10:40

Jesus warns his disciples that if they are to be part of his mission of reconciliation they will be welcomed in some places and rejected in others. Where they are welcomed, Christ will also be welcomed. Because of their personal relationship with Christ, they witness to the importance of obedience to God's law of love. They are among the righteous because they are in a right relationship with God.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is an example of obedience in the extreme. God instructs Abraham to take his son Isaac and build an altar on which he will offer his son as a sacrifice. This is the ultimate test of Abraham's obedience. Abraham is ready to do so when, at the last moment, he is prevented from killing his son and a lamb is provided as a sacrificial burnt offering. Jesus' own death on the cross is our greatest example of willing obedience and self-sacrifice.

An essential part of our obedience to God is to have a welcoming attitude toward all people. It is a matter of the heart to be open to those from different backgrounds and perspectives who live by a different set of values. By listening, we gain a better understanding of them and are more receptive to those with whom we would not normally associate. We come to realize that through our common humanity we all share the same basic human needs. It is easy to love those who love us; our challenge is to love the unlovable who don't love us. God has a way of sending challenging and difficult people into our lives to test our ability to care for all God's people. We need not limit our attention and concern only to those with whom we are compatible.

Obedience to the gospel enables us to see Christ in other people. When encountering angry people, I try to concentrate on understanding the source of their anger. It isn't easy to process the reason why they are angry when it is intense, especially at inappropriate times and places. The presence and companionship of Christ helps to relieve the tension. Where it would be tempting and easier to dismiss them, persistence and patience brings reconciliation and respect. These are times when we have an opportunity to make Christ known in very real and practical ways.

On Tuesday, we take time out to celebrate the 241<sup>st</sup> anniversary of our nation's independence. During those hot, sultry days in July 1776, there were serious differences between the delegates gathered at that first Convention in Philadelphia. Those who signed the Declaration of Independence knew that they were doing so at the risk of being charged with treason. At first, there were not enough votes to declare independence until Caesar Rodney made his dramatic entrance, having ridden seventy miles all night in a thunderstorm from his home in Delaware to cast his vote that gave them the necessary number of votes to declare independence.

One of the best ways to appreciate the mind of our forefathers is to read history. President Harry Truman, the only 20<sup>th</sup> century president who did not attend college, was very well read in American history and biography. He said that, *the only new thing in the world is the history you*

*don't know.* Four presidents, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, John Kennedy and George H.W. Bush were all born in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. John Adams was the only one of our founding fathers who did not own slaves. Both George Washington before him and Thomas Jefferson after him owned slaves to maintain their estates. Adams is credited with authoring the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the oldest one in continuous use. Both our state and federal constitutions have endured largely due to Adam's remarkable foresight.

Many of the founding fathers were Deists who believed in a God who is not involved in the world. The first ten amendments to the Constitution, known as the Bill of Rights, were ratified in 1791. The first amendment makes clear that there would be no law respecting the establishment of religion. Neither was there any intention that this would be a Christian nation. Their intent was to guarantee the free exercise of worship while maintaining strict separation of church and state. The irony is that Constitution that protects the free and open exercise of our religious faith also protects the right of those who have no faith or any use for religion.

We are citizens of both the church and state. If our obedience to God conflicts with our obligation to the state, the First Amendment protects our right to dissent and to assemble peaceably to petition the government for a redress of grievances. The founders were obedient to the rule of what is right and just for the new nation. The result is a governance system that has endured for well over two centuries.

John Adams was first occupant of the White House that was then known as the President's House. On November 1, 1800, he wrote in the first of his voluminous letters to his remarkable wife, Abigail: *I pray that that none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof.* You can see that quote inscribed on the mantelpiece in the State Dining Room of the White House.

When you read American history you learn that were it not for those who challenged the status quo African Americans would not have been freed from slavery, children would still be working in factories, and women would not have their right to vote. It was only later that African Americans and Native Americans were also given their right to vote. To this day, residents of the District of Columbia have no voting representation in Congress. For every step in progress there has been opposition. A fair and just society is based on obedience to the simple rule of treating others, as we want to be treated. What gives us integrity as a nation is our obedience to the rule of equal justice under the law.

We live in a dual world as citizens in Christ and citizens of the state. We have the responsibility to set an example as ambassadors of both Christ and our nation. In the end, the greatness of our nation is measured in how we treat those on the margins who have no one to advocate for them.

With all its shortcomings, our form of government endures. John Adams urged that the celebration of our independence be with *solemn acts of devotion to God, parades, sports, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of the continent to the other.* None of this would have happened were it not for those brave souls who were willing to take the bold risk of pledging *their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor.*