

Giving God the Glory

A sermon by the Rev. Robert B. Edson, in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Sunday after the Ascension, May 4, 2008.

I glorified you on earth by finishing the work you have given me to do. John 17:4

Jesus is in deep prayer with God as he completes his earthly ministry. He has spent his whole life as a man for others. It took great courage and strength to accomplish bringing heaven and earth together in his person and mission. He is the living example of bringing reconciliation and forgiveness to the world. People not only loved him but they had no doubt that he loved them.

He was a man of the people and went where the people were. I enjoy being with people. I am energized by being with people and getting to know them. Over the years I learned that the favorite subject of most people is themselves. You may have had the experience where you are telling someone something about yourself and before you know it, the conversation has turned around to something about them.

One of the most interesting people I knew was a prominent artist in Boston, Polly Thayer. When I first knew her, her eyesight had begun to fade. When I would visit her she would always ask what I was reading. She wanted to know what I thought about current events and I learned that I had better be ready to give an intelligent answer on a variety of subjects. She genuinely was interested. She was secure enough in knowing who she was. She was not without her own opinions; had no need to impress me with her own. People who are so full of themselves usually talk about what interests them and rarely ask about others for fear of getting off their favorite subject. Secure people with a genuine sense of humility enjoy focusing on bringing out the best in others.

Because of her failing eyesight, she asked me if I would read poetry to her. On my next visit, I brought along my college texts of English and American literature and read poems at random as she began reciting along with me lines that she had learned many years before.

I have always appreciated growing up as one of four brothers because I learned early on that I wasn't and didn't have to be the center of attention. I never felt that I was above doing any task. Since the greatest privilege for me as a priest is to handle holy things at God's altar, I have always handled messy tasks. While rector of a parish in the Hudson River Valley, I served on a volunteer ambulance corps as a trained EMT and handled some very grisly situations. It never bothered me because I focused on the patient who needed immediate attention and there was no time to think about myself. That service in the ambulance corps became an extension of my ministry.

I have no patience with pompous people, especially among the clergy. I once knew a rather pompous priest, Father George Fox who enjoyed looking and acting like a medieval prelate. One day Father Fox was pulled over for exceeding the speed limit. When the officer approached him, he said indignantly, "Do you know who I am, I'm Father Fox!" To which the officer responded, "I don't care if you Mother Goose, you're getting a ticket."

The mark of the Christian is one of humility. Jesus had no use for pretentiousness or pomposity. He built up those who needed it and put in place those who didn't. It is the mark of a Christian person never to do or say anything that would humiliate someone. It is better to put them in their best light to bring out their best.

Jesus knew who he was. His task was to glorify God in everything he said and did. He could have made a sensation of himself through performing miracles, but he always pointed beyond himself to glorify God. In all things he gave God the glory.

When our lives reflect God's forgiveness, God's grace, and justice, we glorify God each and every time. As instruments of God's grace and love, we lift others toward God's glory. As Jesus carried out God's mission and purpose for us, so now we carry on that mission in how we live. It is a privilege and a gift to radiate God's grace by what we say and do.

If we live with having low expectations of people we will usually not be disappointed. If we expect more of them, it has a way of bringing out the best in them. I've learned not to be hasty in sizing up other people until I get to know them and discover that they have an interesting story to tell.

We were created to glorify God. Because God knows and cares for each and every one of us, we must not be casual in what we offer up to God. A good place to begin is with a genuine sense of humility in prayer as Jesus did in this high priestly prayer. I still like to kneel when we pray because it is a posture of humility and supplication. It is the same posture we use when we get down and scrub the kitchen floor or dig in the garden.

Our approach to God is as a humble servant kneeling in the presence of the heart of God. We are made worthy in the sight of him who redeems us.

In all things, give God the glory.