

Prophets and losses

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson, Rector-Emeritus, in the Episcopal Parish of Saint John the Evangelist, Hingham, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2021.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Mark 8:36

One of the summer jobs I had during my high school and college years was working in a drug store. It is an entirely different experience dealing with people when you face them across a store counter. We've all experienced rude store clerks, but customers can be disrespectful and condescending. That is why I treat sales associates, cashiers and those stocking the shelves with the courtesy they deserve. We're never too busy to offer a word of appreciation to them.

When I taught young children about the Eucharist, I asked what catches their eye when they enter the church. One little girl, pointing to the altar, said that she sees the counter. That made me think. Living as we do in a consumer society was I just another clerk behind a counter?

There are those who think of the church as a business with the assessment paid to the diocese as our franchise fee for belonging to the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Of course, we are far more than a business. We are a community of faith that needs to use sound business practices. If you carry the analogy further, members of the congregation are like stockholders who have invested in the core beliefs and values of the Christian faith.

The product we offer is learning to be imitators of Christ and to pattern our lives after his example. This product has already been paid for and there is no expiration date on it. Our job is to take up our cross; to carry whatever burden we have and to help others with theirs. It is by losing ourselves in being a Christ to our neighbor that we find our basic meaning and purpose.

I have often wondered what it would be like if the lives of the heroic figures of our Judeo-Christian heritage had turned out differently? What if Abraham had not accepted his role as the father of nations? What if Moses had begged off from leading his people out of slavery into the Promised Land? Or, what if Saint Paul had never traveled that road to Damascus where he was converted to Christ? God knew that this feisty but brilliant man was the right person at the right time to advocate for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He first had to be stopped in his tracks and be converted from fighting against the early Christians into being the foremost spokesman for Christ.

Episcopalians are reluctant to share what our faith means to us. It is said that when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with an Episcopalian you get someone who knows how to ring a doorbell but doesn't know what to say. Not long ago two people appeared at my door to tell me that Jesus commanded us to celebrate his death. I told them that the story doesn't end with Christ's death on Good Friday. Christians are the people of the Easter resurrection. We celebrate his victory over the forces of death. We are commanded to love one another as he loves us. At that point the two of them standing at my door were clearly uncomfortable and were anxious to leave. I do have to admire them for their willingness to go out and share their faith at the risk of having doors slammed in their face.

The disciples don't understand why Jesus has to suffer a sacrificial death. They hadn't come this far with him only to give him up to die. Jesus is steadfast in not allowing anyone to dissuade him or stand in his way. He is resolute in carrying out his mission and he knows what lies ahead. Instead of a coronation, he faces an execution. Instead of a crown of jewels, a crown of thorns will be pressed down upon his brow. He emphasizes that if we live only for our selves we lose our purpose for living, but if we lose ourselves in him as a man for others we gain meaning and purpose for our lives. There can be no victory without sacrifice, no crown without a cross. His victory is our victory.

We live in chaotic times with both the virus and the forces of white supremacy, xenophobia and racism fueled by conspiracy theories. We are reminded of what the philosopher George Santayana said that if we don't learn the lessons of history we are bound to repeat them.

With the rise of Nazism in Germany, the Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the radical decision to join the plot to destroy Hitler. He was imprisoned and executed just three days before allied forces liberated his camp. An important part of his legacy is his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he writes about cheap grace. Modern popular piety wants forgiveness without repentance, absolution without confession, and a crown without a cross. With Christ, love triumphs over hatred, goodness conquers evil, right overcomes wrong and truth displaces falsehood.

Christianity is counter-cultural. If our priorities are in place, we learn to use things and love people and not the other way around. The culture of needing to have it all is never satisfied. The true measure of having it all is to realize that we really don't need all we think we want. There is great wisdom in knowing what we have is all we really need. Jesus tells us that we profit nothing from trying to gain the whole world at the cost of sacrificing our soul. No price can be put on our personal integrity.

A negative attitude that always expects the worst becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy while a positive attitude sees problems as opportunities. With the right attitude we cease making ourselves the victim of our own oppression that that results in being our own worst enemy.

To serve others without counting the cost is its own reward. Christ's love is at work when we reach out to the least, the lost and the lonely, giving hope to those on the margins. It is but for the grace of God that they could be any one of us. In the final analysis the true test is when we see Christ in the face of other people, will they see him in us?