

A better way

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2016.

This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. Luke 15:2

We observe today the fifteenth anniversary of the tragic attacks on our nation that took thousands of lives in 2001 when the planes hit the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon outside of Washington, D.C. and the aborted flight that crashed in Pennsylvania. It was the work of terrorists with sick and twisted minds using religion as a pretext for their hatred and violence. That morning I was with the mother of a young man who grew up in my parish whose office was at the top of the south tower. We watched with dread as events unfolded on her television. You can imagine our relief when he finally called to tell her that he was safe. Instead of staying on his office, he had the presence of mind to dash down twenty-five flights of stairs to an elevator that took him down to the lobby just as the second tower was hit.

Our nation's response to the attack was to launch a war that caused the loss of so many more lives. In time, there were compassionate responses in the form of the city of New York allowing a Muslim center to open a few blocks from ground zero. Churches offered space for Muslims to meet and worship. Such understanding and compassion have gone a long way as examples of loving our enemies, blessing those who persecute us and not blaming whole nations and religions for the evil done by extremists.

In our gospel passage today, the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling about Jesus welcoming sinners and sharing a meal with them. Eating with sinners was considered radical and blasphemous because it went against religious custom and tradition. At the heart of Christian teaching is about searching and finding the lost.

The two brief parables about the shepherd leaving his flock in search of the one lost sheep and the woman in search of a lost coin are about recovering what is lost. Both parables illustrate that every human being is of infinite value, especially those we don't understand or like. Jesus came not for the healthy but to heal the sick and recover the lost. The rejoicing of the angels over the return of the lost is in contrast with the Pharisees and scribes who resent Jesus welcoming sinners. The contrast is between those who know their need for repentance and those who think they have no need for it.

God took the initiative to come to us in the person of Christ to welcome back those who went astray. God reaches beyond those who think they have no need for repentance to those who know they of their need for it. Christianity is all about seeking out the lost and bringing back those who have gone astray. The order of confession in traditional form of Morning Prayer may seem archaic but is unparalleled in its cadence and beauty: We have erred and stayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts...we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. (Book of Common Prayer, page 62-63.)

Jesus distinguishes between the one lost soul who repents and the ninety-nine who have no use for it. He knows very well that the ninety-nine need it as much as the one who has gone astray. We are sadly mistaken if we deny our need for repentance. We can see ourselves as the one lost sheep that knows our need of repentance or we refuse the need for it. We can count ourselves among the lost coin or we can be the valuable hoard stashed in a secure place.

Those who are drawn to Jesus are not the respectable people of his time. They are the disreputable ones who are condemned by the righteous who know the love that God has for them. Now you may be thinking that you are not such a bad person and I'm sure you're not, but those of us who try to lead good decent lives still fall short of the ideal. As with the lost sheep or the lost coin, we are a work in progress and God is not finished with us yet. Just knowing that keeps us humble. The ideal of the Christian person is one who has wholeness and integrity. This is why self-examination and reflection is an important component in maintaining a sense of integrity.

When I encounter those who are no longer active church members, they usually tell me that they are spiritual but not religious. They see no need for being part of organized religion and believe that they can lead good lives without it. They may be

angry with God for a loss in their lives or they may feel that the church let them down in some way. They remain on the sidelines calling on the church only for holiday or family occasions such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals, sometimes referred to as “hatch, match and dispatch.” When it comes to hatching, it has been said that God doesn’t intend for the church to be a refrigerator for perishable piety, but an incubator for hatching converts.

I can tell you that it makes all the difference in my life to be part of a caring and supportive community of faith that includes people in rather than excluding them out. Our effectiveness as a parish is largely measured by our willingness to reach out to those beyond our membership.

We need to have a better relationship with our neighbors. There have been misunderstandings and disagreements about proposed programs that have been thwarted. In the spirit of Christian charity, I would propose that we invite our neighbors to engage in open dialogue about mutual concerns and tell them about Emmanuel’s mission and ministry. I would like to invite them to join us in our Saint Francis Sunday Blessing of the Animals, our neighborhood Christmas Party, and our Advent Lessons and Carols and Christmas Eve services. My hope is to encourage a better and more trusting relationship with the community.