

**Sunday, April 21, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Everything Needed for Life”**

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On this fourth Sunday of Easter we turn our attention to the nuts and bolts of living as a resurrection people.

Resurrection has been defined as “the power and person of God unleashed into the world like never before.”

To believe in resurrection is to believe that God’s kingdom has come – it is here – in our lives today.

It is based on the belief that Christ is risen, which changes everything.

In the congregational tradition, a minister is called from among the congregation and charged with the responsibility of steeping themselves in the word of God: studying, interpreting, teaching, preaching and carrying the message of God’s love into the world.

Will Willamon said that “the role of clergy is to worry about what makes church *church* in a way that is helpful to all members of the body of Christ as they go about their vocation.”

Fulfilling my role as your minister, I have made a commitment over the next few months to study, reflect on and preach about Christian virtues and values.

Together we will examine the history of values systems, how they develop and how they bind a community together.

Ultimately, at the end of June, we will write our own Congregational Value Statement identifying the core values that will both root and lead our church into the future.

We will trace the development of moral code from Plato and Aristotle, through biblical times to the early church writers, right up to recent commentary and reflection.

Along the way I ask you to pay close attention to your own decision-making and relationships.

Search for your own code of behavior and discern what it is that guides your life.

Throughout our study, I invite you to ask yourself the question, “Who do I hope to be?”

We will explore the many ways that people have tried over the course of human existence to better themselves, to reach a goal of happiness, contentment or wholeness.

This way of living does not happen in one moment, but it comes through daily practice.

We will explore how habits are formed and characters are built.

As Christians, the kind of life we are called to live is a journey.

We will journey together these next few months with the goal of increasing our faith and strengthening our characters.

Faith is a gift of God's grace – we enter into it unknowing how we will be transformed – what we will become.

One author compared it to marriage stating that when people marry they rarely know what they are getting into – but over time they come to learn and understand why it is important and meaningful to be married.

I find this analogy particularly appropriate as I work with six couples this Spring and Summer to plan weddings, while celebrating my own 26<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

I realize how little these young couples know of marriage – of the important blend of covenant, compromise and compassion. They will learn-but starting out, they don't quite know.

So it is with faith and belief in resurrection – we enter into relationship with God with the expectation that it will be good for us – perhaps provide us some safety or comfort.

Only as we grow in our faith do we realize that Christianity does not promise fulfillment but rather offers a way to live in the world truthfully and without illusion.

Professor Stanley Hauerwas, one of the theologians I will reference often in our study, points out that

*“Virtuous people, happy people are people of settled character. As such they are capable of being happy through time, which is the only ‘happiness’ worth having. To have a settled character means to have a history that allows one to make one’s life one’s own. ...*

*Happiness is not so much the end, but the way.”*

Happiness is the word that writers have used for centuries to define the ultimate goal in life.

Writing almost 400 years before Christ, Aristotle reflected on how humans achieve happiness:

*If we take the proper function of man to be a certain kind of life, and if this kind of life is an activity of the soul and consists in actions performed in conjunction with the rational element, and if a man of high standards is he who performs these actions well and properly, and if a function is well performed when it is performed in accordance with the excellence appropriate to it; we reach the conclusion that the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with the best and most complete. But we must add “in a complete life.” For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one sunny day; similarly, one day or a short time does not make a man blessed and happy.”*

Aristotle's list of virtues included those he adopted from Plato:

Courage, Temperance, Justice and Wisdom.

He then added: Generosity, Magnificence, high mindedness, gentleness, truthfulness, wittiness, friendship, a virtue between ambition and lack of ambition, and shame-perhaps modesty.

Virtues were those traits that govern human appetites – appetites which must be felt and responded to.

Aristotle believed that the happiness achieved by mastering the virtues was one of self-sufficiency.

Turning to biblical interpretation of the virtues we find the little noted, Book of Sirach – a combination of the ancient Near Eastern and Israelite wisdom traditions with the commandments of Moses found in the Torah.

In his instructional narrative Sirach calls for obedience to God and parents, humility, courage, charity, integrity, friendship, prudence, common sense, honesty and above all else, fear of the Lord.

It is here that we see the transition from a life of self-sufficiency to a life dedicated to God.

Christians believe that happiness comes through lives formed in reference to Jesus.

The ongoing nature of developing a strong character as part of a journey is reflected in our reading today from 2nd Peter:

You must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.

We are reminded that we cannot be virtuous on our own.

We need community.

Discovering virtue is something we do together.

Jesus talked about virtues in the beatitudes noting all the ways that a person might be blessed.

Later, the early church writers expounded on this theme.

For Augustine, writing from 386-395 the virtues of faith, hope, love, temperance, courage, wisdom, and justice are all carried out for the sake of God.

It is in response to God's love that we work to better ourselves and to live in such a way that honors and glorifies God.

The only way to achieve virtue, to overcome our sinful nature, is through God's grace.

For thousands of years the study of human behavior has engaged the great thinkers.

The pursuit of happiness has always intrigued thinking humans.

I think that we have gotten somewhat lazy in our efforts to have strong moral characters.

Martin Luther was obsessed with the particulars of how he might possibly overcome his sinful nature.

He prayed for hours each day and made detailed lists of improvements that he might make to his character.

As a young man, Benjamin Franklin outlined a plan for reaching moral perfection.

He identified thirteen virtues he would strive to practice:

1. Temperance: Eat not to dullness. Drink not to elevation;
2. Silence: Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself. Avoid trifling conversation;
3. Order: Let all your things have their places. Let each part of your business have its time;
4. Resolution: Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve;
5. Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself – waste nothing;
6. Industry: Lose no time. Be always employed in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary actions;
7. Sincerity: Use no harmful deceit. Think innocently and justly; and if you speak, speak accordingly;
8. Justice: Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty;
9. Moderation: Avoid extremes. Forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve;
10. Cleanliness: Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes or habitation.
11. Tranquility: Be not disturbed at trifles or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity: Rarely use venery but for health or offspring—never to dullness, weakness or the injury of your own or another’s peace or reputation;
13. Humility: Imitate Jesus (and Socrates)

Jesus is said to have been the embodiment of the virtues.

It is to Jesus that we must look to define our own values.

It is to God’s Risen Son, our Savior, that we go to find the way to our own true happiness.

This week, I invite you to make your own list of values and virtues. Even if it feels unattainable, like Benjamin Franklin’s plan – start to think about the person that you want to be – perhaps the person that you ought to be.

*Jonas Salk said, If humankind would accept and acknowledge its responsibility and become creatively engaged in the process of evolution, consciously, as well as unconsciously, a new reality would emerge, and a new age could be born.*

Let us commit to bringing that new age to fruition.

Let us be the ones that embrace a new moral code that brings us out of the darkness of hate and violence and into the light of Resurrection.

Let's learn together from our ancestors, as well as our contemporaries, how to live as an Easter people.

Let's commit to transforming our lives, even if it is hard.