

Sunday, February 3, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “There is Always More”

One of the great joys of ministry is hearing people’s stories.

One of the first lessons I learned, as a new minister was that you can never guess what someone’s story might be and that there is always more than you initially know.

Stories unfold, sometime slowly – over time.

It is, however, the only way we really get to know someone.

Sharing our stories is often the first and best way to begin breaking down barriers and building bridges.

Our stories move us beyond separation and suspicion.

In today’s passage the people in Jesus’ synagogue are “amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

They asked themselves if this impressive man could possibly be the son of Joseph the carpenter.

The cultural lens through which they saw Jesus colored their image of who he was – or who he even had the potential to be.

This is a human trait that is very much a part of our own culture today.

We have set expectations of how people behave and we don’t often change our minds.

I am certain that we can all think of a time that we may have judged a person on appearance or affiliation.

This cuts off our opportunity to learn more about people, to understand lives that may be different from our own.

After 9-11 many Americans began to make assumptions regarding the behavior of Muslims with little or no knowledge of Islam and its teachings.

Many of these perceptions were rooted in fear – fear of the unknown.

This winter I’m participating in a Taconic Learning Center class on Interfaith Understanding.

We are using a book called “Getting to the Heart of Interfaith.”

It is a narrative story of three men, a Protestant Pastor, a Jewish Rabbi and a Muslim Imam, who develop a deep understanding of one another through deliberate, intentional dialogue.

I want to share some of their insights with you this morning as we explore how easily we judge other people-even Jesus.

The author's main premise is that "Preconceived notions about what people think and believe often make us suspicious or fearful or critical of each other." They advocate for "listening to one another's stories, working together, getting to know each other." Their experience has been that these strategies lead to greater understanding and less conflict.

This makes sense to me.

When we start talking about our families, how we grew up, where we lived, what our experiences have been, we can start to see each other as unique individuals.

Each time we tell our own stories, we not only meet each other, but we come to a deeper understanding of who we are and what we believe.

When Jesus declared that he was anointed by God to carry out Isaiah's prophecy the crowd was initially stunned.

At first, there was a moment of awe.

Then there was an excitement that one of their own was going to come into power.

You can imagine the church leader's minds reeling with the possibilities of having a miracle worker in their own congregation. Think of the fund raising possibilities!

But Jesus quickly clarified the situation by revealing more of his story. He said, "Oh no, you've got it wrong."

"I am not here to make your lives more comfortable."

Rather, "I am here to minister to the people who are not included in our circle."

He cites the examples of Elijah and Elisha, Old Testament prophets noted for their compassion to strangers-non Jews.

Both Elijah and Elisha took God into places where God was not thought to be and had no business being.

Imagine if the story paused here and the elders of the church sat down with Jesus and said, "Tell us more about what you believe. Tell us how you will carry out this divine appointment."

The crowd in the synagogue, however, become enraged and quickly turns into an angry mob.

They try to drive Jesus out of town with the intention of hurling him over a cliff.

This seems to me to be a foretelling of the passion story – Jesus lauded on Palm Sunday and crucified just five days later by the same crowds.

What is it about us that generate such a response?

How can we be so easily swayed?

How much time does it take for you to go from amazement to rage?

One commentator characterized it this way: “We bring our dashed hopes, our suspicions, our fears, to the first cliff we can find so that by pushing them off the precipice we might ensure our own security, safety, and salvation. Yet, Jesus pushes through our walls of resistance, our facades of forbearance, and our determined denial toward that which will truly bring us peace, comfort and hope.”

Our interfaith guide calls for a five-step process in embracing our fellow human beings.

Stage 1: Move beyond separation and suspicion – you must sit down with each other and start the conversation.

Stage 2: Inquire more deeply – ask the follow up questions. “What do you mean by that?” “Tell me more.”

Stage 3: Share both the easy and difficult parts – honesty is paramount when you are entering into relationship. You must be willing to admit to the things that make you uncomfortable.

Stage 4: Move beyond safe territory – oh this is the hardest part because it involves vulnerability on your part.

To truly develop a mutual friendship you have to open yourself to the other. You have to admit to weaknesses.

Stage 5: Explore spiritual practices from other traditions. If the bridge you are crossing is one of religion – understanding another’s practices is important.

If the bridge is cultural – race, nationality, gender, sexuality – you must inquire about traditions and practices.

It is what defines us as a people.

Who we are and what we do are the parts of ourselves that we must share.

Without understanding and curiosity about your neighbor you will live in a vacuum, surrounded by people who are just like you.

It is interesting to me to see how much time people will spend following the lives of movie stars or politicians – or television characters – but how little time or effort they will put in to knowing their neighbor.

There is a strong likelihood that you may know more about the family on your favorite television show than you know about the family of the person you have sat next to in church for the past twenty years!

The most important lesson for us in today's story comes in the very last sentence.

“He passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

Oh my friends, this is the image of Jesus that I want you to carry with you every moment of your life.

When things seem crazy or you find yourself fearful and anxious, remember that you are rooted, deeply rooted, in your faith.

Faith is the polar opposite of fear.

When you trust, when you know that God is with you – that you are filled with the Holy Spirit – you too can walk through the midst and be on your way. You don't have to be afraid of people who are different or people you don't know. You can embrace the world with a loving heart, just as Jesus did.

I want to close with a poem by John van de Laar called *Wild God*

It seems to us that things would be much easier

If you would just do what we ask, Jesus;

If you were more compliant and cooperative,

More flexible and adaptable,

More open to follow agendas other than you own;

But, frustratingly, you refuse to be tamed, Jesus;

You won't be domesticated into leaving our brokenness untouched,

Undisturbed,

Unruffled;

No – you prod and provoke,

Unafraid of the pain it might cause us,

Of the comfort we may have to relinquish.

You are a Wild God, Jesus, and we are afraid of such a God,

But we choose to praise you anyway,

Because a domesticated deity,

A tame grace is not what we need;
You are a Wild God, and we praise you that you are,
Because any other God would be unworthy of the name.