

Sunday, March 23, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Companions on the Journey”

Last Sunday I brought greetings of peace and grace from our church to the United Congregational Church in Bridgeport.

I was warmly welcomed there and humbled to be a part of what they are building in their community.

As you know, it has been my privilege to be in covenant with Reverend Sara these past few years by way of our clergy group.

My life and ministry has been greatly enriched by that relationship.

It is my hope that together we will build new relationships that will take us into a future that knows no divide between urban and rural, rich and poor, white and color, straight and gay, abled and disabled, young and old.

We come together as God’s people, beloved followers of Jesus Christ, in covenant with one another, which we just articulated.

Let’s take a look at Mark’s gospel and see what it might be saying to us today.

Imagine for a moment, if you will, what it might be like to be paralyzed.

Concentrate on your legs.

Imagine not having the ability to move them.

Now think about your arms.

Feel their weight and then imagine not feeling them at all.

Now, picture yourself on a mat, being carried by four of your friends through a crowded street.

Your friend’s strength and enthusiasm is moving you along.

You are completely dependent on them for your safety.

They are intent on getting you in to see this Jesus everyone is talking about.

They have heard about miracles.

They have faith that you might be healed.

The crowd is too dense.

They cannot go through.

They decide to go to the roof.

The roof.

You are on a mat, paralyzed.

All you can do at this point is trust your friends.

Slowly, you are eased up to the roof and then down, through a hole to the feet of the Savior.

You look up from your mat and you are in the presence of God.

He looks into your eyes and says, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

You are not sure what to do.

You say nothing.

There is a stir in the crowd.

The elders, the Pharisees are criticizing these words.

Then Jesus says, "so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

And you stand,

you take your mat and walk,

you walk, through the crowd.

The crowd is amazed.

They sing praise to God.

And you, how do you feel?

You have not uttered a single word.

How has your life changed?

So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....

So that you may know that it is through the faith of friends, through the efforts of community, through the care and love of one another that we move into the presence of Christ.

Our God is a relational God.

Our God who comes to us as sovereign creator, in the person of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit encourages us to celebrate the dependence we have on one another.

We cannot go through life alone.

We are meant to be in relationship.

We are better in community.

People often ask me, “Why do I have to come to church on Sunday?”

They tell me that they have their own relationship with God, at home on Sunday morning.

They explain to me that they don’t need organized religion to feel close to God.

I understand their feelings.

I know what it is like to think you are independent.

And I know what it is like to realize that you need someone to carry your mat to Christ.

Almost fourteen years ago I was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

After many tests and consultations with doctors it was determined that I would have to have surgery to remove the tumor.

The doctor told me that I would be in the hospital about a week, but that it would take me about a year to fully recover.

A year. Didn’t he realize that I had two young sons to raise, a business to run, a husband and home to care for?

Did he really expect that I could stop for a year?

Well, it wasn’t exactly optional.

You see, God comes to us in the most surprising ways.

For me, it was a period of complete surrender.

I had to depend on the doctors to perform the surgery.

I had to depend on my family and friends to take care of me, to attend to my every need.

I had to be fed. I had to be bathed.

I had to depend on the prayers of other people, because my own prayers didn’t seem like enough.

I was the man on that mat being carried through the crowd.

I was humbled.

I learned to be dependent.

I was transformed.

We need each other.

We come together to worship, to praise God as a community.

It is a good thing.

It is a gift.

Reverend Sara and I are trying to build this type of a relationship between our two churches.

The United Church of Christ says this about covenant relationships:

"What is it that holds people together even in the midst of all kinds of differences? When folk in the United Church of Christ talk about how they relate—to God, to each other, other churches, other religions, even creation—they often use the word "covenant."

It's God's good glue that keeps us together.

Covenant is a holy promise of devotion that is shared.

When that glue sticks, God forms a bond of unity that is pliable and dynamic, not rigid or unresponsive.

Unity is a result of a covenantal way of life and an amazing gift of God.

This is what we are trying to build.

We want to be a covenant people.

I want to share a story about an encounter I had with a young woman in Bridgeport last week.

Haley is 16 years old. Her adopted mother works as the food service coordinator at United Congregational. Last summer Haley was on the staff at Silver Lake. When I walked into church last Sunday morning the choir was rehearsing in the front chancel of the church. United has a combined adult and youth choir.

I needed to make my way through the choir to the pulpit to get ready to preach.

Haley opened her arms wide to give me a hug. She said "Hi – do you remember me?"

I sort of hedged and said, "Tell me where we met."

She said, "I came to your church last year with Silver Lake staff."

I assured her that I remembered and made my way to the pulpit.

Later at coffee hour Haley came up to me and said, "I love seeing you here at my church. When I visited your pretty church in Salisbury it seemed so different than what I was used to, but now I see that we can work together."

Oh my friends, we are meant to care for one another. It is the warmth of our faith that provides the spark for one another when we might be feeling just a little dull.

Our lives are enriched as we join our voices in worship, as we pray for each other, as we take our turns, carrying the mats of our friends, or sometimes, being the person carried.

In today's gospel story, the paralytic man never uttered a word.

He simply took it all in.

Celebrate your dependence on God and your interdependence on each other.

Consider who will carry you to the feet of Christ and when will you be called upon to carry your friend?

Let your friends care for you and you will know God's love.

Give yourself permission to ride on the mat, carried through this crowded life by the faith, the love and the strength of your friends.

Last week I made this promise to the congregation in Bridgeport:

Each week we will pray for all the members of this congregation.

As often as we can, we will come to help you serve your neighbors.

We will gather resources to support your ministry.

In turn, we ask that you remember us in prayer and that you come to us with your blessings.

We will be neighbors and friends, carrying each other to Christ.

We will be blessed.