

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut

Mission Otherwise Routine—June 7, 2006

It's easier when we have a task. Whether the mission is large, small, or impossible, the objective is there and we know when it's accomplished and can feel satisfied. It's harder when we start thinking about why we do what we do with the moments and days of our lives.

If someone could drop in from Mars and observe you 24/7, what would that observer infer about your reason for being? Probably in sharp contrast to the Martian observer's inferences, what would your personal mission statement be? Why are you on this planet?

I doubt that your answer would equate to a job or be identical to your daily routine. It would possibly have something to do with relationships, with connections to the matrix of people in which you live and move and love. Your answer may well have changed over the course of your life, or be changing now.

Or maybe you are at a place in your life where you can't really answer the question to your own satisfaction at all. It's possible to spend your entire life wondering what you want to be when you grow up, especially if you equate your purpose for being with a job.

So I want to suggest something really radical. Imagine that your mission, Ms. or Mr. Phelps, is this: So to know and to follow God as revealed in Jesus Christ as to make God known to others whose lives intersect with yours, in such a way that they find knowing and following God as revealed in Jesus Christ irresistibly appealing.

Imagine that this mission guides you, whether like Saint Paul you make tents for a living or deliver medical care or frame houses or draft contracts. Whether you live in a retirement community or are busy caring for youngsters at home.

Imagine that this mission guides you, whether you are folding laundry or mowing the grass. Or watching a Little League game or participating in a meeting. Or reading an e-mail. Or deciding which bills to pay, or which expenses to incur.

What changes when you imagine this mission guiding you? What shifts in your attitude?

What aspect of the mission statement merits your attention right now?

—Rev. Ben Brockman

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut

Touching the Holy—June 14, 2006

“This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” — Psalm 118:23

The awe-response is the tip-off—the tip-off that we, like Moses facing the bush that burned without being consumed (see Exodus 3), are standing on holy ground. Something “marvelous in our eyes” provokes awe.

The eyes of faith allow us to echo first part of the verse—“this is the Lord’s doing.” And when we link the perception of the marvelous with the knowledge that it comes from the Lord, we touch the holy.

What have you marveled at? Is there something in your life that never ceases to amaze you? Even the commonplace can evoke awe if we remember to seek its origin. I planted blue and pink lupines in the garden several years ago. Each year they self-seed, and new hybrids join the old-timers. They are beautiful. I planted and tended them, but I did not make them or give them the power to grow, and God gave me the capacity to tend them. They inspire awe every time I look at them. To see them is to touch the holy.

A child has surgery today, benefiting from an operation that didn’t exist twenty years ago. I marvel at some surgeon’s intuition of a new possibility, at the trial and error research and perseverance that developed the procedure, at the courage of the first patient who underwent it—and I know I am touching the holy.

What happens when you touch the holy? At the very least, it’s like getting a greeting card from heaven: “I love you,” signed God. A very nice feel-good moment. But it can be a lot more than that, if you’ll let it. It can be a reminder that your life can be God-shaped. Even more, and it can be an invitation to let your life be God-shaped.

Touching the holy can be an invitation to allow yourself to be transformed, in that little moment, into the person God created you to become, someone made in God’s own image—the image we see most clearly and fully revealed in Jesus. And to imitate Jesus, to consciously live into that image, is to become holy. Touching the holy puts us on the way to becoming holy. It makes the divine expectation declared in Leviticus 11:45—“You shall be holy, for I am holy”—a little less overwhelming.

So look for those moments of awe, and remember the gracious God who is ultimately behind them. They are moments of grace. And as you touch the holy, let the moment shape you. Be open to God’s loving desire to transform you into the likeness of Jesus. When you receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, know that you are receiving Christ. Study the Bible, cherish the stories about Jesus; take those words to heart. There you will touch the holy most closely.

And as you become a person who is accustomed to touching the holy, allowing yourself to be made into a Christ-like person, another marvelous thing happens. You become awe-inspiring, and other people touch the holy through you, and you inspire them to become holy, even as God is holy. A virtuous circle.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fairfield, Connecticut

Acceptable Risk—June 28, 2006

Is it easier to give away a few billion dollars when you know you have a few billion left? I thought about this when I read about the mega-wealthy investor Warren Buffett's gift to the Bill and Linda Gates Foundation a few days ago.

There was a time in my life when I thought that only very poor people were inclined to great generosity. But then I met some very wealthy people who were amazingly generous. And I came across some stingy poor ones.

My current theory is that generous people are confident and trusting people. Whether rich or poor, they measure risk in a different way than tightwads do. They condition their generosity on something that ungenerous people don't.

And it's not speculative risk-taking, a gambling instinct. From what I've read about Warren Buffett, he's not a speculative investor. He's known for reading balance sheets very closely and for investing in companies whose management style he likes and whose business prospects are solid.

Generous people are in fact inclined to resist the siren call of easy dollars, and are more given to hard work. But generous people seem able to resist the equally compelling illusion that hoarding creates security.

Whether rich or poor, generous people turn out to be people of great faith. They are confident citizens of the universe, not employees of this or that corporation, or even of themselves. They know that somehow they will make do, and that making do is just fine. They delight in what they have, and don't pine for what they don't have. They relish the moment, instead of holding their breath waiting for a perfection that will never arrive. They measure happiness in spiritual and emotional terms rather than in material ones; in terms of relationships, rather than of possessions.

They can risk giving money or material things away generously because they know from experience that the risk is repaid by a soul-filling sense of connection with the deep organizing principle of the universe, love.

The hard part is finding that risk an acceptable risk the first time. And then finding it acceptable again, after succumbing again to the instinctual belief that we can hoard enough to be secure.

It's human nature to think that accumulating wealth is the key to happiness. There are any number of ads targeted to zip code 06824 and hereabouts to reinforce this belief. In fact, generosity is the key to happiness, and risking generosity is life-transforming.

Even when it's so scary it seems life-threatening. "Human nature," said Katherine Hepburn's character in 'The African Queen,' "is what we're put on earth to rise above." Even if doing so is terrifying. Jesus said this is how we save our souls.

—Rev. Ben Brockman