

Sunday, January 31, 2016
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Coming Home”

It is good to be home. I missed you and hope that the month has been a peaceful and perhaps even joyful one for you.

My time away was rich and nourishing.

I had the opportunity to reconnect with family and friends and to delve into my studies on inter religious understanding and peacemaking.

I read quite a few books and engaged in dialogue with people whose lives are dramatically different than my own, ranging from Syrian Muslims to Anguillan Episcopalians.

I spent a lot of time reflecting on who we are as a congregation and what it is that we stand for in the world.

At the beginning of January I read a parable that haunted my reflections throughout the month:

“Wallace Ford told a powerful story about a people who lived in a community that was enclosed in a glass dome.

Although the dome limited them greatly, they knew that they would die a horrible death on the outside, and that story passed from one generation to the next.

They had lived with the dome for so many years that they long ago stopped noticing the limits it placed upon them.

There was only one offense so heinous that the penalty was to be cast outside the dome.

One day, to everyone's horror, someone committed that very offense.

The punishment was swift.

The entire community escorted the offender to the edge of the dome and pushed them out into the world beyond.

Then they all pressed their noses to the glass to watch them die.

At first, the offender lay on the ground face down, cowering in terror, wondering how death would come, every muscle clenched against the inevitable.

Nothing happened.

After a bit, the offender rolled over, looked around, and then, to the amazement to everyone inside, the outcast stood up and soon began dancing and singing and shouting.

Banging on the outside of the dome, the offender shouted,

"Come out, come out! It's wonderful out here. Lots of room, fresh air, warm sunshine!"

The people inside the dome were confused and so distressed that they got buckets of black paint and painted the glass walls as high as they could reach so no one could see the person outside dancing and singing.

Then they all breathed a sigh of relief and went back to the way things always had been before that day."

Let's just pause for a moment and let this story sink in. //

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus returns to his hometown. When he reads the scroll of Isaiah the people listened attentively. When he claimed that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, they were amazed and questioned how it could be, but they were still open to Jesus' message.

It was only when Jesus began to challenge their sense of entitlement, and when he pointed out God's concern for outsiders, that they got murderously angry.

The radical inclusivity of Jesus was scandalous and offensive to his hometown congregation.

They wanted to believe that they were "in" with God, and for them, that meant there had to be others who were "out".

But, when Jesus suggested that outsiders were really the true insiders, they refused to let go of their stereotypes, their sense of privilege, and their need for exclusivity.

One writer pointed out that "It's tragic when God's people are more like the people of Nazareth than Jesus. We love to talk about Jesus the Messiah, and to hear how God's Reign has come to us. But, sometimes, when we are challenged by the Gospel to welcome those whom we believe are "sinners" or "outside" of God's "chosen ones," we may prefer to attack the messenger rather than do the difficult work of opening our hearts."

The reality is that God created each and every one of us.

As we heard in Jeremiah's text :

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

and before you were born I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

This message is for us as well.

God, who formed us, calls us – all of us – to carry out God's mission of peace and justice, love and compassion throughout the earth.

None of us can say that someone doesn't matter – every created thing matters.

One of the great beauties of our theology and polity in the United Church of Christ is that your relationship with God is between you and God.

We don't rely on saints or intermediaries to speak to God – it is a one-on-one relationship.

Only you and God truly know your inner self.

You might present a different face to the world or have a hidden agenda you are hoping to accomplish, but when you are in conversation with God there is no room for falseness.

We believe that we spend eternity in the presence of God – that after our mortal lives end we have the opportunity to meet God face-to-face.

We must live each day with the thought that this could be the day I meet God face to face.

This could be the day that I will account for my life.

This could be the last day that I have an opportunity to answer God's call to service.

Are there people in your life who need forgiveness?

Are there people whom you struggle to love?

Are there classes or types of people whom you believe are undeserving of God's grace?

My friends, if God's grace could be earned by our behavior or beliefs, by our cultural norms or religious rituals it wouldn't be grace!

The gospel message is one of love and inclusivity.

Jesus reached out to all and reiterated the message of Genesis – that God created all human beings, in God's image and God said it was good!

The challenge before us and one that I would like to explore throughout Lent this year, is how do we widen our circle?

Are we the people in the dome?

Let's be creative in thinking of ways that we can live out our Christian values.

Our opening prayer this morning included this plea: Disturb our certainties so we will be open to new insights. Upset our priorities to make room for faith, hope and love. Expand our horizons to encompass ideas we have not entertained before. Open our hearts to people we have failed to welcome into our midst.

To me, this prayer is an opening of the new year.

I am going to be bold today and propose that we spend time this year deeply exploring who we are.

I want our extravagant welcome to be expansive – not just to all different types of people, but to all different types of ideas and interpretations. This will be hard work, but I know that we are up to it.

As Joe and I were making our way home from our travels, via boats, planes, shuttle vans, and cars he posed the question, "is it worth it?"

He was wondering if the joy of being someplace different and beautiful was worth the effort to get there and back.

I pondered that question and eventually replied “Yes, it is worth it because without travel, education, meeting people who are different than us...we would never get a glimpse of what God’s kingdom looks like.

We would be rooted in a parochial setting that precludes understanding or knowledge of ‘the other.’

We would be the people in the dome.

This semester I am taking a class called ‘Religion, Conflict and Peacemaking.’

It is a fascinating study of the role religion plays in the world’s conflicts and what we as individuals and communities might do to wage peace.

Tuesday’s class, this past week, ended with this poem by Yehuda Amichai called “The Place Where We Are Right”:

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

is hard and trampled

like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

where the ruined

house once stood.

Let us pray.

Gracious and holy God, creator of all, we thank you for the blessings in our lives and we ask that you grant us the grace to live out our call to discipleship as you envisioned.

Help us, we pray to broaden our understanding of those people whose lives are different than ours.

Open our hearts to understand our brothers and sisters in this world who follow a different path to you.

Be with us as we journey forward, ever faithful, trusting that you alone are the source of our joy.

Remind us, O God, that our individual thoughts and actions are shared with you and help us to conduct our lives always aware of your presence.

Today, hear our prayers for those whom we love.

For those who are sick, we pray for healing.

For those who mourn, we pray for comfort.

For those who barricade themselves behind blackened windows, let your glorious light shine in.

For our brothers and sisters throughout this world who live in poverty, without food or shelter, in fear of violence, we pray that our prayers and our resources might bring them closer to you.

Hear us now, in the sacred silence of this Meetinghouse as we turn to you with the prayers of our hearts....

Amen.