

Giving our all

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 3, 2017

What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Matthew 16:26

I enjoy reading history through the lives of those who made history. Woodrow Wilson was the only President to have earned a Ph.D. and taught history at Princeton University. When he became President in 1913, the clouds of war were gathering in Europe. He tried to keep America out of the conflict. By 1917, we entered what was known as the Great War at the cost of many lives until the armistice was signed the following year at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month. It was to be the war that ended all wars.

In wanting to keep the world safe for democracy, one of Wilson's fourteen points called for an association of nations to insure a lasting peace. He went to Europe to advocate for his proposed League of Nations. At the Paris Peace Conference, he worked on the details of the treaty with Lloyd George of England, Vittorio Orlando of Italy and George Clemenceau of France in preparation for it to be signed at the palace at Versailles.

Upon his return to the U.S. the League of Nations treaty met with opposition in Congress. Wilson undertook a tour across the nation to convince the American people of the importance of the League as a means of preventing future wars. His fervent belief in his cause eventually took a toll on his health and he suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed, though mentally alert. When his wife, Edith begged him to compromise, he stubbornly replied, "Let them compromise!" Wilson's idealism was hampered by his uncompromising stubbornness. He had given all his energies at the cost of his health for the cause of world peace in which he believed so passionately. It took another world war before the concept of the United Nations became a reality.

Jesus is passionate about his mission to bring redemption to the whole world. It places him in personal danger and his disciples are protective of him and want to prevent him from being in harm's way. When Peter vows that they will never let anything happen to him, Jesus rebukes him in the strongest terms, telling the disciples that they must never stand in the way of his mission of bringing reconciliation to the world.

Jesus tells us that we are going to find meaning in life we must first die to self-concern. We find meaning for our existence by immersing ourselves in a passionate belief and dedication to give our whole selves to what we firmly believe. It requires total commitment. We can't do our part in making a better world until we change our attitude about ourselves. If our chief concern is self-preservation, we never know what it means to give ourselves completely. Self-preservation is one of our most basic instincts, but we only find meaning by letting go of self. A life lived solely for its own sake is of little value unless we make a commitment to do our part in making a better life for others.

Self-denial and self-sacrifice are not popular values. We live in an acquisitive society in which we expect to have what we want when we want it. Concern for self-preservation keeps us from taking risks and making sacrifices. Most of us have to learn to have an awareness and concern for those beyond our own world. Many of you are engaged in your own ministries that gives meaning for your life. This parish would not survive were it not for those of you who give yourselves tirelessly in many ways not always known to anyone else.

It is natural for us to avoid pain, but there can be no progress without sacrifice. We don't ask for suffering anymore than Jesus asked to suffer and die on the cross. To put it in perspective, try looking upon what you do not just as work or a job, but a calling and vocation. If it hasn't happened already, there may come a time when you stop and reassess the quality and direction of your life. It can be a risky thing to shift your focus, but it is worth the risk and effort. Losing yourself in the work of serving others is its own reward. It may be difficult for you to see that what you do having any significant consequence until you gain a perspective to see that you are part of a larger effort. We are seeing this in the heroic efforts of those who are rescuing victims of the flooding after Hurricane Harvey that has devastated so much of the gulf coast of Texas.

If you are looking for a description of what it means to live the Christian life, Saint Paul states it eloquently in his letter to the Romans. He writes: Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil and hold to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering and persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Live peaceably with all. Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-6, 18, 21) If we all live by this formula we could all be better off.

Tomorrow is Labor Day. While it is a day off at the end of the summer, take time to reflect on what you do not just as a job but as a calling and vocation. If you are a student, getting an education is a vocation like any other work. If you are retired, your life experience can be very valuable to those in the workforce. Making a difference in the lives of others begins with shifting the emphasis of our own life. When we increase our listening skills, we find ourselves being listened to. When we are more thoughtful of others, we find them more thoughtful of us. It is all about reaching beyond our own worlds to find meaning and purpose that the self-absorbed who lack an awareness of others never know.