

Profits and losses

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 8, 2009.

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

Mark 8:36

When I was a young priest, the altar was against the wall and I stood with my back to the people. As much as I like a free standing altar as we have here, I sometimes wonder if the priest behind the altar looks like a store clerk standing behind the counter dispensing a product.

The church as a worshipping community is more than a business, but there are those who shop for churches as they shop in stores with a greater loyalty to their hairdresser or barber than to their church. I have known people for years with whom we had a good relationship only to have them disappear when they became upset at something. In an era of tentativeness and wavering commitment it is all the more important to support the church's worship, formation and outreach. The church relies upon the commitment of every member without whom we would be spiritually becalmed, drifting about without power or navigation.

What if Abraham had ignored God and worshipped idols? His complete trust in God enabled him to be faithful to God's calling and because of his faith and trust we have the heritage of the Jewish tradition on which our Christian faith is founded.

Where would we be if St. Paul had converted to some local heathen cult? God knew that this feisty debater was the right person to present the case for the gospel of Jesus Christ. But Paul first had to be literally stopped in his tracks to be converted from fighting against Christians to fighting for them. For all his rambling run-on sentences in some of his writings, Paul is most eloquent in his letter to the Romans in which he boldly declares that nothing, no power of any kind, not even death itself can separate us from the love of God in Christ. It is because of God's unconditional love for us and Christ's triumph over the forces of evil that we can overcome any barrier, any power, even death itself.

Jesus knows that he is going to have to undergo great suffering and he will not allow anyone to dissuade him from it. He knows that instead of a coronation, he faces an execution. He knows that instead of a crown of glory, he receives a crown of thorns. Without his sacrifice there can be no triumph for us. Because he takes up his cross to suffer and die on it, we are able to bear our own cross. We win the victory over hatred, falsehood, injustice because he endures his crown of thorns and bears his cross. If there is no cross, there can be no crown.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us that modern popular piety wants forgiveness without repentance, absolution without confession, a crown without a cross. What Jesus is telling us is that there can be no kingdom, no power and no glory without his sacrifice. There is no possibility of real life for us if we live only for ourselves.

We have to beware of the culture that encourages us to love things and use people instead of the other way around. The need to have it all is but folly. We can't have it all and we don't need it all. Trying to live life on the fast track kills the human spirit, sacrifices personal integrity and threatens our personal well being. Absolutely nothing is benefited from trying to gain the whole world at the cost of losing our soul. Our commitment to Christ and his church gives us the perspective to give rather than gain, to live simply rather than to acquire and accumulate.

God entered the human condition in the person of Jesus to be a man for others. He embraces the leper, mixes with the outcasts and washes the feet of the disciples. In the end, he willingly takes the sin of the world upon himself to defeat the corrupt powers of the world.

A negative attitude always expects the worst and usually succeeds in making it happen. A positive attitude sees problems as opportunities in disguise. We make a major leap in our personal growth when we let go of our excuses and take charge of our challenges.

Jesus never thinks of himself as too good or too busy for anyone. No plea for help or healing is unimportant, no sacrifice too great. He boldly challenges us to remember that we are never too busy or too important to reach out to those who would be left behind. Some of Jesus' followers held to the hope and expectation that the messiah would be a political and military leader who would defeat the enemies of Israel. For Jesus to die a sacrificial death certainly is not part of their expectation. They are not able to get their mind around the fact that his kingdom is a spiritual one not of this world.

Jesus tells that the only way we can find meaning in our life is to lose ourselves in serving others. In a self-absorbed culture that wants everything and wants it now, we can learn to do without. Something good that can come out of the present economic crisis is that we are learning that home and family come first and that we can get along with a great many things we thought important. Those of us who didn't live through the Great Depression or remember World War II have never understood how the entire nation had to cope with rationing their resources. There was no real choice in the matter.

Economists tell us that we can expect the present crisis to last longer than expected; perhaps another four or five years. It means a change in our usual style of life requiring us to put our priorities into perspective. Sacrifice and self-denial are becoming a way of life for all of us and those who have never had to deny themselves anything are surprised to discover what they can do without.

Jesus as a man for others is a model for us. He gives us greater awareness to reach out to those who live on the margins of society with little or nothing. Those who brought food to food pantries have become clients and those who served meals to the homeless are now being served. In their face we see the face of Christ. In our hands lies their future.
