

Certain side effects

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on July 5, 2009, the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.

And many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where does this man get all this?"

And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Mark 6: 2, 6

The prophet Ezekiel broke with tradition by rejecting the concept of collective guilt inherited from our ancestors. He believed that we must accept responsibility for our own actions. That was not a popular concept in a religious culture that believed we are born sinful with the guilt of our parents' sins. I recently heard a commencement speaker tell the young graduates that he learned more from his failures than his successes. He was telling us that the sooner we own up to our mistakes and failures and take responsibility for them, the better we learn from them.

We read in the gospels that a great many people are drawn to Jesus and find their lives transformed by him. By most accounts, he is very successful in getting across his message of repentance and forgiveness. Where he is not successful is when he returns to his hometown of Nazareth, he is not taken seriously by his kinsmen and was unable to get anywhere with them. It matters not that we fall flat on our face, but that we get up and learn from the experience. In a world that values success over failure, it is far more important to be faithful to God than to be successful in the eyes of the world.

When Jesus sends the apostles out to preach the gospel, he tells them to go two by two. Jewish tradition called for two witnesses when making a promise or a statement. Going in pairs gives greater courage to take risks. He orders them to take along only what they need. In the face of great opposition, they must be willing to stand up under great duress and persecution to proclaim repentance, cast out demons and heal the sick. This work of the disciples continues today in healing spiritual, emotional and physical sicknesses.

God supplies the energy to do God's work, but when divisive and demonic forces wreak havoc in congregations, it drains the energy from their mission. Infighting over differences can be resolved without confrontation and division. When a congregation is in ongoing conflict with their priest or with each other, they forfeit their potential for fulfilling their mission as a Christian community.

It takes energy and commitment to witness to Christ in an indifferent and hostile world. Too often we are uncertain about what we believe. We have core beliefs and if you are not sure what they are, look them up the *Outline of Faith* in the back of the Book of Common Prayer. Authority for our faith is based on Scripture, tradition, reason. The more we learn from these sources, the more we are lifted closer to understanding the nature and character of God in Christ. When I arrived in a new parish, the warden told that my job was to tell them what they were supposed to believe. He did not understand that belief doesn't come from hearsay, but from your own personal experience with God in Christ. My responsibility is to enable you to learn to think theologically.

I am grateful for those who guided and encouraged me in my vocation as a Christian and as a priest. They lifted me up to a greater understanding of what it means to be in Christ. They sometimes told me what I didn't want to hear but needed to know. The one who had the most profound and positive effect on my spiritual development was a college chaplain. He was the most authentically spiritual person I have ever known and was a great influence on my calling.

He would never have known what a profound effect he had on me had I not written to him years later to tell him how much I learned from him and how it developed my understanding of who I am in relation to God. That is why it is important to tell people that we appreciate their encouragement and help. Sending a bouquet of flowers when they die is too late.

I like to live my faith in practical ways. One of the most significant ways for me was when I was in my first parish and was trained as an Emergency Medical Technician in a volunteer ambulance corps. This was not a sideline community activity but a direct extension of my ministry. I cared for the injured and tended to those who had died and comforted their families. I bound up people who were injured in some of the most bizarre accidents, most of which could have been avoided. In many cases it was as much their broken spirits as their broken bodies that needed urgent care. When asked if it bothered me to deal with accident victims and sudden deaths, my response was that people's concerns and needs always came before my own.

When it comes to taking a stand on matters of peace and justice, we cannot afford to remain timidly on the sidelines. There are times when we need to witness to what is right and just, especially in the face of opposition. If we believe in the dignity and value of every human being, we have to stand up for what is right. If we apply our faith in our daily lives, it will influence what we think and do. Each new generation needs fresh troops to join the mission. Each time we stand up for what is right, we are witnessing for what we believe.

We may be wary of taking an unpopular stand in the face of wrong doing, but we must not mislead others by our silence. There are times when we need to speak up when someone is being maligned. Time and again I hear people say that they just listened and said nothing when someone was being bullied and criticized. That sort of cowardice leads to the assumption that we are in agreement. We have to be clear in who we are and where we stand. To do anything less is to sacrifice our integrity.

Yesterday, we celebrated the 233rd anniversary of our nation. One of the great things about our nation is freedom of worship and to be guided by our conscience. If we are to maintain our integrity we cannot be spectators; we have to be willing to take the risk of getting involved. There are times when we must act out of conviction and risk being scorned. More than once I have been made a scapegoat by those who failed to face reality and do the right thing. Christian witness often means comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. We must be willing to take the consequences of acting on our conscience. Being faithful to God and our conscience is everything and often is the only thing.