

The cost of progress

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2016.

...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Hebrews 12:1-2

When the Prophet Jeremiah tells us that the word of the Lord is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces, he is speaking of the power of God's judgment. (Jeremiah 23:29) Jesus speaks of that power in telling us that he came to bring fire to the earth that will cause stress and division until all is accomplished. (Luke 12:49) While it may be difficult to reconcile this destructive imagery with Jesus' teaching about the blessedness of peacemakers, he is referring to the inevitable divisions that result from those who are willing to commit to his radical teaching.

Watching the Olympic track events reminds me that taking our faith seriously is like being in training as a runner. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. (Hebrews 12:1) Taking our faith seriously requires making necessary sacrifices to qualify for the competition between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

He also tells us to, look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2) Whenever I travelled out on the western plains under the big open sky, I think of the brave pioneering spirit of those early settlers. They left the relative comfort of life in the east to face unknown hardships as they ventured forth in search of new opportunities.

One of those places where they went to seek their fortunes was the now deserted mining town of Bodie, Nevada, a frontier town with sixty-five saloons, numerous brothels and only one church. With daily gunfights and robberies, we can only imagine that the bartenders and the prostitutes, the sheriff and the undertaker were far busier than the preacher. The early pioneer missionaries had to have the necessary conviction to teach the message of the gospel to any who would listen.

One early Christian pioneer in the American west was Episcopal Bishop William Hobart Hare who was chosen as bishop for the Dakotas in 1873. Bishop Hare travelled by horse and buggy ministering to the Native American Sioux tribe. He believed that it was important to honor and respect the Sioux culture in bringing them the gospel of Christ. He continued as Bishop of South Dakota until his death in 1909. When I was a young priest, I spent summers on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota with the youth of my parish teaching Bible school. While staying in one remote village I visited an elderly Native American woman who as a young girl was confirmed by Bishop Hare.

Some years ago, an Episcopal priest in Texas developed a theology with Western imagery based on the pioneering spirit of the old west. He viewed modern Christians as either settlers or pioneers. The settler Christian sees life as something to be guarded and protected. The settler church is like the old stone courthouse dominating the town square with small windows and little light inside. It is the staid symbol of law and order, peace and security. Settler Christians have a basic fear of the unknown and are primarily concerned with their own security and rarely take any risks. They see themselves helping God as the sheriff and Jesus as his chief deputy to maintain peace and order by enforcing the rules and protecting the settlers from the bad guys.

By contrast, pioneer Christians venture forth in search of what is yet to be. The pioneer church is like a covered wagon always on the move being careful not to get into a rut. With their daring spirit, they know that the only way to make progress is to take risks. They are willing to mix with all sorts of people and don't hesitate to get down and help push if the wagon becomes mired in a rut. They welcome the opportunity to find meaning and fulfillment and encourage others to take to the trails to find new opportunities on the frontier.

The one time Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, wrote that, it is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly interested in institutional religion. The Christian Church is the one organization in the world that exists primarily for the benefit of non-members. While the institutional church plays an essential role in our relationship with Christ, we are saved by God's grace

and not by membership in any one particular church. I love the Episcopal Church and always have, but I am a work in progress based on my personal relationship with Christ. With all of the church's faults and shortcomings, I still believe that the best way for us to grow in our relationship with Christ is through the shared faith of the Christian community.

To think that God directly punishes bad people and rewards the good is far too simplistic. There are times when evil prospers while the good suffers. It is one thing for those who bring on their own suffering, but we can't blame the innocent who suffer in strife torn places around the world. Personal suffering may result in developing strength of character, but God does not purposely cause pain and suffering for that or any other reason. God gives us the resources to endure in the midst of suffering. You may have heard it said that God never gives us more than we can bear, but try telling that to someone who has broken under the strain and is hospitalized in a psychiatric ward.

Jesus warns us that following him will provoke division and controversy that results in alienating friends and family. To defend the poor is to alienate the rich. To say that there are no outcasts angers those who think there should be. Taking a stand for peace invites conflict. To guarantee equal pay and health care for employees meets opposition from management. Incorporating the LGBT community into the full life of the church has meant division.

There was resistance to the right to vote for women and minorities. Progressive issues such as Social Security, the Civil Rights and Voting Acts, Environmental Protection, Medicare and Affordable Health Care have all met opposition. Alienation for the sake of conscience can be the noblest thing we know. There is no better time than now and no better place than here to renew our commitment to a just society.